

*Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 6*

# **Buddhist Aids To Daily Conduct**

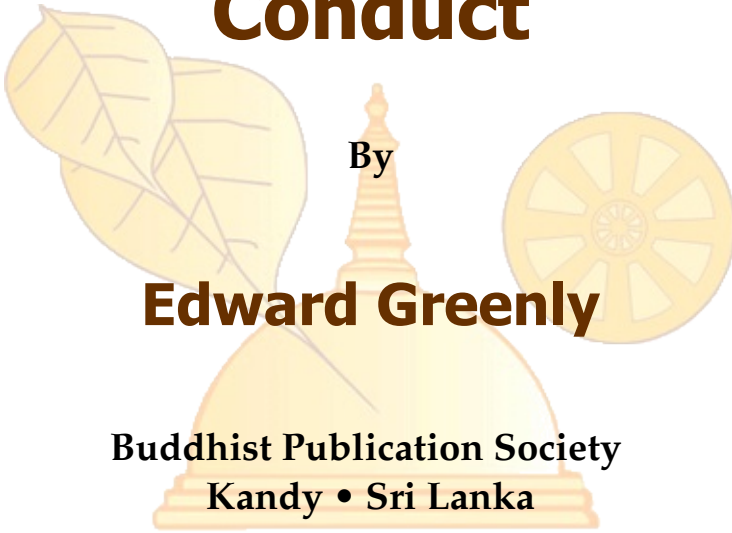
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*Edward Greenly*



**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY**

# Buddhist Aids To Daily Conduct



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**T**o arrive at a proper understanding of any ethical system, there are many aspects of it that need to be considered. We may inquire into its theory concerning the origin of ethical ideas in general, into its relationships or indebtedness to other systems, into the validity of the sanctions that it attaches to them.

That which will be considered in the following pages is the Buddhist motives and aids to conduct, the machinery by which Buddhism endeavours to ensure the conversion of its precepts into practice. Taking as granted the Buddhist code, assuming as valid the Buddhist ideas, the question will be: What follows as to conduct? Nor is this a matter of interest that is merely academic. For, suppose any of the considerations turn out sound and valid, then, clearly,

they have an interest that is practical enough—applicable here or now or anywhere, they must have an immediate bearing on our own lives, on how we are to think and act this very day, whether we use the Buddhist name or not.

The first thing to be observed is that Buddhism does not make what we may perhaps call a “frontal attack” upon evil. There is in it no “commandment,” no “thou shalt” or “thou shalt not,” but merely an “it is good to” or “it is not good to: and that always for the reason “such and such a thing helps or hinders Sorrow’s Ceasing.”

Again, the system being not faith but knowledge, evil is, in its eyes, not “wickedness,” but a “not-understanding,” a mental blindness, a failure to see things as they really are. The remedy, then, evidently, must be “right understanding,” sane and unclouded mental vision, a coming to see things as they really are.

We all know only too well (who is there that does not?) the inner moral conflict, the cry of the aspiring heart in all ages, “The good that I would I do not, the evil that I would not, that I do,” Whence this terrible internal conflict, this division of the mental house against itself? Again, it is Right Understanding that is wanted: the mind has come (by mere precept) to see

some things rightly, but it sees other things wrongly; and so there arises a conflict between two wholly inconsistent views of things "See all things rightly all round," says Buddhism, "you are as one awaking from a dream; some things you see as in the wakened world, but some you still see as in the dream world, the trouble can only be ended by waking up altogether."

And what is this Right Understanding, this undistorted view of life, this Buddhist picture of the truth of things? Well, certain general ideas or principles which at first sight may appear to us to have little, if any, bearing upon ethical matters at all, except, indeed, in so far as they are rather dreaded than otherwise by the exponents of the ethical system that is most prevalent among us in the West.

In their briefest form, these are what are known as the great signs, the characteristics of all existence, combined with the principle of universal causation, which is in reality implicit in them. The three signs are: (1) *anicca*, that is, impermanence or "momentariness"; (2) *dukkha*, sorrow, or, better, dissatisfaction; and (3) *anattā*, the absence of abiding substance, especially of psychic substance (called 'soul' or 'self').

The sources of evil, again, Buddhism places, for

practical purposes, under three heads: (1) *lobha*, or craving, (2) *dosa*, or ill will; (3) *moha*, or illusion, especially the self illusion. In both of the groups the several members are not independent, but interdependent, each being more or less involved in the other two principles. These, then, are the things whereof a comprehension is the Right Understanding that we seek. And how are they applied?

Well, each of the three great sources of evil is taken separately, in the order in which they are given above, and to it, for its cure, is made a special, direct, application of the corresponding member, again in the same order, of the group of the three signs.

There are also what we may call intercrossing applications, so that it is possible to construct a sort of "graphic" representation of the more important lines of remedy thus:

We will take the direct applications first. A man is smitten with a craving for wealth or one or other of the many much-hankered-after things of life. Moral precept comes and says. "You ought not to grasp after that." "Why should I not, when I can get it?" he will perhaps say; or possibly, "I know I ought not, but I cannot help hankering" And then Buddhism comes to him and says, "No, you can never, though you think it, grasp that thing. Anicca! all things are ever

changing. That after which you hanker is changing while you grasp at it: the hand which you stretch out towards it is changing while it grasps. An ever-changing flux without, an ever-changing flux within the mind. How can the flowing grasp the flowing?" And then to the, perhaps, disillusioned and embittered mind it further whispers, "There is a satisfaction after all, but it is not in grasping. Look for it in sorrow's ceasing, and sorrow ceases when you see things as they really are." And so, finding that there is really no such thing as getting, the mind begins to look for satisfaction other where.

To ill will, aversion, hatred, anger, or any of the many forms of dosa, Buddhism applies its second sign of dukkha—that most unpopular of all its doctrines in the West. Orthodox and heretic alike alternately scout or fear this doctrine, yet in it is to be found that which is a solvent for all the bitterness of dosa (Ill will). Nowhere, moreover, is the ethic of mere precept more apt to fail than here, as is, indeed, very generally admitted. "Love your enemies." Maybe; but the world is full of very unkind, unpleasant people; people who are always in the way, people whose very presence is a source of irritation to us. And they are so complacent, these people, so self-satisfied, sometimes even prosperous as well, flourishing like the green bay-tree of the Hebrew psalmist? Well, if the



experience of the readers of this article is at all like that of the writer of it, they will by this time have sadly found that all the precepts in the world, and all the resolutions to obey them, have never succeeded in getting them to love these people. Civilization can restrain the angry hand; precept and training may restrain the angry tongue; virtue may even prompt external acts of kindness; but hostile feeling still remains, the inner attitude has not been changed. Nor does example effect the change we need. It is, indeed, a powerful stimulus to effort. We may be roused thereby to emulate the Buddha, who, alone of the world's teachers, appears to have succeeded in this matter. We shall but discover before very long, that to live as he lived, there is nothing for it but to see as he saw! And the vision so seen—what is that? It is no other than this same Dukkha sign, this same unwelcome "Holy Truth of Suffering". Looking through the Buddha-eyes, we see all these unkind, unlovely people suffering. Behind the thick mask of prosperity and pride, transparent to the rays of Buddha-sight, goes on dissatisfaction always, always striving after what they have not, are not; never an hour of satisfaction with what they have or are. For that is life's conditioning; "Man never is, but always to be blest," and so the never-ceasing chase goes on, while the face grows hard or worn or ennui-weary,

until, with life's meaning still unlearnt, the inevitable passing comes. And the seer of the vision, what of him? Why, though he could not love, though even now he cannot like, yet at sight of sorrow he can pity, nay more, he cannot help but pity. And, where compassion is, there is no room for hatred, nor room for any of the minor forms of Dosa, indignation, anger, even "righteous anger;" all these disappear in presence of compassion. And so this feared and scouted sorrow-doctrine brings peace and light where all precepts and commandments fail. It is a cure, too, for what we may call the negative forms of Dosa, the callous indifference to our fellow beings that refined and cultured minds are so addicted to. A crowd, an unsavoury, prosaic mob, how we draw back our phylacteries almost at the very thought of it; the horses up and down the street, we give them, save when they are badly beaten, scarcely a single passing thought. Yet once see all these as, by life's very inner nature, suffering, and, instead of indifference, pity comes at once. And so, where all precepts and commandments fail, this sorrow-doctrine can make possible the full practice of the "golden rule," and lead our feet into the path of peace.

Moha, the Self-illusion, is for Buddhism the root of all evil, the parent both of craving and ill-will; so that whatever be the remedy for it cuts really at the root of

them as well. Still, there are special ills that arise immediately out of this illusion, and to them the sign of signs, as we may call it, of Anattā, has immediate and direct application. Self-esteem, self-importance, pride, the troubles that come of these, are a commonplace of moralisers, and a perennial perplexity to whom falls in any way leadership or management of the affairs of men. And not the least part of the trouble is that, granted the ordinary view of life, these things positively have logic on their side! Mere vanity, of course, the baseless foible of the foolish and light-headed, needs no discussion; but the knowledge of just merit, from which arises "That last infirmity of noble mind." that is very far from baseless. A good mechanic knows his work is good; a master in painting knows that he can paint; one that is born a leader is quite aware that he can lead. Sometimes, defying modesty, one such will say so. "It cannot be done better," wrote Duerer, they say, to Raphael, sending him a drawing. Now, if in each of us there be a "soul," then obviously and logically enough, as the deeds, so the soul is. What, then, if I know my deed is good? Why, of course. I cannot help but know my soul is good. If I have thought a clever thought, I cannot fail to be aware I have, or am, a clever soul! With manifest danger to my morals. That genius often is modest proves nothing but that, in so

far it holds, or thinks it holds, a soul or/and creed, it is illogical. Apply the Anattā principle, however, and what follows? This that I am, it is compound, it is conditioned by Kamma; by the arising of such-and-such it has come to be; heredity, teaching, environment, a hundred things unknown, untold, have helped to make it what it is, in no wise a substance, thing or space, it is rather to be likened to a mathematical point, itself without parts and without magnitude, a meeting-plane of intercrossing lines of cause, coming together from we know not where, to radiate at once we know not whither. Or we might compare it with a line, the locus of a point, moving in the resultant of these interacting lines of force. What room, in the light of such a concept, is there left for self-esteem?

Of the innumerable cross-applications, only one or two can be touched on here. The bearing of Dukkha on craving, for example, is plain enough. For he who knows that the tempting “pleasure” cannot bring him satisfaction, will he crave like other men? And he who sees his fellows as Anattā, void of self, will he hate? For him there exists no such evil, wicked soul; those that trouble, they too are, like himself, Anattā, component, cause-driven; what is there in that to hate? We are not angry when we clearly discern the causing of some evil, such as an earthquake or storm.

That which sets up the real Dosa-feeling in us, the real anger, is the supposed self-originatedly hateful “soul”; embodiment (or rather enpsychment), of malignity; out of its own free and evil will bringing uncaused hurtfulness to birth.

One most important bearing of transience upon conduct, however, is so often overlooked, that it is well worth pointing out.

Obvious enough in its external, general, aspects, it is far more deeply penetrative than at first appears. Perhaps a sharp unkind word passes; perhaps a kindly act is left undone; for a moment we regret, and then we think, “Ah, we will set that right another day.” And then, perhaps, that day comes, and we forget again, and yet again; perhaps half subconsciously we even reckon on that “future life,” that “all eternity” [1] in which to set it right. With what result? Is there anyone, at any rate anyone past his early youth, who knows not that bitterest of all reflections, “O, to have done this or left undone that, to have said this or left unsaid that—but now the beloved is gone, the rest is silence. O, for that chance back again!” Transience, however, is something far more than a reflection concerning three-score-years-and-ten and then a passing; it is the knowledge that the life is always passing: it is more than transience, it is momentariness, a far more subtle, penetrating thing.

There is a remarkable passage in the Visuddhi Magga: “The duration of the life of a being is strictly speaking, extremely brief, lasting only while a thought lasts.”

If this be so, however, what follows as to conduct? Why, manifestly, this—that, just as to the longer life we crudely think of can good be done only while it lasts, so also to life considered thus. Would we do good to those we love, to anyone? Then we must do it now, there is no other time. Yesterday’s sufferings, longings, fears, are not to-day’s; tomorrow’s will be different again. Let pass the ever, slipping opportunity, and not all the trusted-in tomorrows, not all the immortal paradises that man ever dreamed of, can bring that opportunity again. Not in the past is the life, it is not in the future, it is nowhere but in the present, passing, fleeting thought, and only in that thought moment can we do the good we would.

Such are some of the considerations by which Buddhism converts its fundamental, highly philosophical ideas into aids for daily conduct.

But for a thought to be effective, it must become habitual. These thoughts are wanted, not now and then or here and there, but all day long, and on all manner of occasions, unexpected almost always too. They are of little use if put off to those occasions. He that would save his life by swimming does not wait

until he falls into the water; he learns the art, and practices and practices, until to float is more instinctive than to sink. So with these life-saving thoughts. They must be practised, and practised assiduously, when they are not wanted, until they become a mental habit, and come uppermost when they are wanted.

For this purpose, what are generally called “meditations” are generally recommended; introduced by the old Buddhist masters, and through long ages of experience proved of value. There are many of them and endless variations can be made of them. [2]

For instance, we may take the several root-ideas, these three signs, with Kamma and the others, day by day throughout a week; and applying them each especially to our characteristic hindrances of temperament or circumstance, practise looking at life that way.

Or we may review the episodes of each day in order backwards, asking concerning each of them “Was this good to have been done: was it well done?” (never “Did I do well?”) “Was therein it any doing, separately activating soul, or was it wholly Kamma action? Did it contain any element of Dukkha, of suffering for myself, for others or for both?” Few

things are more profitable than this very simple-seeming exercise, because from it we learn the real nature of the life-process almost better than by any other means [3] It bears much the same relation to the study of Buddhist theory as does laboratory work to the reading of a text book. Anattā, Dukkha and the like we have demonstrated, no doubt, to our complete satisfaction, and so, indeed, we ought to do. But to discover by direct introspection that every episode that makes up life is of these very elements compact,—that makes of the conviction a seen and vivid thing, like the visit to a foreign country that we have only known from books. After six months of it, indeed, Life appears in very different guise. The disturbing heats of craving die away; through the cool, clear, transparent air of truth we begin to “see things as they really are.”

Yet it is but a beginning. For deep has been the sleep, and tremendous is the Buddha vision, dawning but gradually on the mind.

Hour after hour, we lapse back into the dream-land, dreaming, indeed, at first for far longer than we wake; and what we believe “to be awake” is too often a mere half awakesness. As we see things, however, so we live; and therefore, while those minutes of awakening last, the conduct problem solves itself. And in them are the first foretastes of the final peace.



# Notes

1. Probably the world will never know the price it has paid, and still pays, for that 'optimistic' doctrine, in little kind acts left undone. [\[Back\]](#)
2. Thoughts and texts suitable for such meditations can be found in [The Wheel No. 20: The Three Signata](#), by Prof. O. H. de A. Wijesekera. [Ed.] [\[Back\]](#)
3. Better still, indeed, is that continuous mindfulness that has got past the need of a day's-end review. [\[Back\]](#)

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