

Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 67

The Buddha's Teaching

**A Clear and
Practical Message**

Soma Thera



BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

The Buddha's Teaching

A Clear and Practical Message

By

Soma Thera

Bodhi Leaves No. 67

First published: 1975

BPS Online Edition © (2014)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS and Access to
Insight Transcription Project

For free distribution. This work may be republished, reformatted, reprinted and redistributed in any medium. However, any such republication and redistribution is to be made available to the public on a free and unrestricted basis, and translations and

other derivative works are to be clearly marked as such.

The Buddha's Teaching

A Clear and Practical Message

The Buddha's message consists of the doctrine (*dhamma*) and discipline (*vinaya*). The discipline has to do with conduct, virtue and morals—the ethical side of the message—and the doctrine with the rest. In the threefold division of the path to happiness, produced by the destruction of craving, the discipline comes under the aggregate of virtue (*sīla*), and the doctrine belongs to the aggregates of concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). The discipline concerns the activity of speech and bodily behaviour; the doctrine is connected with the activities of the intellect and with understanding. The discipline is an essential factor for the attainment of the extinction of ill. The practice of virtue eliminates restlessness and anxiety due to immoral action and speech, facilitating a mental clarity and penetration leading to *Nibbāna* and providing a necessary element for right thought and

understanding.

The salient feature of the Buddha's message is its freedom from exaggeration, immoderate thought, and extreme action. As declared by the Buddha in the instruction of the Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Law (*dhamma-cakkappavattana sutta*), his teaching is the middle way (*majjhima paṭipadā*), balanced and serene, free from the practice of clinging to sensual enjoyment and self-mortification, and from the extravagant, absurd notions of eternalism and annihilationism. This freedom from extremes is the best test for distinguishing the genuine teaching of the Buddha from the spurious doctrines attributed to him. What is extreme and extravagant, irrational, or exaggerated wherever it may be found, cannot be the teaching of the compassionate, Fully Enlightened One.

In the diffusion of the Dhamma in the world, no coercive method or force of any kind was used. The Dhamma spread itself quietly, unhurriedly, gently, with dignity, and by clean means. The message of the Buddha, wherever it went, pacified the minds of tameable men with the cooling waters of compassion and peace. The history of the propagation of the Dhamma is a record of kindness, of loving-kindness, and of selfless service. There is enough to warrant the statement that the first disciples of the Blessed One, who published his message, went from place to place

bearing in their hearts the image of his gracious personality and mindful of these words of his to them: "Wander forth for the good of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the profit, welfare, and happiness of divine and human beings. Make known the teaching, good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, endowed with meaning and letter, and complete in everything. Proclaim the purified way of the excellent life."

A follower of the Buddha cannot resort to violence to gain his ends. Not only is violence wrong in the Buddha's teaching but also anger, which is near to violence. For anyone who appreciates the moderate way of life, the life that is free from extremes, it is a sign of failure in right practice to fall into ill will, anger or indignation. Hate of every kind clouds the mind, hinders clear understanding, and deprives one of the power to reach sane conclusions. Anger has an intoxicating quality. The man who is angry is in some respects like a drunken person. He is not sober. Seeing the danger and futility of anger for one in search of truth, the Buddha said:

"Bhikkhus, if others speak ill of me, speak ill of the Dhamma, the teaching, or of the Sangha, the community of bhikkhus, there should not be in you on that account misconduct, ill will or malice. Should you on that account be angry and offended you would

spiritually be in danger. Bhikkhus, if, when others speak ill of me, the teaching, or of the community, you feel angry and offended, would you be able to see the difference between the good and the bad speech of others?"—"No, Venerable Sir"—"Bhikkhus, when outsiders speak ill of me, the teaching, or the community of bhikkhus, the false should be explained by you as false thus: 'This is a falsehood for this reason, this is an untruth for this reason. This is not in us; this does not exist in us.' Bhikkhus, if outsiders speak in praise of me, the teaching, or the community of bhikkhus, there should not be in you on that account joy, or pleasure, or elation. Should you on that account be joyful, pleased, and elated, you would thereby be (spiritually) in danger. When others speak in praise of me, the teaching, or the community of bhikkhus, the true should be acknowledged by you as true thus: 'This is true for this reason; this is a fact for this reason. This is in us, this exists in us.'" [1]

The follower of the Buddha in upholding truth and rejecting untruth, according to his understanding, will not go beyond clearly stating what he believes to be true, and will not subscribe to and support in any way what he has found to be untrue. He will not hate those who hold views different from his. He will always act free from resentment under the most difficult circumstances. Adherence to the truth is a most

important thing for the good life; it will always keep the ways of reason free and clear, and produce a readiness to acknowledge error and to change a course of action that has been found to be wrong. This humility, tractability, and freedom from pride can be seen in all who have the open mind, which is most needed for the attainment of inner peace.

As the Buddha's teaching is one that inculcates the idea that every man is responsible for his deeds and for what he is, no one can blame another for his own unhappiness, misery, feeling of insecurity or anxiety. Every man is the heir of his own deeds; his deeds are his possession, his relative, his refuge. Due to his own deeds a man continues in *samsāra*. All good depends on nobility of character. It may be justly said that the Buddha's teaching—which tells us to seek security and freedom in ourselves, in our own minds, purified by virtue—is the best of all conceptions of human liberty, based as it is on a realistic view of life.

The Buddha sees not only suffering but also the transcending of suffering. He teaches how to avoid what produces unhappiness and to do what produces happiness. He says that the evil-doer suffers here and hereafter and that the doer of good rejoices now and afterwards. The transcending first of evil by mundane good, and the transcending of both good and evil later through attainment of the supramundane constitute

the path to freedom proclaimed by the Buddha.

This is a gradual path, free from harsh and violent methods— as it must be since it is a teaching of moderate principles suited for practice by all intelligent beings. In the Gaṇaka Moggallāna Sutta, the Blessed One says that just as a horse-trainer, having got a good thoroughbred, first accustoms him to the bit and then trains him in what further training he must get, step by step, along the way of purity, by stages. [2]

Unlike the paths of some other teachers who believe happiness has to be reached by suffering, [3] the Blessed One's path is a turning away from what is unhappy to what is not. When according to the Buddha's instruction a person sees the world's ill, he is not depressed by it because the Buddha shows also to him the happiness possible of attainment here and now, and so he gains confidence in the Master's teaching. Such a person through such confidence gains joy, calm, gladness, concentration, and the vision of things as they really are. Then turning away from the happiness connected with the temporary to that which is unconnected with mundane perception, he reaches a dispassion, freedom, and the knowledge of the supreme bliss of the extinction of ill, Nibbāna. After that, as an extinguished one he lives as unsullied by the world as the lotus, which, having risen above its

native pond, stands unsullied by the water in which it has grown.

The carrying out of the principles taught by the Buddha needs a friendly mind on the part of the practitioner, and so the path of virtue of the Buddha, that which leads to concentration and wisdom, may be called the way of friendly feeling, *mettāyana magga*, since one who practises virtue (*sīla*) bestows on all living beings freedom from fear, hatred, injury, and distress. Feeling amity, the understanding Buddhist is impelled to be virtuous, and kindness becomes the dominant note of the Buddhist way of life.

The virtuous man will be such: possessed of intelligence, gentle, humble, docile, energetic, free from indolence, unshaken in adversity, modest of demeanour, wise, impartial to all, one who wants to have friends, bountiful, free from avarice, a leader, a guide, and an instructor. Such a man is clearly one who can be called a model citizen. He is driven to action by the law of righteousness, which inspires right exertion for the overcoming of ill. It is not possible for one who sees the world with friendly eyes not to exert himself for the good of others. So it is said by the poet thus:

“The virtuous, who have girded themselves for right exertion would abide long in the grove in hell

where the leaves are swords for the doing of good to others. But without the ability to do good, they would not even for an instant be attached to Sakka's Delightful Park, with its divine nymphs."

It was in keeping with this principle of the Bodhisatta that in our times Mahātmā Gandhi wished to be reborn amongst the poorest, the lowliest, and the lost.

The lives of the Buddha and his noble disciples, and his well-known lay followers like Dhammasoka, bear witness to the great spirit of friendliness which the Dhamma generates in one who follows it. It was from the time when Dhammasoka, after turning away from the cruel way of the sword, began to tread the way of friendly feeling that the teaching of diligence (*appamāda*), which he had learned from the Arahanta Nigrodha, the novice, took effect in him through his progress in right endeavour. Right endeavour is one of the principle features of the Buddha's teaching and is the work of the diligent. The opposite of diligence is negligence, sloth, indolence, which leads to death and not to immortality. The first verse of the portion of the Dhamma which Asoka heard from the young saint runs thus:

Diligence is the way to the deathless;
Negligence is the way to death.

The diligent do not die.

The negligent are as it were dead. [4]

In one who is endeavouring to do good with a heart endued with friendly feeling, the barriers of greed, hate, and delusion, which keep men from helping one another, disappear, and the will to progress towards the lofty and the true and the good, becomes fully active. The importance of the Buddha's teaching for the world's happiness and well-being lies largely in its power to awaken men to a sense of reality and to make them energetic in the service of others. The Buddhist life, when it is lived fully, is one dedicated to the good of all living beings, and it is fully lived when it is established in confidence in regard to the truth, and in virtue and wisdom.

A community or society becomes fully great only when good men arise in it. And good men arise when great virtues are practised by its members. But how can great virtues be practised when the great path trodden by the noblest of beings is forgotten, and when one walks along paths that lead to destruction? It is when there are persons with outstanding qualities of conduct and intellect that a community becomes free from the plague of fanaticism and the insecurity of extremist action as well as from the heartless exploitation, oppression, and suppression of the weak

by the strong. To protect a community from being overwhelmed by these evils there is only one way. That is the harmless, non-violent way, praised by the wise and proved to be the best by centuries of experience of mankind. That way is where, through the development of men of character, intellect, intuition, and vision, the foolishnesses and the pettinesses of the unthinking are cancelled and expunged and nullified. Closed is the way where intelligence is at a discount, and the wise who are the signposts to the way of the enlightened are neglected. The danger of such a state of affairs lies in the increase of fear and anxiety in the world, which can only be dispelled by the stability of love and wisdom.

As taught by all the great teachers of humanity, the practice of the golden rule is the starting point of the cultivation of the liberation of the heart through amity. It was taught by the Blessed One long before the rule was propagated in the West. This ancient teaching of treating the self and society equally, impartially, without distinction, is the essence of the four excellent dwellings, the *brahmavihāras*. The quicker they become generally active in a community, the nearer will that community be to the abolition of the grounds for discord in it and for ensuring the safety of everyone. It is only with widening of the mind through the spirit of universality which the four excellent dwellings bring

into being that true freedom can hope to gain a foothold in the world. And it is because the Buddha saw in these practices the most potent antidote to the narrowness of the unregenerate hearts of men that he gave the practices an important place in his teaching. Non-violence, which is the beginning and the end of the path of noble living, cannot be practised without the thought of universal kindness and mercy.

Further, in a community where the principles of Buddhist virtue reign, there cannot be any kind of regimentation. The members of the community will learn to live in a way that does hurt to nobody. In such a community the way of friendly feeling will encourage the idea of dedicating the self to the service of others and doing all one can do to make the life of the members of the community happy. As such a way of life is for the wise and not for the foolish, as it is for the contented and not for the discontented, and as it is for the energetic and not for the indolent, all who follow it genuinely will turn their minds to the attainment of knowledge, contentment and right effort, the basis of blameless living. Thus the standards in such a community will be the highest humanly possible, and by the very loftiness of the standards the dullness and boredom of uniformity will vanish and the unity of the group will be strengthened by the diversity of achievements and skills of the members,

according to their capacities, temperaments, and tendencies.

The message of the Buddha can lead to a clear view of life and a practical way for the acquirement of individual and social good, since it is a teaching dependent on reality. In such a teaching the intelligent can have trust; it can give them the necessary impetus for reaching the highest goal attainable in the world. The Buddha's message points out the path to complete freedom (*vimutti*) from the shackles of superstition, wrong understanding, discontent, and conflict.

The Dhamma, the law of the Buddha, is a teaching of right exertion. It is the active man of indomitable energy who blesses the world both with material wealth and with wisdom. It is impossible to come to the essence of the Dhamma and not be impelled to go forth to reach the highest purity. The Buddha's teaching, when it is wholeheartedly admitted into any mind, brings about radical changes for its good. The message of the Buddha, when it is properly grasped, can make the cruel compassionate, the lazy active, and the selfish selfless through its immeasurable wisdom, which can transmute what is base into something noble and precious.

When the message of the Buddha permeates a society, men can no longer be servile; they have to be

free and governed by love and sympathy and the voluntary restraints of righteousness. With the message of the Blessed One ruling the lives of men there will come into being the fully reasonable way of living in which the compassionate outlook, the quintessence of culture, becomes predominant. This teaching will train men to be careful about their actions and impart serenity to the human mass. The kinship of blood, or race, or language, is feeble in comparison with the kinship of noble ideas in action which spreads wide the spirit of a genuine civilisation. The kinship of noble ideas springs from a pure consciousness and transcends the bounds of family and nation. Great and pure ideas by their wisdom and sublimity unite people in a way nothing else can. That is the power of goodness. And in entering the ocean of the Dhamma, people resort to a wealth of great ideas that are incomparable for their potency and usefulness in producing a happy world within and without.

Notes

1. D I 2–3 Brahmajāla Sutta. [\[Back\]](#)
2. M III 2. [\[Back\]](#)
3. M II 93. [\[Back\]](#)
4. Dhp 21 [\[Back\]](#)

Table of Contents

| | |
|-----------------------|----|
| Title page | 2 |
| The Buddha's Teaching | 4 |
| Notes | 17 |