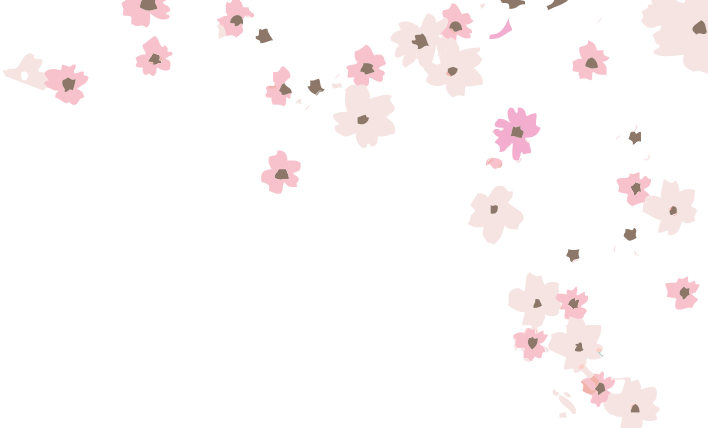




Life's Highest Blessings

Venerable Mahinda



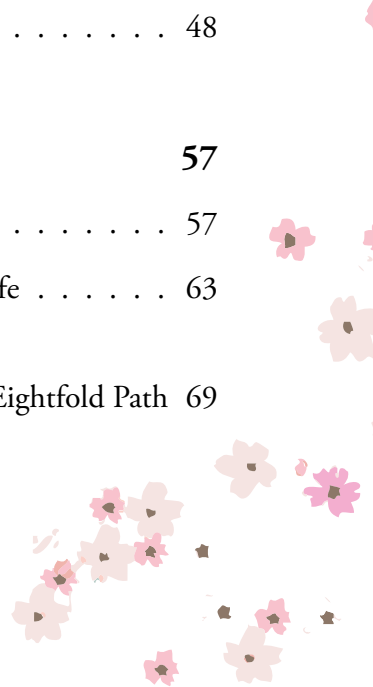


Venerable Mahinda

Venerable Mahinda was ordained in 1976 under the tutelage of the late Venerable Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda Nayaka Thera. He has taught Mindfulness and Metta Meditation for almost 45 years in over 20 countries. Currently, Venerable Mahinda is Abbot of the Aloka Meditation Centre in Australia; Founder and Spiritual Director of Australian Buddhist Mission Inc; General Advisor to the Buddhist Missionary Society, Malaysia; and Founder and Spiritual Director of Aloka Foundation, Malaysia. He is advisor to a number of other Buddhist organisations in Malaysia, Singapore and Australia.

Contents

Preface	1
Foreword	3
Mangala Sutta – Life’s Highest Blessings	5
Introduction	5
Phase 1 of Life	
– Preparatory Stage/ Growing Up Years.	13
Phase 2 of Life	
– Adulthood/ Householder	24
Phases 3 and 4 of Life	
– The Spiritual Life and the Highest Attainment	39
Conclusion	48
 Dhamma: The Best Thing in Life	 57
Cultivating the Worldly Dhamma	57
Going Beyond the Fleeting Pleasures of Life	63
Supramundane Dhamma	
– The Four Noble Truths and The Noble Eightfold Path	69





Preface

Life's Highest Blessings is an explanation by Venerable Mahinda of some of the most important teachings of the Buddha.

The first part, *Mangala Sutta – Life's Highest Blessings*, is an explanation of the Mangala Sutta, a discourse of the Buddha on the subject of blessings, as one journeys through the four stages of life – from the mundane stages of growing up years and adulthood; to walking the spiritual path and finally, the highest attainment of enlightenment.

In the words of Venerable Mahinda, “The Mangala Sutta provides meaning and direction in our lives. It can help both the young and the old to avoid making mistakes in life that will cause suffering to ourselves and others. When we listen to or read the teachings, we will realise what we have done right and what mistakes we have made, and what we need to do to compensate for our negligence and shortcomings.

He adds, “Parents should not think that they have finished their duties towards their children after sending them to universities and training in certain professions. That is only the worldly aspect of life. They need to inspire them to walk the Dhamma’s path and lead a more spiritual way of life by way of example... especially in this time of crises”.

Dhamma: The Best Thing in Life, meanwhile, touches on the cultivation of the worldly dhamma such as the practice of Right Speech, Right Bodily Action, and Right Livelihood,

as well as the learning, practicing, and realisation of the Dhamma through the understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path as expounded by the Buddha.



Foreword

I take great pleasure in penning a few words on the occasion of the printing of this booklet on the Mangala Sutta, entitled “Life’s Highest Blessings“. The Mangala Sutta guides us step-by-step in how to achieve ultimate happiness through living a beautiful and meaningful life within any society. This booklet, therefore, is deeply needed today.

A recent study conducted in England and Wales by St. Mary’s Catholic University in Twickenham has concluded that the number of people with no religion exceeds Christians. A few years back 25 percent of people identified themselves as having no religion. This is a growing trend in the western world. Recently the first chair of atheism studies was established at the University of Miami, USA. It is sad to note that here in Asia this trend is emerging among some young Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans who blindly embrace anything western.

One cannot ignore the light that the Mangala Sutta possesses that shines upon all aspects of human life. It is some relief that there are knowledgeable people, although few in numbers, who present the noble teaching of the Buddha cogently.

The narration of the Mangala Sutta by Ven. Mahinda Mahathera is simple and direct. It is evident that Ven. Mahinda Mahathera draws from his many years of personal and social experience when explaining this Sutta. He additionally has been conducting online Metta Circles in Malaysia and many other lands across the world. His aim in conducting these Metta

Circles is to encourage everyone to show interest in universal brotherhood, meditation, and spreading the message of peace. May his desired expectations soon be fulfilled.

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Mangala Sutta – Life’s Highest Blessings

Introduction

The Mahā Maṅgala Sutta (or ‘Mangala Sutta’) is the discourse on life’s ‘highest blessings’. When we talk about blessings, there are two kinds of blessings: one is the blessings that we receive from outside or externally, and the other is internal. When we practise the Dhamma, live a virtuous way of life, and perform our duties and responsibilities, then we become a source of blessing not only for ourselves but also for others.

In all ancient religions it is understood that there are beings, such as gods, *devas* or deities, nagas and other beings, who have certain powers to bestow blessings on human beings. The Pali/Sanskrit word *deva* indicates a ‘being of light’, and that became the root of the Latin word ‘deus’ (god) and ‘divus’, which developed into the English word ‘divine’. Such beings may be on the path to enlightenment, such as bodhisattvas and Dhamma protectors; or they may be on other, worldly paths, and the type of blessings they are able to confer on us will differ accordingly. This is what we consider external blessings.

However, even external blessings can only come about through cause and effect. When you understand the principle of cause and effect, you will know that in order to have all the

goodness in your life – peace, happiness and success – you must do something for yourself. If you create a cause, then the effect will come. Without understanding the principle of cause and effect, it is difficult to receive real blessings.

Worldly devas may be able to help us with our worldly problems such as issues relating to our health, wealth, relationships, career and other worldly matters. But they are not able to help us in our pursuit of enlightenment. For higher spiritual pursuits, we need to connect with enlightened beings. There are great enlightened beings, who through their great compassion and aspiration, have manifested into various forms (human as well as non-human) in order to lead us out of samsaric existence by gaining our final liberation.

In order to receive blessings, guidance and protection from such divine beings, whether worldly or beyond worldly, we need to prepare ourselves so that we become suitable vessels – just as a water vessel or container needs to be clean and without cracks in order to contain water.

At different stages of our lives, we have different duties and responsibilities. When these are carried out properly, we not only become an internal source of blessings to ourselves and to others, but we also become a suitable vessel for external blessings. That is how we apply the principle of cause and effect. Prayers alone are not enough. Whether for worldly gains or for enlightenment, we need effort and perseverance to cultivate various wholesome qualities in order for our wishes and aspirations to be fulfilled.

If you look around you, most people go to places of worship to seek blessings. They seek blessings for peace, for harmony, happiness, good health, wealth, and for general well-being. But when they go back home, more often than not, they do all the things that are contrary to peace and happiness and to their own well-being – such as eating unhealthy food, getting agitated easily, shouting and arguing with one another and so on.

If we wish to live in peace and happiness, we need to generate the kind of thoughts, speech and body actions that will give rise to peace and happiness. What we need to understand is that all our sufferings are conditioned by three unskilful or unwholesome roots. In Pali, they are called LOBHA, DOSA, MOHA, which we translate into English as greed, hatred and delusion.

There are three kinds of greed or craving which give rise to suffering. They are called: (1) KĀMA TANḤĀ, or the craving to please one's senses, craving for sensual pleasures; (2) BHAVA TANḤĀ, the craving for existence; and (3) VIBHAVA TANḤĀ, the craving for non-existence.

The first type of craving or KĀMA TANḤĀ is well-known to all of us. It refers to the craving or desire for sensual pleasures, i.e. to seek pleasure or enjoyment through our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and the mind. We crave for all sorts of entertainment to please our senses. We get attached to such pleasures and enjoyment, and when we are not able to get it, then we get upset or we feel bored.

The second and third types of craving are not so well known. They are called BHAVA TAṆHĀ and VIBHAVA TAṆHĀ. BHAVA TAṆHĀ is the craving for existence, to exist forever. It also refers to the craving for becoming; becoming this or becoming that. But whatever we become, we will still be faced with unsatisfactoriness. VIBHAVA TAṆHĀ is the craving for non-existence; not wanting to become this, not wanting to become that. These are also sources of suffering.

It is this kind of craving that often gives rise to suicidal tendencies, because it is based on a wrong view: the belief that when we die, that is the end of everything, no more suffering. That is why it is so important to take time to listen to or study the Dhamma, to understand the Four Noble Truths, and the law of karma and rebirth, in order to develop Right Understanding and Right Views about the nature of our life so that we will be able to appreciate the preciousness of this human life. This human life provides us with the unique opportunity to develop our mind to gain final liberation.

As long as there is craving in one form or another, there will also be aversion or anger that leads on to hatred, ill will and grudges. When we get what we want, we are happy, but when we cannot get what we want, we get upset and angry. When we crave or cling on to our views, thinking that we are right and others are wrong, we will naturally tend to argue with one another.

All our tendencies to craving and aversion are conditioned by what we call ignorance. When we use the words ignorance or delusion, we need to understand it from the Buddhist

perspective. Ignorance is not the ignorance of anything and everything under the sun, it is the ignorance of the nature of our life, with regards to the Four Noble Truths. When we use the word delusion, we don't mean a kind of mental disorder as used in psychology.

What ignorance or delusion refers to, from the Buddhist perspective, is the lack of understanding of the true nature of the 'self' and the world around us. Things that are painful and suffering we consider them to be pleasurable. It is because of the ignorance of the true nature of our 'self' and life around us that we continue to grasp, giving rise to greed, anger, jealousy and all the other unskillful thoughts, speech and body actions that lead to suffering.

In order to reduce and eventually overcome the tendencies of greed, hatred and delusion we need to cultivate the qualities of generosity, loving-kindness and wisdom. We need to be mindful of these qualities and to practise them in our daily lives.

The Mangala Sutta talks about the internal source of blessings – how you can live your life in such a way that you become the source of blessing in your life, on both the worldly level and the spiritual level, leading one to eventually overcome the greed, hatred and delusion that is the cause of all our suffering.

In order to properly understand the Mangala Sutta, we must understand the context in which this teaching was given. Buddha taught this discourse some 2,500 years ago. In India at that time there was the teaching of the four *ashramas*, which refers to four stages of life: namely, Brahmacharya (or the celibate life of a student), Grihastha (householder),

Vanaprastha (forest-dweller) and Sannyasa (the life of renunciation). As these terms do not really fit into the Buddhist context in our contemporary society, we shall refer to these four stages¹ as:

1. Preparatory Stage (Growing up)
2. Adulthood (Householder)
3. Spiritual Life
4. The Highest Attainment

Although most of the values mentioned in the Sutta are applicable at all stages of our life, this discourse is best understood when we consider how the values or qualities are grouped together in relation to the four stages of life. The practices of metta (loving-kindness) and mindfulness play an important part in order to live in peace and harmony at all stages of our lives.

The first stage of life is the preparatory stage, or the growing up years of a student. As a student, one learns and acquires different knowledges and skills in arts and sciences. These knowledges and skills are to prepare us to encounter the world.

If we take human life span to be about 100 years, the first part of our life – about 25 years – will be dedicated to studies. Even today, by the time one goes through school and then to the university, one will be about 25 years old.

¹ See R.L. Soni “Life’s Highest Blessings – The Maha Mangala Sutta”, Buddhist Publication Society, 1978. Dr Soni classified the 11 stanzas into (1) The Preparation, (2) Wayfaring in the World, (3) the Religious Life and (4) the Highest Goal (p.85).

The second stage of life is that of adulthood, or a householder. In this stage, husband and wife should cherish one another, as well as their children, and perform all the necessary activities associated with their roles. This continues until the children grow up and finish their studies. Sometimes in Asian societies, you even have to wait for the children to get married before you are free. Those who choose not to lead the life of a householder should start cultivating their minds and lead a more spiritual way of life.

The third phase of life is that of a religious or spiritual life. This is the stage when one gradually relinquishes one's worldly duties and responsibilities. One withdraws from worldly pursuits and leads a more religious and spiritual way of life, going to the forest and solitary places for retreats, where one could exert effort to practise self-restraint, develop insights into the Four Noble Truths and eventually realise the bliss of Nibbana. Thereafter, one will be unshaken by all the worldly phenomena and one's mind becomes stainless and secure – free from the taints of greed, hatred and delusion.

Then comes the fourth and final stage of life, or the Highest Attainment. Enjoying the fruition of spiritual life, one is now invincible wherever one goes; one will find wellbeing and safety everywhere.

The teaching of the Mangala Sutta was actually given to a certain *deva* or deity. Many human beings would pray to the *devas* for all sorts of blessings. But even amongst the *devas* themselves, they did not know what the highest blessings

are. They came together in an assembly and went to see the chief of the *devas*, *Sakka Deva Rājā*. The chief of the *devas* said: “Since we do not know what the highest blessings are, why don’t we approach the Buddha?” So they appointed a representative to visit the Buddha. The sutta relates that as soon as the *deva* appeared at Jetavana Grove in Sravasti where the Buddha was residing, the whole place was illuminated by the *deva*’s radiant body. The *deva* paid respects to the Buddha, then stood respectfully on one side, and asked this question:

Bahū devā manussā ca, Maṇigālāni acintayum
Ākankha-mānā sotthānam, Brūhi maṇigala muttamam

“Many human beings and devas are pondering about blessings: what are the highest blessings in life? Please tell us what are the highest blessings in life.”

Then the Buddha spoke the verses of the Mangala Sutta, with all the qualities or blessings classified under different stanzas.



First Phase of Life – Preparatory Stage (Growing Up Years)



*Asevanā ca bālānam, Paṇḍitānañ ca sevā
Pūjā ca pūja-nīyānam, Etam maṅgala muttamam*

Not to associate with fools, to associate with the wise,
To respect and honour those worthy of respect, this is the
highest blessing.

In the early phase of life, when a child is very young, the child will imitate what he or she sees. They won't understand, but they will imitate. When they associate with foolish people, who always think all sorts of bad things, speak bad words, and are very rough, rude and unskilful in their actions, they will naturally follow those foolish people. Wise people, on the other hand, have good thoughts in their mind, filled with love and compassion. They also have right speech and pleasant speech, and they don't resort to lying, slandering and gossiping. They have right actions: they don't kill, they don't steal, and they don't commit sexual misconduct and so on. When young ones associate with wise people, they will naturally follow them.

Those worthy of respect are the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, as well as our elders in age and in wisdom. Honouring those worthy of respect paves the way for children to learn from their knowledge and good qualities. These three 'blessings' are the foundation of early childhood: not to associate with fools, to associate with the wise, and to respect and honour those worthy of respect.

Actually, the blessings should really begin from the mother's womb, with the cultivation of metta (loving-kindness). When the unborn baby in the mother's womb is about five months old, the auditory organ responsible for hearing is already fully developed. So the unborn child can already hear whatever the mother and father says. Emotional imbalance and feelings of insecurity in later years as teenagers and adults can often be traced to early childhood or even before birth, when the baby is still in the mother's womb. Contemporary early childhood

educators emphasise the first six years of childhood as a crucial period for children's education. Moreover, when the child is brought up amidst love and compassion, they will be able to recognise these qualities as they grow up, and they will also be able to give love and compassion to others.

The problems of delinquency, bullying, drug abuse and emotional imbalance resulting in suicides, domestic violence, breakdowns in family life and many other issues have their roots in early childhood upbringing. So parents have a very important role to play to contribute towards peace and harmony in the world we live in.

The next stanza also refers to the young ones. It says:

Patirūpa-desa vāso ca, pubbe ca kata-puññatā
Atta-sammā panidhi ca, etam maṅgala muttam

To live in a suitable locality, to have done meritorious actions in the past,
To set oneself on the right course, this is the highest blessing.

Patirūpa-desa vāso ca – to live in a suitable locality. Here you can see that the Buddha also recognises that environment is very important. You need a healthy environment and an environment where there are good people, and where children can have access to learning good things. There is a well-known Confucianist story that will illustrate this point:

Mencius was a student of Confucius and became great scholar in his own right. When he was young, he lived with his

mother in a place near a graveyard. On and off, there would be Chinese funerals, and the young Mencius would wait and every time he heard the funeral procession coming, he would run to the cemetery. He would watch the undertaker doing all sorts of things and he would imitate the undertaker, and he would see people throwing prayer papers and so on. Then the boy went back home and he did the same things at home.

But Mencius's mother did not want him to be doing such things in his life, so she thought: "I will move, I will shift a bit further away from here so that he will not go to the graveyard." So the little boy could not go to the graveyard anymore. But this time, the city market was nearby. He would go to the market and watch all the activities of the merchants and when he came home he imitated them: chopping meat like the butcher, pretending to haggle over prices and so on. Then his mother thought, "No, this won't do." She did not want him to grow up like that.

Now his mother realised that the environment in which she brought up her son was very important. Mencius's mother wanted him to study and to become a learned person. So, his mother eventually moved again and stayed close to a school. It was actually a Confucianist school. This boy would go to the school grounds, and even if he did not go into the classroom, he would just listen from outside. That was how he eventually became a great Confucianist scholar.

This is an example of how important the surrounding environment is to a child, and parents have a duty to provide their children with a suitable environment. And of course,

in the Buddhist context, a suitable environment would also mean having a place where the children can go and associate with the Sangha and receive proper Dhamma education.

Then, the next blessing the Buddha mentioned is *Pubbe ca kata-puññatā* (having done merits in the past). Merits create opportunities for one's material as well as spiritual wellbeing. They are actions which are done to benefit others with a sense of joy and happiness.

Traditionally, we talk about the ten meritorious actions. They are:

DĀNA	– generosity
SĪLA	– morality or good conduct
BHĀVANĀ	– mental development
APACĀYANA	– reverence
VEYYĀVACCA	– service
PATṬIDĀNA	– transference of merits
PATṬĀNUMODANĀ	– rejoicing in others' merits
DHAMMA-SAVAṆA	– listening to the Dhamma
DHAMMA-DESANĀ	– expounding the Dhamma
DIṬṬHIJUKAMMA	– straightening of views (i.e. to cultivate Right Views)

The first three actions – DĀNA, SĪLA, BHĀVANĀ – form the basis of all the other meritorious actions. A child who has

performed such merits in his or her past lives will naturally be born in the lap of luxury or at least in a comfortable home. He or she will tend to be more cheerful and confident by nature. Meritorious actions can also be inculcated during early childhood days so that by the time the child becomes a teenager or adolescent, he or she will have already acquired a storehouse of merits.

Success in life does not only depend on academic achievement. There are many professional people who are successful academically, but they lead rather miserable lives. So it is very important for parents to pave the way for their children to perform acts of merits through various cultural and traditional practices during Buddhist festivals such as Vesak, or New Year celebrations, the offering of *dana* to Sangha members on memorial days and so on. Through their participation on such occasions, young ones will be exposed to merit-making and lessons can be learned through such informal activities. Meritorious actions will naturally open up the path for the child's progress in their studies as well as their ability to interact with good friends.

The next blessing is *Atta-sammā panidhi ca*, to set oneself in the right course. Often young ones do not know what they want to do, even up to their college or university level. They often say, "I don't really know what I want to be... it all depends on my results." The truth is that their aspirations have been clouded by various worldly considerations and expectations. We are born because of some unfinished business, something that we wanted to do or some people that we wanted to help, but we could not fulfil our task when

death cut us off. However, our wishes and aspirations live on as we take a new birth.

Owing to all the distractions around us, we have little or no time to allow our past aspirations to surface, because we are too busy with a very tight daily timetable to keep us occupied while our parents are busy working. We have to learn swimming, singing, go for music or piano lessons and other tuition. Our minds are always occupied with things to do, no time to connect with our past lives' aspirations. This can be a very frustrating experience for the young ones. Anger and resentment can arise because our new environment, the family and the household that we are born into is so different.

That is why we see many young ones angry, unhappy and rebellious, because they do not really fit in with the new environment that they are born into. So they feel rather lost. Until one day they encounter something, someone or some dream that strikes a chord in their hearts; something familiar, something that they have seen or experienced before – what we call 'déjà vu'. This may suddenly activate their subconscious mind. They will be restless at first, wanting to do all sorts of things to fulfil their unfinished business, but that will settle down when they come to their senses.

We are all conditioned or guided by our subconscious mind, by things or events that have been strongly impressed or imprinted in our minds from life to life. Hence the need for good parental guidance and a Dhamma upbringing that will also connect us with our spiritual guides or guardian deities, who are usually our own past parents, teachers, relatives

or friends who are still caring for us. When this link or connection is broken due to ignorance or scepticism, children may suffer, feeling insecure and sometimes live in confusion.

This sense of direction should come about through proper parental guidance as well as our religious convictions. The Jatakas, or past life stories of the Buddha and other great masters can provide the inspiration for a more meaningful direction in life. All beings wish for happiness, but there are different sources of happiness. Some derive their happiness at the expense of others' sufferings, through unrighteous or wrong livelihood. Hence the need for proper guidance at the early stages of one's life.

Apart from the Jataka Stories, there are also stories from our own immediate relatives – our grandparents, uncles and aunties – about their failures in life, their successes and so on, which our parents can share with us so that we can avoid making the same mistakes, thus enabling us to set ourselves in the right course in life.

Nowadays, after the final years of high school, parents will think about their children's future career. They will take them to the career guidance counsellor for advice, and they will be told what kind of job is in demand today, which can make lots of money and also provide a good social status. But all this advice does not take into consideration our past lives' experiences. How would someone who had been a farmer for 500 lifetimes fit into a career as an IT specialist, doctor, engineer or lawyer? It is not impossible, but it will be very stressful.

Moreover, most parents want to see their children become a doctor, engineer, lawyer and so on. They don't think about their sons and daughters becoming monks or nuns. However, if they know what Buddhism is about and what the Buddha taught with regards to our real goal in life – to gain Nibbana, our ultimate liberation – they will be better equipped to guide their children in the pursuit of a spiritual path. A proper sense of purpose and direction in life is important so that all our efforts and energies will be well directed, thus fulfilling our full potential.

The next verse in the Mangala Sutta says that once you have set yourself in the right direction, then comes learning and discipline.

*Bāhu saccañ ca sippañ ca, Vinayo ca susikkhito
Subhāsītā ca yā vācā, Etam maṅgala muttamam*

Vast learning, perfect handicraft, highly-trained
discipline,
And pleasant speech, this is the highest blessing.

Herein lies the foundation of Buddhist education:

1. Vast knowledge of the arts and sciences and their application,
2. Well-trained discipline, and
3. Proper presentation through courteous and pleasant speech.

The word ‘education’ comes from the Latin word *educare* which means ‘to lead forth’ – to lead forth from the darkness of ignorance to the light of wisdom. From the Buddhist perspective, it means to lead forth from suffering to peace. When we observe the mass of suffering created by well-educated professionals in the field of warfare and various other activities, we need to question the kind of education that we are receiving.

Bāhu sacca means vast learning. During the time of the Buddha, the learning of the arts and sciences was obtained mainly through listening. By listening to teachers, you gain knowledge and experience. And not only do you need to gather knowledge and information, there is also *Sippa*, which is handicraft, the practical skill set. You have the knowledge and you must know how to apply the knowledge. Learning through teachers who are able to transmit not only knowledge but also living skills is very useful, compared to modern day ‘e-learning’ through the Internet, which lacks the personal touch and the transmission of values and living skills.

Moreover, the transmission of knowledge from teacher to pupil involves wisdom and compassion on the part of the teacher, and respect, humility and gratitude on the part of the student or listener. These are the values that are lacking in today’s educational system. Hence the need to supplement our contemporary education system with Dhamma education through non-formal and informal means, during Buddhist festivals such as Vesak, other cultural activities

and New Year celebrations, which promote values such as generosity and morality through the observance of precepts (*sīla*) and rendering of services to others. These activities also promote many other wholesome qualities that enable us to develop our organising skills and practise patience, tolerance, understanding, and so on.

Our current information-based education needs to be balanced with value-based Dhamma education, so as to ensure peace, harmony and stability within the family, the nation and the world.

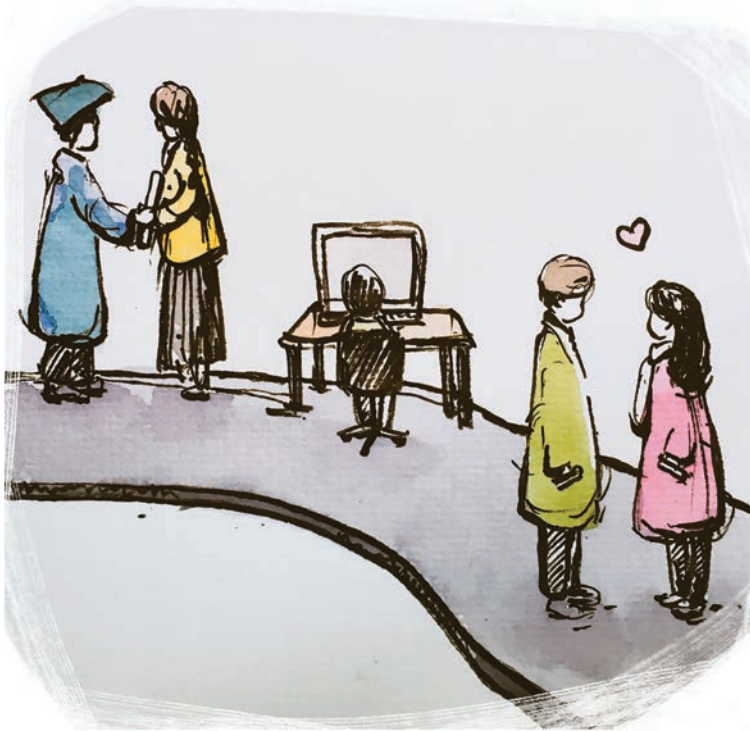
The next blessing is about *Vinayo ca susikkhito*, which means well-trained discipline. Discipline is about self-restraint; restraint in speech and body actions. In other words, as one grows in knowledge, one also needs to grow in self-discipline.

Then comes the next quality: *Subhāsītā ca yā vācā*. That means you are able to present and speak in a courteous and pleasant manner. Somebody can excel in their academic studies and become very successful in their career. However, if they do not know how to present themselves in a courteous and pleasant manner, but speak very arrogantly, using harsh and impolite language, then their lives and their knowledge would not be so useful.

These teachings so far are for us to cultivate the necessary values in the early stages of our life so as to lay the foundation for the next stage of life, as a householder, if we so choose to marry and bring up children.



Second Phase of Life – Adulthood / Householder



Once you have acquired the necessary knowledge, skills, and discipline in your childhood days, you are now ready for the next phase of life – adulthood, the encounter with the world.

During this period of adulthood, we will be meeting people from various walks of life. We will be associating with our colleagues at work, looking out for life-long companions, bringing up children, caring for parents, supporting relatives,

and assuming social responsibilities. All these involve interpersonal relationships. As such, it is important for us to understand the law of karma and how to cultivate METTĀ (Loving-Kindness), KARUNĀ (Compassion), MUDITĀ (Sympathetic Joy) and UPEKKHĀ (Equanimity).

Our relationships with one another are related to the samsaric and karmic bonds which have been developed from past lives, as well as within this lifetime. Why are we attracted to certain people and not towards others? Why has this particular child come into our life? Why are some relationships only short-lived and others long-lasting? The answers to these questions lie in the understanding of the teachings of karma and rebirth. Hence the importance of Dhamma education.

Marriage from a Buddhist perspective is to provide the support for one another to cultivate the virtues and qualities that will eventually lead to final liberation. The Buddha related his story how as Prince Siddhartha he was married to Yasodhara, and how they had been living together from life to life², even as animals – as deer, birds, and so on.

In order to have such strong and wholesome connections, we should cultivate wholesome states of mind from early days, cultivating the qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. The Buddha explained how these qualities should be developed, just as a mother with her four children³:

² Cf. Candakinnara Jātaka- Jātaka.iv.282ff; Dhammapāda.i.97; or Apadānapāli Kuṇḍalakesīvaggo Yasodharā-therī-apadānaṃ (314 ff.)

³ Anguttara Nikaya Atthakatha Manorathapurani 2:204

To her youngest infant child, she should cultivate METTĀ, or loving-kindness. To her second youngest child, who is handicapped and disadvantaged, she should cultivate KARUNĀ, or compassion. To her older child, who is a teenager, she should cultivate MUDITĀ, or sympathetic joy, rejoicing in their youthful achievements in their studies and other activities. And finally, to her eldest child who is married, she should cultivate UPEKKHĀ, or equanimity.

Parents with strong materialistic concerns will naturally become disappointed when they have a child who is a slow learner, crippled or handicapped. They fail to understand that such children have come to them to receive their love and care, in order to clear off certain karma of the past. There are also other children who are born to help the world, hence the need for proper parental guidance.

Those who choose not to marry and lead the household life, should recognise the importance of spiritual cultivation as well as providing humanitarian services that will generate a strong merit field which will support them later in life.

Towards the later part of the household life, we begin to experience separation from loved ones. Firstly, from our grown-up children, going overseas for studies or leaving the house upon marriage. Then, there will be the loss of parents, grandparents and so on. The understanding of the true nature of our 'self' is important to help us cope with sorrow, lamentation, and the various manifestations of suffering. Hence the need for spirituality which will help to transcend the idea of 'self'.

Although we use the terms ‘I’, ‘my’, ‘me’ and ‘mine’ in the conventional world, the reality is something else. The parents, husband, wife, children and so on, which we claim to be ‘mine’ or ‘ours’, actually do not really belong to us. We do not own them. We cannot make them to be what we want them to be. They have come into our lives as the result of our past connections. As such, we should act as good custodians and our duty is to pave the way for them to develop their full potentials and gain their final liberation. The household life is truly a workshop on the lessons of life.

The Buddha’s advice for this stage of life is:

*Mātā pitū upaṭṭhānam, Putta-dārassa saṅgaho
Anākulā ca kammantā, Etam maṅgala muttamam*

Supporting mother and father, cherishing wife and children,
Engaging in a peaceful occupation, this is the highest blessing.

Mātā pitū upaṭṭhānam – supporting mother and father. In the Sīgālovāda Sutta, the Buddha taught the duties and responsibilities of children to parents, and parents to children. The first duty of children to parents is to support their parents, out of respect and gratitude, thinking, “Having supported me, I shall support them.” This involves material as well as spiritual support. There is a Buddhist parable about supporting parents and it mentions how if a child carries his (or her) mother on his right shoulder and his father on his left shoulder, feeding and caring for them until they are one

hundred years old, he is yet unable to repay the debt that he owes his parents⁴. However, if he can pave the way for his parents to walk the Dhamma's path, to lead a righteous way of life that will lead them to final liberation, then that child would have more than repaid the debt he owes his parents. So besides caring for parents at home, it is the duty of children to take them to temples and to pave the way for them to grow in the Dhamma's path.

Putta-dārassa saṅgaho – to cherish wife and children. Here it is understood that a husband needs to cherish his wife, and a wife needs to cherish her husband, and as parents they need to cherish their children.

In the Sīgālovāda Sutta, the Buddha mentioned the duties and responsibilities of husband to wife and wife to husband, as well as parents to children. A husband should be kind and courteous towards his wife and not despise her in times of anger or quarrels. He should be faithful to her, and even provide her with ornaments from time to time. He should also authorise her to carry out daily affairs in his absence.

A wife, on the other hand, should be diligent in carrying out her duties, hospitable towards her husband's relatives and friends, and show kindness towards maids or servants. She should be faithful towards her husband and able to manage the household affairs.

As parents they have the duty to restrain their children from unwholesome or unskilful actions and to promote wholesome and skilful actions. They should also observe their

⁴ Kapaṇḍiyya Suttas, Anguttara Nikaya 2:31-32.

inclinations and aptitudes and guide them towards a suitable profession, provide marriage guidance, and hand over their inheritance at an appropriate time.

Now, you may think that it is understood that a husband would cherish his wife, and a wife would cherish her husband, but it is not so. There are many people who marry, but after a few months or years have passed, they don't really cherish one another, they don't really care for one another. In married life, there must be love. But more than that, there must be trust and respect. You must have respect for one another. A husband must respect his wife, and you must take it from where she is coming from. You cannot expect her to be what you want her to be throughout your whole life. And in the same manner, for a wife towards her husband: A wife cannot expect her husband to be what she wants him to be. In a real, loving life, you must have these three things: respect, trust, and care for one another – because there are bound to be ups and downs in life, and you will need to support one another in times of trouble.

Those who choose to marry should take their married life as a real workshop of life, an opportunity to cultivate qualities such as patience, tolerance and understanding. While having children to look after, most people will also have aging parents to care for, and these various responsibilities can make life quite stressful. On the one hand, family life provides the precious opportunity for your children to be born as human beings, with the unique potential to cultivate and develop one's mind to gain liberation. Caring for aging parents provides the opportunity for you to pave the way for them

to have a good rebirth. However, on the other hand, there will be a great many challenges in this situation and thus you will also start to see *dukkha*, the unsatisfactory nature of life, and begin to understand that life is not just about pursuing worldly pleasures. This will actually prepare oneself for the next stage of life.

The next blessing is *Anākulā ca kammantā*. This refers to engaging in peaceful occupations. There are five kinds of unrighteous or wrong livelihood which should be avoided. They are:

1. The production and sale of armaments and weapons to destroy lives,
2. The production and sale of poisons to destroy sentient beings,
3. The production and sale of drugs and intoxicants that cause one to lose control of one's mind,
4. Slave trade (as in human trafficking), and
5. Bringing up animals for slaughter.

These unrighteous livelihoods, whilst bringing in lots of money, also bring along untimely deaths, illnesses, mental stress and various disturbances, and many other forms of suffering. When you engage in right livelihood – avoiding hurting or harming others, killing, stealing, lying and cheating others – then your mind will be more peaceful and you will be able to have quality time for your children and other family members.



Whilst leading a household life, you will still have some other worldly responsibilities, to become a pillar of society. The next set of blessings are:

*Dānañ ca dhamma-cariyā ca, Nātakānañ ca saṅgaho
Anavajjāni kammāni, Etam maṅgala muttamam*

Generosity, righteous conduct, helping relatives,
And blameless actions, this is the highest blessing.

Dana refers to the act of giving or generosity. What you give is what you have received, and what you receive is what you have given. This is the law of cause and effect: what goes around, comes around. Generosity is the basis of a virtuous way of life. It lays the foundation for our material wealth and comfort, as well as enabling us to support our family, community and society.

Dhamma-cariyā is righteous conduct. Living in accordance with the Dhamma means living according to the principles that uphold peace and happiness, both for ourselves and for others around us. This includes the observance of the basic Five Precepts and the performance of our duties and responsibilities as laid out in the Sigalovada Sutta. This is the discourse which explains the duties and responsibilities of children to parents and parents to children; pupils to teachers and teachers to pupils; friends to friends; husband to wife and wife to husband; employers to employees and employees to employers; and disciples to religious teachers and religious teachers to disciples. The Sigalovada Sutta is referred to as the lay Buddhist ethics. It provides a very comprehensive understanding of our roles in society, to maintain peace and harmony.

The next blessing is *Ñātakānañ ca saṅgaho*, or the supporting of relatives. When your brother or sister, or some other relatives are in trouble, you come forward to offer them a helping hand. You need to understand that, from the karmic point of view, the reason why we are born in a certain family

and become related to one another is actually the result of our karma from the past. Even your marriage to one another and the children that you get, these are also your karmic bonds from the past. As such, we need to fulfil our duties and obligations towards them.

Moreover, in times of crisis, when we are in need of food, shelter and other basic requirements of life, who could we first turn to? We will need to turn to our own relatives or some trustworthy friends, who can also be considered our relatives.

The next blessing is *Anavajjāni kammāni*. This refers to blameless actions. When we talk about blameless actions, we need to understand that no one in this world is totally free from blame. But we need to know where the blame is coming from. If wise people blame you, then you should take it into consideration. If foolish people blame you, then don't worry so much.

Your actions become blameable because they are conditioned by the unskilful or unwholesome roots of greed, hatred and delusion, giving rise to unskilful thoughts, speech and body actions. Unskilful thoughts are thoughts of covetousness, ill-will and wrong views. Unskilful speech consists of lying, slandering, harsh speech, and frivolous talk. Unskilful actions consist of killing, stealing and sexual misconduct. These are the ten unwholesome or unskilful actions which should be avoided in order to live a blameless way of life.

The next stanza on the adulthood phase reads:

*Ārati virati pāpā, Majjapānā ca saññāmo
Appamādo ca dhammesu, Etam maṇigala muttamam*

To cease and abstain from evil, avoiding intoxicants,
Steadfastness in virtue, this is the highest blessing.

Towards the middle and later stage of your adulthood, you will need to strengthen your mind and develop wisdom in order to face the challenges of the household life, while supporting your children for their higher studies, caring for elderly parents, and assuming greater responsibilities in your workplace and so on. Hence the need for a strong foundation in discipline and moral integrity by ceasing and avoiding all unskilful actions.

Ārati virati pāpā means that you must abstain, and not only abstain, but also put an end to the unskilful habit patterns. This can only come about through the cultivation of mindfulness and steadfastness in virtue.

Majjapānā ca saññāmo. This refers to the total avoidance of intoxicants, as you cannot afford to lose control of your mind as you assume greater responsibilities at home and at work. In the Sigalovada Sutta, the Buddha outlined six consequences of losing control of your mind through drunkenness. They are:

1. Loss of wealth,
2. Increase of quarrels,
3. Susceptibility to disease,
4. Earning a bad reputation,
5. Shameless exposure of the body, and
6. Weakening of the intellect.

Hence the need to overcome such habitual tendencies.

Appamādo ca dhammesu – This refers to steadfastness in virtue, through the diligent observance of the Five Precepts and the performance of our duties and responsibilities as a householder. The cultivation of general mindfulness on your thoughts, speech and body actions as well as the practice of the Four Brahma Viharas such as METTĀ (loving-kindness), KARUNĀ (compassion), MUDITĀ (sympathetic joy) and UPEKKHĀ (equanimity). All these should provide a good foundation for further mental cultivation in your next stage of life.

The next set of blessings or qualities to be developed are as follows:

Gāravo ca nivāto ca, Santuṭṭhī ca kataññutā
Kālena dhamma-savaṇam, Etam maṅgala muttamam

Reverence, humility, contentment, gratitude,
And timely listening to the Dhamma, this is the highest
blessing.



These are the basic requisites for a spiritual way of life. With regards to respect, there are two kinds of elders that need to be respected. First are our physical elders, those who are older than us – such as our parents, grandparents, teachers, brothers, sisters and so on – both within the family as well as our extended family which includes relatives and others. The second kind of elder refers to our spiritual elders, our religious or spiritual teachers, even though they may be younger in age.

Members of the Sangha will usually recite the following chanting blessing during *dana* offering. It is about the benefits of reverence:

*Abhivādanasīlissa niccamvuddhāpacāyino
Cattāro dhamma vaddhanti āyu vaṇṇo sukhaṃ balaṃ*

The meaning is this: For one who is in the habit of constantly honouring and respecting elders, four blessings increase: life span, good complexion, bliss or happiness, and strength.

By respecting and listening to the advice of your spiritual teachers and parents, you can avoid certain harm and dangers that can be life-threatening. Through respect and humility, valuable knowledge and living skills can be transmitted from parents and teachers to you. When you are respectful and not arrogant, you are naturally more calm and peaceful. Hence the good complexion, happiness and strength, as anger and arrogance saps energy.

The next virtue or quality is *santutṭhī*, or contentment. ‘Contentment is the greatest wealth’ - *santutṭhī paramaṃ dhanam*. At this stage of one’s life, it is important to assess your achievements in your worldly pursuits and develop a sense of contentment, so that you will be able to get on to a more spiritual way of life.

Kataññu, or gratitude, is another important ingredient of your spiritual quest for truth. It is a great purifier of the mind. Often, due to anger, our minds can get very clouded and you will tend to forget all the goodness which your parents, teachers or spouse have done for you. When your mind is not in a good state, you will tend to find fault with others and that will make you feel more agitated and disgusted with the people and things around you. If you can just pause for a few moments to recall the good things that others have done for you, then you will soon begin to smile again. That is the power of gratitude, cherishing and appreciating the goodness of others. You should not let a little mistake or weakness in others spoil all the goodness you have received from them.

Respect, humility, contentment and gratitude are the values of life that will help you to reduce your ego and the strong feeling of ‘I’ and ‘my’. At the end of the day, it is the ego arising as a false notion of the idea of ‘self’ which is the cause of all human suffering. So, *Gāravo ca nivāto ca, santutṭhī ca kataññutā* – these are actually the prerequisites for a spiritual life. Whilst you are still a householder towards the end of this phase of life, when you begin to fulfil your duties, you

should be developing these qualities more and more. These qualities of respect, humility, contentment, and gratitude are also important for the young but more so as we grow older, because after acquiring vast knowledge and worldly possessions, name and fame, people tend to grow in pride and vanity. If these values are not present, family quarrels and breakdown can arise, thus obstructing our spiritual path.

The next blessing in life is about timely listening to Dhamma, *kālena dhamma-savaṇam*. Timely listening to Dhamma is to gain the necessary inspiration and motivation to keep walking and progressing on the Dhamma's path, without going astray. It is also to constantly remind you of the true nature of life, to help you prepare to cope with the ups and downs of life, whether material or spiritual. For example, when you are healthy, you listen to the Dhamma for your personal growth and development. When you are sick, you also have the opportunity to listen to certain Dhamma that will give you encouragement, how to face your illness and overcome your difficulties. When you are in trouble, or in crisis, you need to be reminded of the Dhamma. When you are in fear and anxiety, you need to go for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. Hence the importance of timely listening to the Dhamma.



Third and Fourth Phases of Life – The Spiritual Life and the Highest Attainment



Once you have developed the qualities in the second phase of life, the third phase of life is about attaining to a certain degree of spiritual maturity. By this time you would have a better understanding about the unsatisfactoriness of life and also experienced the fleeting nature of sensual pleasures. It is about time to look forward to more lasting happiness

and peace, through the Dhamma's way. This third phase of life is when you should begin to reduce and relinquish your worldly duties and responsibilities, and start to go for retreats more often.

Those who have chosen to skip the life of a householder should focus on this phase of life, to attain to spiritual maturity.

The Buddha's advice is as follows:

*Khantī ca sovacassatā, Samanānañ ca dassanam
Kālena dhamma-sākakchā, Etam maṅgala muttamam*

Patience, obedience, the sight of *Samanas* (or holy ones),
Timely discussion of the Dhamma, this is the highest
blessing.

‘*Khantī paramam tapo titikkhā*’ – Patience, or endurance, is the highest form of self-discipline. The Pali word *Khantī* is usually explained as patience or endurance. *Sovacassa* refers to obedience, but it means more than that. When we practise the Dhamma, especially in retreat conditions, we need to take instructions from our teachers. We need to exercise lots of patience and endurance. When our mistakes are pointed out to us, we should not get angry but practise patience and also have the willingness to correct and amend ourselves. Thus the word obedience should also include the idea of an amenable character, someone who is easy to speak to when giving instructions. This will lead to the next verse:

Samanānañ ca dassanam. This refers to the sight of a *samana* or a holy one. What it means here is that the mere sight or

presence of a holy person will make you feel happy and joyful. If your heart is open to rejoice with the sight or the presence of great masters and teachers, you will be able to feel a sense of bliss and upliftment, thereby receiving the necessary transmission for your spiritual accomplishment. Hence the importance of making the right connections in life. Those who do not have the right connections and associations will not know how to rejoice even if they come face to face with the Buddha or some other great masters or teachers.

When you are connected and associated with authentic teachers, you will have the opportunity to clarify your doubts on the more subtle or profound aspects of Dhamma. That is what *Kālena dhamma-sākakchā* is about, to have timely discussion of Dhamma. You may first have discussions of Dhamma with your Dhamma friends, but when there are certain issues that you cannot understand, then you should clarify them with your spiritual teachers who are your real ‘*Kalyāna Mitta*’, or spiritual friends. This will quickly lead you to the next and final phase of life, i.e. the life of a noble one.

The Dhamma is about transforming you from an ordinary human being into a good human being; then from a good human being into a noble human being – one who has become a truly peaceful and harmless person, and who has distanced himself (or herself) from greed, hatred and delusion.

The actual practice that leads to transformation from an ordinary worldly being to a noble one is explained in the following stanza:

*Tapo ca brahma-cariyañ ca, Ariya-saccāna dassanam
Nibbāna sacchi-kiriya ca, Etam maṅgala muttamam*

Practising restraint, leading a holy life, seeing the Noble Truths,
And the realisation of Nibbana, this is the highest blessing.

Tapo or self-discipline is about restraining our body, speech and mind, and *brahma-cariya* is about leading a pure and holy life. These two qualities will pave the way for us to go beyond sensory perceptions to develop wisdom and insights into the true nature of our life.

The information and knowledge we receive through our ordinary sensory perceptions is not complete and reliable, because our eyes can only see within a certain spectrum of light waves, from ultraviolet to infrared. Beyond that we are unable to see. And because we cannot see it for ourselves with our physical eyes, we tend to reject the existence of those phenomena that fall beyond the limit of our physical eyesight. Similarly with our ears, we can only hear within a certain frequency of sound waves. Cats can see better than us at night, and dogs can hear better than us at all times. Our human sensory perceptions are limited.

Our physical bodies, made up of skin, flesh and bones can be broken down into elements such as carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, calcium and all the other elements, and these various elements can be further broken down into atoms, which are defined as 99.999% empty space. More than 2,500 years ago,

the Buddha, in the laboratory of his enlightened mind, was able to see through the emptiness of our body and feelings. And he described them in terms of foam – (*phena*) and bubbles (*bubbula*)⁵.

Do you believe that your body is really empty? No. It is hard to believe, because we tend to only trust the information and knowledge received through our limited ordinary sensory perception. In order to realise the true nature of life and things around us, we need to go beyond our sensory perceptions. Hence the need for sense restraint and a pure and holy life.

The way to go beyond our ordinary sense faculties is through the cultivation of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: namely, mindfulness on the body, feelings, mind (or mental states), and the Dhamma. The development of these Four Foundations of Mindfulness progresses from one to another, until the attainment of Nibbana and the complete realisation of the Four Noble Truths. This is what is meant by *Ariya-saccāna dassanam*, seeing the Noble Truths, and *Nibbāṇa sacchi-kiriya*, the realisation of Nibbana.

It is through the systematic cultivation of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness that we will be able to attain to higher knowledges and insights and be able to see what the physical eyes cannot see, to hear what the physical ears cannot hear, and to know what the ordinary, undeveloped mind cannot know. Truth lies beyond thoughts and conceptual understanding. Hence the need to go beyond our

⁵ Phena Sutta SN 22.95

sensory perceptions. But our yearning for sensual pleasures is so strong because of the habitual tendencies of grasping, clinging and attachment which have been going on from life to life. So we need real courage, effort and perseverance to reduce and overcome these habitual tendencies.

Now that we are born as human beings, we have the unique ability to develop and liberate our minds. Furthermore, we are so fortunate to be born at a time when the Dhamma is still available. And since we have the merits to have made the right connections to receive this sublime teaching of the Buddha, we should make good use of this opportunity to study and practise, to cultivate the necessary wisdom and insights that will lead us to our final liberation, so that we will be able to help others cross the ocean of samsara, the cycle of birth and death.

Upon the complete realisation of the Four Noble Truths and the attainment of Nibbana, come the final blessings:

Putthassa loka dhammehi, Cittam yassa na kampati
Asokam virajam khemam, Etam mangala muttamam

A mind unshaken by contact with changing worldly conditions,
Sorrowless, stainless and secure, this is the highest blessing.

Putthassa loka dhammehi, Cittam yassa na kampati. This refers to a mind that is not moved or shaken by the eight worldly phenomena. These are: profit and loss, praise and blame, fame and ill-fame, happiness and sorrow. Once you have

truly realised the Four Noble Truths and the true nature of life and things around you, you will not be affected by these worldly phenomena.

The first pair is profit and loss. When you do business, sometimes you make money, sometimes you lose it. When you make money, you are not too excited about it – you do not spend everything but keep something for a rainy day. When the time comes that you lose money, then at least you have some savings and you don't get upset. Many young ones these days do not understand this Dhammic principle. They are often overjoyed when they make profit, and they get very stressed and depressed when they lose money.

The whole idea of practising the Dhamma or what the Buddha taught is to develop wisdom so that we will not be disturbed by all these worldly phenomena. When somebody praises you, remember, the same person may also blame you. One day you become popular, the next day you can become unpopular. Politicians especially should know this very well. Similarly, sometimes you are happy, sometimes unhappy. What we call real maturity is when you have this kind of enlightened, equanimous mind, and you do not get affected by adverse conditions so easily.

The next blessing, *Asokam*, means sorrow-less. Why do people feel sorrowful? It is because of their cravings and attachments. Owing to strong attachment, they will feel very sad and sorrowful when they lose their loved ones, or when they lose their business, or when someone has cheated them. When you have developed some wisdom, you will know the

impermanent nature of life and things around you. And you will also know how to think in such a way that will lessen and overcome your problems.

If someone has cheated you, for example, you should understand that in the long rounds of samsaric existence, you must also have cheated others. So now is payback time, when karma ripens. Then you will be able to smile and say: 'Thank you. You have given me the opportunity to clear my karma. If I have cheated you in the past, I am sorry. May you be well and happy.' With wisdom you will be able to see things differently. When you fall sick, you can still smile and say: 'Thank you. With all the merits that I have done, now this illness is helping me to clear my karma: the pain and sufferings which I have inflicted on so many others in the past.' In your old age, when you fall sick and are in pain, you will still be able to be cheerful, and grateful to have the opportunity to clear your karma amidst the support you are receiving from your loved ones, and the blessings of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.

And when the time comes for you to breathe your last breath, and if you have not completed your task in overcoming greed, hatred and delusion, you should realise that this is something which you have gone through countless times before, from life to life. But now that you have come to the Dhamma, you must make sure that this time you will do it right, without fear or confusion, but with strong faith and confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. So that you will be able to make the clear aspiration that whatever happens, you will

continue to grow in the Dhamma's path until your final liberation is attained, so that you will be able to reach out to others to help them cross the ocean of samsara.

If you genuinely practise the Dhamma as laid out in the Mangala Sutta, then towards the end of your life, you will have equanimity; you will not be disturbed by all the worldly conditions, and your mind will be free from sorrow.

Having led a harmless and peaceful way of life, your mind is stainless (*virajam*) and secure (*khemam*) – free from the taints of greed, hatred and delusion. *Asokam virajam khemam* are actually the attributes of an Arahant, a worthy one, who has distanced himself or herself from the tendencies of greed, hatred and delusion.

Having gone through this highest form of spiritual development, the Mangala Sutta concludes with this verse:

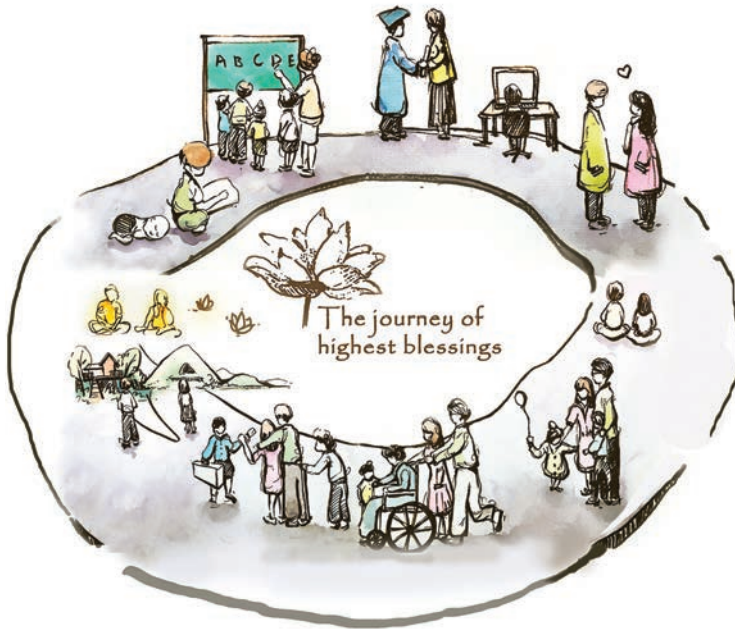
*Etā-disāni katvāna, Sabbattha maparājita
Sabbattha sotthim gacchanti, Tam tesam mangala
muttamam ti*

Those who fulfil all these conditions, they are invincible wherever they go.

They will find wellbeing and safety everywhere. This is the highest blessing.

This marks the fourth and last phase of life, which represents the Highest Attainment in Life, when one truly enjoys the fruition of a spiritual life.

Conclusion



The teachings contained in the Mangala Sutta provide a sense of direction especially for lay Buddhists who are interested to walk and grow in the Dhamma's path.

Although we use the term ‘blessings’, the advice given by the Buddha sounds more like values or qualities which should be cultivated at different stages of our lives. When we put them into practise, these values will naturally become a source of blessings for ourselves and others.

The values of METTĀ (loving-kindness), KARUNĀ (compassion), MUDITĀ (sympathetic joy) and UPEKKHĀ (equanimity) play a very important role in maintaining emotional stability at different stages of our lives. These are values which the wise ones possess and which they will always promote. In fact, the cultivation of METTĀ should begin from the mother's womb. At five months old, the baby in the mother's womb can already hear whatever the mother and father says, as the auditory organ responsible for hearing has already developed by then. Parents could express their tender loving care and welcome their baby to this world so that the baby will feel happy and confident even before birth. If METTĀ is practised throughout early childhood days, the child will feel and experience love and care, and will naturally grow up and be able to give love and care to others.

METTĀ is very important during teenage years when the child tends to get angry, rebellious and resentful to various conditions at home. It is the antidote to anger. By then, METTĀ will also begin to condition KARUNĀ or compassion to manifest. So the child will grow with loving-kindness and compassion. Kindness and compassion, if promoted at this early stage of life, can prevent bullying and various other destructive emotions.

In the teenage years, the child may be intelligent but often emotionally unstable. Their moods will swing, high one moment and low the next. The practice of METTĀ, KARUNĀ, MUDITĀ, and UPEKKHĀ will provide emotional stability.

Through the cultivation of MUDITĀ or sympathetic joy during the teenage years and early adulthood, they should be able to rejoice with the goodness, achievements and success of their siblings and classmates, thus avoiding the tendencies of envy, jealousy, sibling rivalry and so on. MUDITĀ is also important during adulthood. It will give them joy whilst having a stressful time raising children. Towards later adulthood, after experiencing the ups and downs of life, wisdom and insight will begin to develop. As we age with wisdom, equanimity or UPEKKHĀ will develop.

If these four qualities – METTĀ, KARUNĀ, MUDITĀ, and UPEKKHĀ – are systematically developed we will all grow with emotional stability at different stages of our lives, avoiding the problems of family breakdowns through divorce and separation, domestic violence, suicide, and so on.

Peace and harmony begins in the family, and this will contribute to peace and harmony in the society, nation and the world. Hence the need for Dhamma education for peace.

Although we have explained the Mangala Sutta in terms of the Four Ashramas, or the four stages of life that prevailed in India at the time of the Buddha, this discourse can also be explained in terms of 38 blessings, progressing in stages from the worldly and mundane values of life to higher spiritual values, culminating in one's final liberation.

When we explain the discourse in terms of the Four Ashramas, we need to take into consideration the different circumstances prevailing in India more than 2,500 years ago compared to our contemporary society, especially with regards to the

duration of each stage of life. If we consider the life span of humans to be 100 years at the time of the Buddha, then each of the four stages would be for the duration of about 25 years.

In our contemporary society, human life expectancy is around 70 to 80 years, with females usually living about four to eight years longer than males. Whilst the first and second phase of life (that of a student and of a householder) are quite comparable to the Buddha's time – over a period of 25 years each – the third and fourth stages need to be grouped as one, considering that the retirement age has been extended to 60 or 70 years in most developed countries.

As we age, we need to grow in wisdom, living a simple and contented way of life so that we will be able to spend more time on meditation and contemplation. We also need to change our diet, have simple, regular exercise and make other adjustments to keep the body healthy.

Why do we want to live a long and healthy life? Because our life as a human being is indeed very precious. The Pali word *manussa* for 'human being' is comprised of the two words '*manas*' and '*ussanatā*'. *Manas* means 'mind', while *ussanatā* refers to the 'state of elevation' or 'developed state'. We human beings are unique in that our minds are at an elevated or developed state. We need to make the best use of this opportunity to gain our final liberation, and to be able to reach out to others to pave the way for them to be free from all sufferings, or at least to plant the seeds of enlightenment in their hearts.

Most people pray for good health and longevity so that they can enjoy their lives and have their worldly dreams come true, such as seeing their children grow up, graduate, marry, have grandchildren and so on... including perhaps making a trip around the world. All these and more, simply to fulfil their selfish dreams.

Those who have come into contact with the Buddha-Dhamma will realise the preciousness of this human life and will want to live a long and healthy life so that they will be able to practise the Dhamma and attain to the highest bliss of Nibbana.

For that purpose, we need to consider the two kinds of happiness. Firstly, the happiness whilst leading a household life, and secondly, the happiness gained through leading a spiritual way of life. It is important to know when we should make a transition from the worldly to the spiritual, to give up the lesser happiness for the greater happiness, taking into consideration our life energy cycle. If we observe our lives, our life energy increases from day one of our lives, and as we grow, our life energy increases until it reaches a peak at a certain age and then starts to decline.

At what age does our life energy peak? In your worldly career, you would normally peak between 30 to 40 years of age, corresponding to your worldly achievements. The Buddha gained full Enlightenment at the age of 35 and lived on energetically until he was 80 years old, travelling along the highways and byways of India, preaching for the welfare and happiness of the many.

In our case, when our life energy peaks, we enjoy our lives, feeling strong and invulnerable, ignoring the signs of our body. We eat rubbish, enjoy and dissipate our energies until we fall sick. Then the doctor will give us the bad news – that we are suffering from high blood pressure or diabetes, or we may have a mild heart attack or stroke, cancer and so on. This is just a wake-up call.

Then what happens? Those who respond to this wake-up call will get back on their feet and life begins once again. They will now go on healthy diets, begin to exercise, take up tai chi, qigong, yoga classes and go for meditation retreats and other things. Then their life energy will go up again. But this time it will not peak as it did when they were 30 to 40 years old.

Now, if our life energy peaked at 30 to 40 years, we will begin to feel the decline when we reach about 50 to 60 years, before it reaches a very low level. Then if we start to take all the necessary precautions, our energy may come up again, and at around 60 to 65 we will peak again. After that, all the organs of the body, after working for more than half a century, will start to weaken and our energy will again drop to lower and lower levels, until perhaps when we reach 120, when hopefully we may experience another peak!

If we know how our life energy fluctuates with age and the stresses of life, once we have enjoyed our first peak at around 30 to 40 years of age with our material career, we should begin to prepare ourselves to make a transition to a more spiritual way of life and work for our final liberation.

Please remember the last words of the Buddha:

Vaya-dhammā saṅkhārā, appamādena sampādettha

Transient are all component things, work out your deliverance with heedfulness.

The Dhamma shows us how to live our lives in a way conducive to peace and happiness within ourselves and with those around us. The Buddha taught the Dhamma that relates to worldly life, based on avoiding harmful actions and performing beneficial ones. He also taught the supramundane Dhamma that goes beyond the worldly level.

The Mangala Sutta on life's highest blessings contains practical advice on how to develop the right conditions in our lives for peace, happiness and prosperity. At the same time, the Sutta directs us towards higher values that will lead us to develop the wisdom and insights to confront and overcome any obstacles that arise in our lives, and pave the way for us to eventually realise our true potential as human beings, to gain true freedom from all suffering, putting an end to old age, sickness and death.

The highest blessing is to have this Dhamma in our lives. If we have the faith and confidence to put it into practice, the Dhamma will lead us to happiness in the short term, and ultimately to the final goal of liberation.

Some of you who are reading these teachings on the Mangala Sutta for the first time may wish that you had come across these teachings earlier in your life, so that you could have

avoided all the mistakes that have created so many problems in your life. However, some of you may think, ‘Oh, I’ve passed that phase of life, it’s too late now...’.

Are you sure this will be your last birth? Otherwise, please make sure that you study these teachings very carefully. Memorise the whole of the Mangala Sutta. Recite it frequently. Impress it in your consciousness. Then you will never make the same mistakes again in your next life. And you will be able to give others a helping hand, to walk and to grow in the Dhamma’s path.

May the Blessings of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha be with you all always.



Dhamma: The Best Thing in Life

Cultivating the Worldly Dhamma

*Sabba dānaṃ Dhamma dānaṃ jināti,
sabbam rasam Dhamma raso jināti
Sabbam ratim Dhamma ratī jināti,
tanhakkhayo sabba dukkham jināti*

The gift of Dhamma excels all gifts,
the taste of Dhamma excels all tastes,
delight in the Dhamma excels all delights.

The eradication of craving overcomes all sorrow. (Dh. 354)

Dhamma (in Pali) or *Dharma* (in Sanskrit) refers to any teachings that promote peace and happiness in our lives, enabling us to live in harmony with nature and with all those around us. Following such teachings protects us from harm and dangers, and ultimately frees us from old age, sickness, death and all other forms of suffering. As such, Dhamma is the best thing we can have in our lives.

The teachings of the Buddha, known as the Buddha Dhamma, reflect what the Buddha realised through his own experience: how to be completely liberated from all the sufferings of life. In other words, how to find true and lasting happiness – what we commonly call enlightenment, or Nibbana.

The Buddha Dhamma is classified under two categories. The first is called LOKIYADHAMMA – teachings at the mundane or worldly level – and the other is called LOKUTTARA DHAMMA, or the supramundane teachings.

LOKIYA DHAMMA, or the teachings at the worldly level, is based on the law of karma – cause and effect. These teachings show us how to lead a righteous way of life through good moral conduct, by avoiding unwholesome or unskilful actions which bring suffering to ourselves and others, and by performing wholesome and skilful actions which promote happiness and wellbeing for both ourselves and others. This can be summarised as avoiding evil and doing good.

The Dhamma or teachings which go beyond the mundane, worldly level, is known as LOKUTTARA DHAMMA, and this involves the cultivation and purification of the mind, leading to the understanding and realisation of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. It is these teachings that show the path to true happiness and freedom – freedom from the samsaric cycle of birth and death.

The mundane or worldly Dhamma prepares us to live a successful life through righteous means. By avoiding unskilful actions – which disturb our peace of mind and give rise to remorse, guilt and restlessness – and cultivating skilful actions – which promote peace and happiness in our minds – we also lay the foundation for the training and purification of our minds.

When we construct a tall building like a stupa, we need to ensure it has a strong foundation to support the height of

the structure. Likewise, we need to build a firm foundation in good moral conduct to support us to develop the highest potentials of our mind. Thus we need to cultivate the worldly Dhamma in order to have the calmness and clarity of mind to eventually realise the supramundane Dhamma. It is the supramundane Dhamma, or the wisdom and insight into the true nature of life, that will enable us to cope with the ups and downs of life, with old age, sickness and death, and ultimately to go beyond samsara – the cycle of birth and death.

Good moral conduct involves both avoiding evil and doing good, and is explained in terms of Right Speech, Right Body Action, and Right Livelihood.



Right Speech consists of avoiding lying, slandering, harsh speech and frivolous talk. We should also cultivate positive speech: speaking the truth, speaking in a manner that will unite (rather than divide) others; speaking gently and courteously; and speaking words that are useful and beneficial.

Right Body Action consists of avoiding killing or harming living beings, avoiding stealing, and avoiding sexual misconduct. On the positive side we should protect life, respect the rights of ownership, and respect established relationships.

Right Livelihood consists of avoiding livelihoods that involve killing or harming others: through the production and sale of weapons; the production and sale of poisons; or the production and sale of intoxicants; bringing up animals for slaughter; and slave trade (such as human trafficking). In other words we should try to ensure that our livelihood is obtained through means that cause no harm to ourselves or others.

Skilful or good actions are those actions which we perform in fulfilling our duties and responsibilities towards one another. The discourse on the Sigalovada Sutta explains the duties and responsibilities we need to perform in the different relationships in our lives. That is, the duties of children to parents, parents to children; pupil to teacher, teacher to pupil; husband to wife, wife to husband; friend to friend; employer to employee, employee to employer; and religious teacher to disciple, disciple to religious teacher. This discourse gives practical advice about how we should behave

in order to maintain harmony and support each other in our relationships.

In addition, skilful actions include the cultivation of values such as generosity, reverence, humility, contentment, gratitude, patience and so on. The Buddha took many occasions to describe how he had practised these virtues in his previous lives, through the relation of the Jataka stories, as well as giving examples of how others had cultivated these virtues. These are found in the Dhammapada and elsewhere in the scriptures.

The key aspect to note is that by avoiding unskilful actions, which cause harm to ourselves and others, and developing skilful actions which benefit ourselves and others, we will be protected from the negative consequences of bad actions and we will generate a store of positive karma or merits.

According to the law of cause and effect, 'good begets good, evil begets evil'. This means if we harm others through our actions of body, speech or mind, those negative effects will eventually come back to us. On the other hand, if we do good, we will in turn reap the benefits of positive results. For example, if we avoid lying, our words will be trusted and we will have a good reputation. If we treat our family members and friends well, they will support us in return.

Furthermore, when we do not observe Right Speech, Right Body Action and Right Livelihood, our minds will be plagued by remorse and guilt over the suffering we have caused to others, and also to ourselves. Sometimes we are not aware of this underlying remorse, but when we try to settle down our

minds, there is the tendency for our minds to become very restless and disturbed.

Therefore, the cultivation of the worldly Dhamma will pave the way for us to lead happy and peaceful lives as a result of doing good and restraining from evil. Of course, if we have already committed some negative actions in our past, we may not see the positive results of our good actions immediately, but the more we cultivate the worldly Dhamma, the more we create the right conditions for our lives to become harmonious, prosperous and peaceful.

However, on another level we also need to understand that this happiness we derive from a comfortable lifestyle, stable and loving relationships, and all the worldly pleasures we experience through our five senses is fleeting in nature. No matter how much we love our family, sooner or later we will have to be separated. No matter how much we take care of our wealth and possessions, one day we will have to leave it behind. In this manner, all the things that give us pleasure one moment may be the source of pain and suffering the next.

Even all the worldly merits and positive karma cannot protect us from the inherent unsatisfactoriness of life: the sufferings of old age, sickness and death; association with those whom we do not like or unpleasant conditions; separation from loved ones or pleasant conditions; and the inability to fulfil certain duties. That is why, while we are living in relatively peaceful and happy circumstances, we need to make good use of our lives to develop something higher.

Going Beyond the Fleeting Pleasures of Life

*Na taṃ mātā pita kayirā – aññe vā pi ca nātakā
Sammā panihitaṃ cittaṃ – seyyaso naṃ tato kare*

What neither mother, nor father, nor any other relative
can do,
A well-directed mind can indeed do one greater good.
(Dh. 43)

In order to go beyond the fleeting pleasures of life and to experience a more lasting happiness, we need to develop the wisdom and insight to understand the true nature of our lives, our existence and the world around us.

This is where we need teachings at the supramundane level – LOKUTTARA DHAMMA – which involves the cultivation and purification of the mind, leading to the understanding and realisation of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. These teachings lead us to freedom – freedom from the samsaric cycle of birth and death – and ultimately to true happiness.

At this point it is useful to consider the three aspects of Dhamma, or Truth:

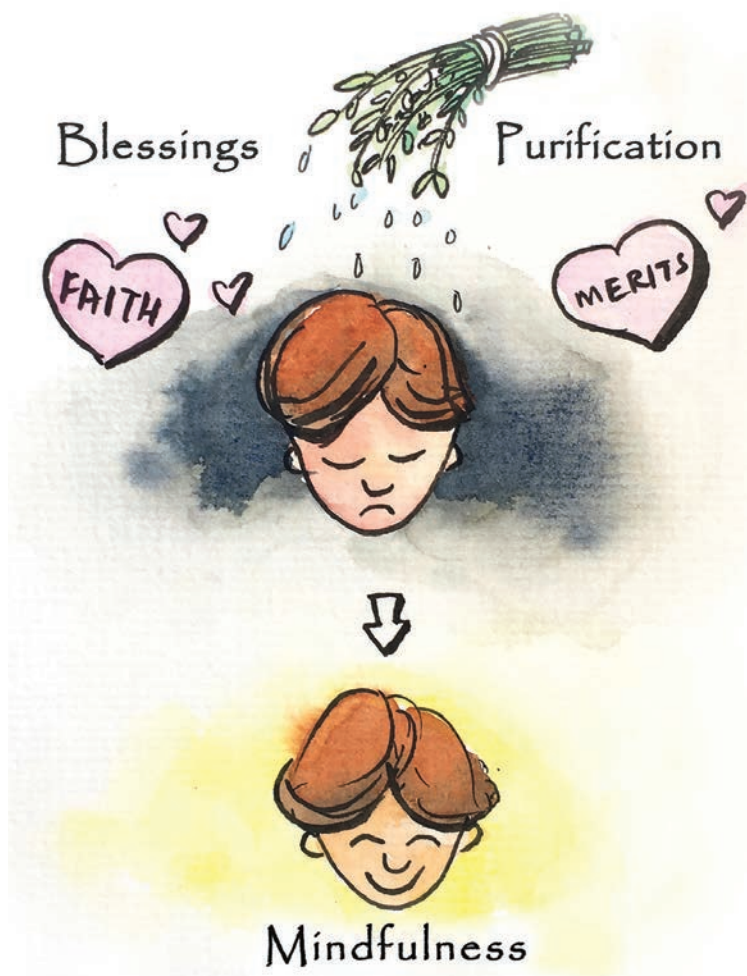
1. PARIYATTI, the theory or principles
2. PAṬIPATTI, the practice
3. PAṬIVEDHA, the realisation

In other words, in order to gain a complete understanding of the Buddha-Dhamma we first need to study, reflect and contemplate its teachings, theories and principles. For many people this takes the form of listening to Dhamma talks, reading about the Dhamma and reflecting on the teachings through the practices of chanting or contemplation.

However, we need to be aware that the knowledge of the Dhamma we gain through these means is at the intellectual or conceptual level. In order to translate what we understand at the conceptual level into actual experience and realisation of the truth, we need to apply what we have learnt through the practice of Dhamma. This should be done not only through formal practice such as training the mind through meditation and retreats, but it should also extend to informal situations, where we need to reflect and contemplate on how the Dhamma relates to our own life and to apply Dhammic principles in our daily activities.

The more we practise and apply the teachings in our daily lives, the more we will be able to perceive the true nature of our existence. This how we gradually come to realise the Dhamma for ourselves. And when we know the Dhamma, the truth, through our own direct experience, we will gain greater confidence in the teachings until eventually our faith will become unshakeable.

Having already gained some intellectual understanding of the Dhamma, we then need to train and purify our minds until we can clearly see the truth for ourselves.



The intrinsic nature of our minds is pure, bright and luminous like a stainless mirror. A clear mirror will reflect the truth accurately, without distortion. However through our own lack of understanding and wisdom, we have deposited layers and layers of 'dirt' – the defiling tendencies of greed, hatred

and delusion and their various manifestations – which have ‘stained’ our minds and blurred our vision. That is why we need to cleanse the mind and to remove these layers of ‘dirt’.

The purification of the mind can be achieved through the practice of mindfulness or *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation. We can describe mindfulness as being present, with clear awareness of our body, feelings and state of mind. It is this practice of mindfulness that will help to convert our intellectual understanding into the experience and realisation of the true nature of our lives and our existence.

Mindfulness can be practised in both formal and informal situations in our daily lives. We can start by practising mindfulness of our own bodies: our breathing, posture, activities of the body and so on. As we become more aware of our bodies, we will naturally become more aware of our feelings. Whatever feeling arises, we just observe it and know what the feeling is like, without having aversion to any unpleasant feeling or clinging on to any pleasant feeling.

When we are more mindful of our feelings, we will naturally become more aware of our states of mind. On a daily basis we experience many different states of mind: happiness, joy, excitement, anger, confusion, depression and so on. And we tend to get so caught up in these emotions that we act on impulse, without regard for the consequences of our actions. This is where mindfulness can help, by focussing our minds on the present moment. When desire arises, we know there is desire in the mind. When anger arises, we know we are angry. When we are mindful, clearly aware of the emotion

itself, we have already stepped out of that state. This is how mindfulness provides the space to overcome negative emotions and instead cultivate positive ones.

The more we cultivate mindfulness, the more we will be clearly aware of what this life is about. We will begin to see how everything is subject to change: our bodies are changing, our feelings are changing, and our state of mind is constantly changing. When we see change, we will start to see unsatisfactoriness and the empty nature of our lives. This will lead us on to understand the truth of life.

The empty nature of our lives – often described as emptiness or void – needs to be understood in its proper perspective. Emptiness is not nothingness. When your mind goes blank, it does not mean that you have realised emptiness. The term ‘emptiness’ is used to refer to anything which does not exist on its own accord. That is, the true nature of things is that everything arises dependent on causes and conditions. Nothing arises from nothing. There is no such thing as independent existence. We all exist dependent on causes and conditions. Our lives depend on food, clothing, shelter, medicine and so on. Plants survive because of heat, sunlight, water, gravity, and so on.

The true nature of life and things around us is what the Buddha fully realised on the night of his Enlightenment, when wisdom and insight arose with the clear understanding of the law of Dependent Origination or *Paticca Samuppada*. Dependent Origination explains how suffering arises and how suffering ceases dependent on causes and conditions.

The Buddha taught the *Paticca Samuppada* in his first sermon (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta) in terms of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.



Ferrying across the ocean of samsara

Supramundane Dhamma – The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path

What the Buddha realised on the night of his Enlightenment, he taught in the first sermon or Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta in terms of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. These teachings form the foundation of Buddhism, and they are based on the law of cause and effect.

The Four Noble Truths can be simply stated as:

1. *Dukkha* – suffering or unsatisfactoriness
2. *Samudaya* – the cause
3. *Nirodha* – the cessation, and
4. *Magga* – the path that leads to the cessation of suffering.

The problem of suffering arises from the cause, which is craving, and the cessation of suffering also arises from the cause for its cessation, which is the Noble Eightfold Path.

The First Noble Truth is the Truth of *Dukkha*, which is generally translated as suffering or unsatisfactoriness. But it is often misunderstood as ‘life is suffering’. The Buddha did not say that ‘life is suffering’. If life equals suffering, then there is no way out. What the Buddha taught was ‘there is suffering in life’, and there is an end to the suffering.

The Buddha defines *dukkha* as:

*Jāti pi dukkha, jarā pi dukkha, vyādhi pi dukkho, maraṇam
pi dukkham...*

That is: birth, old age, sickness and death. These are all sources of suffering which are conditioned by the physical body. Then he went on to explain the sufferings conditioned by the mind. They are as follows:

*Appiyehi sampayogo dukkho, piyehi vippayogo dukkho,
yam-piccham na labhati tam-pi dukkham...*

That is: association with people or conditions which you do not like; separation from people or conditions which you love; and unfulfilled desires, or not being able to get what you want. We encounter these phenomena of mental sufferings in our daily lives, so they are easily understood. But the more profound meaning of the term *dukkha*, which is not easily understood, lies in the summary of its definition:

Sanikhittena pañcupādāna-kkhandā dukkha.

In short, the Five Grasping Aggregates are *dukkha*. What are these Five Grasping Aggregates? They are the aggregates of form (or the physical process), feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness.

The Buddha said that the Five ‘Grasping’ Aggregates are *dukkha*. It is not the Five Aggregates themselves which are

the problem, but the fact that we grasp or cling on to them. We cling on to our body, to our feelings, to our memories and perceptions. We cling on to our ideas, views and other mental formations, and we cling on to our consciousness. It is the clinging or attachment to the Five Aggregates that conditions *dukkha* to arise. Why? Because these Five Aggregates are constantly changing. They are in a state of flux. If we cling on to something that is constantly changing, how not to suffer?

This is the profound meaning of the term *dukkha* which ordinary people may find difficult to understand. That is why the training of the mind is so important.

The untrained mind clings on to these Five Aggregates as the false notion of 'self', as 'I', 'my', 'me', and 'mine', giving rise to the ego and egocentricity – the root cause of all human problems.

Although we need to use these terms 'I', 'my', 'me', and 'mine' in our conventional world, we need to understand that in reality, there is no such thing as 'I', 'my', 'me', and 'mine'. The idea of absolute ownership is not real. Although we claim that this body, feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness are ours, we do not have absolute control over them. We claim children, parents, husbands, wives and so on as 'mine' and 'ours', but we are unable to make them be what we want them to be. If we are the true owners, we should be able to do anything with them. But this is not so. Legally we may be the owners but in reality, we are just their custodians,

not owners. Karma is our real inheritance – we are heirs to our karma and related to our karma.

Whilst the mundane Dhamma refers to the ‘self’ as ‘I’, ‘my’, ‘me’, and ‘mine’, the supramundane Dhamma sees the ‘self’ in terms of the Five Aggregates, which are constantly in a state of flux or change. This profound meaning of *dukkha* (the First Noble Truth) as the Five Grasping Aggregates is not easily understood without proper training of the mind.

The Second Noble Truth refers to the cause of suffering, which lies in craving or the grasping of desires. Craving leads to clinging or attachment, and to aversion, anger, hatred and grudges.

Craving or desire is a mental force which drives us to get the things we want. When we get them, we are happy; when we cannot get what we want, we get upset and angry. The happiness or pleasure that we get through craving is fleeting. It does not last. Having fulfilled our desire for one thing, we will crave for something more.

Consider the worldly happiness that you enjoy in your lives. First you crave to have a partner. You find one and get married, and you are happy. Then you crave to have children. When you have children, you crave to bring them up, to give them a good education. Then you want them to get married, to have grandchildren. Then when you get tired, you will crave for the grandchildren to grow up quickly so you can have some freedom! This craving goes on and on, it does not end in a hurry. It goes on from life to life, until you come into contact with the Dhamma and realise that

the cause of all your suffering lies in your own craving or grasping tendencies.

The mental force of craving which drives us to get what we want actually comes from our own mind, through the process of thinking and rethinking. When we attach certain values such as ‘beautiful, nice, tasty...’ and so on to the things which we see, hear, smell, taste and feel, and then we go on thinking and rethinking about them again and again, we will experience some good feeling. This good or pleasant feeling will condition craving or desire to arise.

If you keep thinking of some tasty and delicious food again and again, you will begin to salivate. That is a sign of craving or desire. And the same applies to all our other sense faculties, like seeing, hearing, smelling and feeling.

Once we are able to understand that craving is something we ourselves have created in our own minds through thinking and rethinking, we will also realise that we ourselves can discreate this force of craving, through the silencing of our mind. And this can come about through the practice of meditation based on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

We will need to cultivate the stillness of mind until the habit pattern of the mind to create thoughts is broken. Upon breaking the habitual tendencies of thinking and rethinking, we will be able to experience seeing as seeing, hearing as hearing, tasting as tasting, feeling as feeling, and thinking as thinking. That is how we will be able to reduce and eventually put an end to the tendencies of craving and attachment.

When we clearly understand and realise that craving is the cause of suffering, we will also understand the Third Noble Truth, that there is an end to suffering. And this lies in our ability to put an end to our habitual tendencies of craving and attachment.

The Fourth Noble Truth is the path that leads to the end of suffering. It is called the Noble Eightfold Path. This is the path which lays the foundation for the proper cultivation of the mind, so as to develop the strength and sharpness of mind to break through the habitual tendencies of craving and attachment.

Avoiding the extremes of self-indulgence on the one hand and self-mortification (or self-torture) on the other, the Noble Eightfold Path consists of:

1. Right Understanding
2. Right Thought
3. Right Speech
4. Right Body Action
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

Right Understanding or Right View consists of the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, the Law of Karma and the Three Characteristics of Existence: namely, *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta*, or impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self.

Right Thoughts are thoughts free from covetousness, ill-will and cruelty, but flowing with renunciation, loving-kindness and compassion.

These two, Right Understanding and Right Thoughts, are classified under *paññā* or wisdom. Right Understanding is the key factor. When there is Right Understanding or Right View, then all the other path factors will fall into place.

The third path factor is Right Speech, which involves the avoidance of lying, slandering, harsh speech and frivolous talk, and the cultivation of truthful speech, speech that will unite (rather than divide) others, gentle and courteous speech and speaking words that are useful and beneficial.

Right Body Action consists of avoiding killing or harming living beings, stealing, and sexual misconduct and the cultivation of respect for the sanctity of all life, respect for the rights of ownership, and the respect for established relationships.

Right Livelihood consists of avoiding those livelihoods that involve killing or harming others through the production and sale of armaments and weapons; the production and sale of poisons; the production and sale of drugs and intoxicants (which cause one to lose control of one's mind); the bringing up of animals for slaughter; and slave trade (including human trafficking). In other words, we should ensure that our livelihood is obtained through peaceful means, without causing harm to ourselves or others.

Right Effort is fourfold. It refers to the effort to prevent and overcome unwholesome or unskilful states of mind, and the effort to develop and maintain wholesome or skilful states of mind.

Right Mindfulness refers to the cultivation of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, namely: mindfulness on the body, feelings, mind and the Dhamma, and not clinging or having aversion to any of these four foundations.

Right Concentration consists of clear awareness of the cultivation of the four mental absorptions, namely *pathama*, *dutiya*, *tatiya* and *catutṭha jhānas*, or the first, second, third and fourth *jhānas*.

Traditionally the Noble Eightfold Path is explained in terms of:

Sīla – good conduct

Samādhi – concentration or mental discipline

Paññā – wisdom

These three stages of practice aim at purifying our body, speech and mind from the unskilful tendencies of greed, hatred and delusion.

Through *sīla*, or the restraint of speech and body actions, the tendencies of greed, hatred and delusion can be prevented from manifesting at the physical and verbal level, but not at the mental level. Hence the need to develop *samādhi* or concentration, to cultivate calmness and insight in order to prevent the tendencies of greed, hatred and delusion

from manifesting at the mental level. However, unskilful tendencies can still manifest when one's mind is out of *samādhi*, out of concentrated states of mind when the path factors of Effort, Mindfulness and Concentration are not in proper focus. Hence the need to develop *paññā*, wisdom or insight, through the cultivation of Right Understanding and Right Thoughts.

In the First Sermon of the Buddha, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the Buddha declared to the first five ascetics how he had perceived and realised the Four Noble Truths. He said:

“This is the Noble Truth of *dukkha* (or suffering).
It should be fully perceived.
And it has been fully perceived.”

He went on to say:

“This is the Noble Truth of the cause of suffering
(or *samudaya*).
It should be eradicated.
And it has been eradicated.”

Similarly:

“This is the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering
(*nirodha*).
It should be realised.
And it has been realised.”

Finally:

“This is the Noble Truth of the path leading to the
cessation of suffering (or *magga*).
It should be developed.
And it has been developed.”

This is known in Pali as *tiparivaṭṭaṃ dvādasākāraṃ*, or the three aspects and twelve ways how the Buddha realised the Four Noble Truths.

Although many of us have heard about the Four Noble Truths and understood the teachings at the intellectual or conceptual level, we still need to practise and realise the Four Noble Truths in all the three aspects and twelve ways.

This is referred to as *pariyati*, *paṭipatti*, *paṭivedha*, or theory, practice and realisation.

In the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, we can see how the worldly Dhamma, morals and ethical teachings are directly interrelated with the cultivation of the supramundane Dhamma through the attainment of wisdom and insights as a result of meditation and mindfulness.

When one's mind is truly liberated from the tendencies of greed, hatred and delusion, the samsaric cycle of birth, old age, sickness and death is ended. Then there will be no longer the recurring need for food, shelter, clothing, medicine and all the other needs and wants. Hence, the Dhamma is the best thing in life.

