Understanding Buddhism: The Dhammapada

The ***Dhammapada***, an anthology of 423 verses, has long been recognised as one of the masterpieces of early Buddhist literature. From ancient times to the present, the Dhammapada has been regarded as the most succinct expression of the Buddha's teaching.

**Dhammapada palm leaf manuscript** (44.5 \* 6.5 cm) in Sinhalese characters, of which the first and last pages are shown, is believed to be the oldest extant copy of the scripture. Photo: Courtesy of K. D. Paranavitana, Assistant Archivist, Department of National Archives, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Buddhist tradition has it that shortly after the passing away of the Buddha his disciples met in council at Rajagaha for the purpose of recalling to mind the truths they had received from their beloved Teacher during the forty-five years of his ministry. Their hope was to implant the principles of his message so firmly in memory that they would become a lasting impetus to moral and spiritual conduct, for themselves, their disciples, and for all future disciples who would seek to follow in the footsteps of the Awakened One.

With the Teacher no longer among them, the monks found themselves with the responsibility of handing on the teaching as faithfully as possible. Having no written texts to rely on, they did as their ancestors had before them and prepared their discourses for recitation, that is, basic themes were repeated with variations in order to impress the ideas on their hearers. At that time, according to the Sinhalese, the Dhammapada was orally assembled from the sayings of Gautama given on some three hundred different occasions.

Subsequently, several renditions of the Dhammapada in the Sanskrit and Chinese languages came into circulation. Likewise, a number of stanzas are to be found almost verbatim in other texts of the canonical literature, testifying to the esteem in which its content was anciently held. Since first collated, the Dhammapada has become one of the best loved of Buddhist scriptures, recited daily by millions of devotees who chant its verses in Pali or in their native dialect.

It was inevitable that differences in interpretation of teaching as well as of disciplinary practices would arise, with the result that about a century after the First Council was held a second gathering was called to affirm the purity of the doctrine. It was at this Second Council that the Arhats divided into two main streams, namely, the Mahasanghika or "Great Assembly" and the Theravada or "Doctrine of Elders." These gradually developed into the Mahayana or Northern School of Buddhism espoused chiefly in India, Tibet, China, and later Japan, and the Hinayana or Southern School whose stronghold is Sri Lanka, Burma, and the countries of Southeast Asia.

GROUP ONE

Flowers

Who shall conquer this world
And the world of death with all its gods?
Who shall discover
The shining way of dharma?
You shall, even as the man
Who seeks flowers
Finds the most beautiful,
The rarest.
Understand that the body
Is merely the foam of a wave,
The shadow of a shadow.
Snap the flower arrows of desire
And then, unseen,
Escape the king of death.

And travel on.
Death overtakes the man
Who gathers flowers
When with distracted mind and thirsty senses
He searches vainly for happiness
In the pleasures of the world.
Death fetches him away
As a flood carries off a sleeping village.
Death overcomes him
When with distracted mind and thirsty senses
He gathers flowers.
He will never have his fill
Of the pleasures of the world.
The bee gathers nectar from the flower
Without marring its beauty or perfume.
So let the master settle, and wander.
Look to your own faults,
What you have done or left undone.
Overlook the faults of others.
Like a lovely flower,
Bright but scentless,
Are the fine but empty words
Of the man who does not mean what he says.
Like a lovely flower,
Bright and fragrant,
Are the fine and truthful words
Of the man who means what he says.
Like garlands woven from a heap of flowers,
Fashion from your life as many good deeds.
The perfume of sandalwood,
Rosebay or jasmine
Cannot travel against the wind.
But the fragrance of virtue
Travels even against the wind,
As far as the ends of the world.
How much finer
Is the fragrance of virtue
Than of sandalwood, rosebay,
Of the blue lotus or jasmine!
The fragrance of sandalwood and rosebay
Does not travel far.
But the fragrance of virtue
Rises to the heavens.
Desire never crosses the path
Of virtuous and wakeful men.
Their brightness sets them free.
How sweetly the lotus grows
In the litter of the wayside.
Its pure fragrance delights the heart.
Follow the awakened
And from among the blind
The light of your wisdom
Will shine out, purely.

YOUR JOB

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| On a sheet of paper, with your group:1. Summarize your verse. What does the verse discuss?
2. Point out **metaphors, personification, prevalent imagery** (nature, heaven, morality, human body, and others), **etc.**
3. What is the **message** of your verse? What is the “poem” saying?
4. Overall, what is the verse’s message about Buddhism? What could a spiritual person learn from the verse? How does it say one should live his/her life?
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PREPARE A 3-5 MINUTE ANALYSIS OF YOUR VERSE TO SHARE WITH THE CLASS. SHARE A FEW PASSAGES WITH THE GROUP, INCLUDING PERTINENT IMAGES AND LINES WHICH FURTHER THE VERSE’S MESSAGE.

GROUP TWO

The Thousands

Better than a thousand hollow words
Is one word that brings peace.
Better than a thousand hollow verses
Is one verse that brings peace.
Better than a hundred hollow lines
Is one line of the dharma, bringing peace.
It is better to conquer yourself
Than to win a thousand battles.
Then the victory is yours.
It cannot be taken from you,
Not by angels or by demons,
Heaven or hell.
Better than a hundred years of worship,
Better than a thousand offerings,
Better than giving up a thousand worldly ways
In order to win merit,
Better even than tending in the forest
A sacred flame for a hundred years -
Is one moment's reverence
For the man who has conquered himself.
To revere such a man,
A master old in virtue and holiness,
Is to have victory over life itself,
And beauty, strength and happiness.
Better than a hundred years of mischief
Is one day spent in contemplation.
Better than a hundred years of ignorance
Is one day spent in reflection.
Better than a hundred years of idleness
Is one day spent in determination.
Better to live one day
Wondering
How all things arise and pass away.
Better to live one hour
Seeing
The one life beyond the way.
Better to live one moment
In the moment
Of the way beyond the way.

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GROUP THREE

The Way

The way is eightfold.
There are four truths.
All virtue lies in detachment.
The master has an open eye.
This is the only way,
The only way to the opening of the eye.
Follow it.
Outwit desire.
Follow it to the end of sorrow.
When I pulled out sorrow's shaft
I showed you the way.
It is you who must make the effort.
The masters only point the way.
But if you meditate
And follow the dharma
You will free yourself from desire.
"Everything arises and passes away."
When you see this, you are above sorrow.
This is the shining way.
"Existence is sorrow."
Understand, and go beyond sorrow.
This is the way of brightness.
"Existence is illusion."
Understand, and go beyond.
This is the way of clarity.
You are strong, you are young.
It is time to arise.
So arise!
Lest through irresolution and idleness
You lose the way.
Master your words.
Master your thoughts.
Never allow your body to do harm.
Follow these three roads with purity
And you will find yourself upon the one way,
The way of wisdom.
Sit in the world, sit in the dark.
Sit in meditation, sit in light.
Choose your seat.
Let wisdom grow.
Cut down the forest.
Not the tree.
For out of the forest comes danger.
Cut down the forest.
Fell desire.
And set yourself free.
While a man desires a woman,
His mind is bound
As closely as a calf to its mother.
As you would pluck an autumn lily,
Pluck the arrow of desire.
For he who is awake
Has shown you the way of peace.
Give yourself to the journey.
"Here shall I make my dwelling,
In the summer and the winter,
And in the rainy season."
So the fool makes his plans,
Sparing not a thought for his death.
Death overtakes the man
Who, giddy and distracted by the world,
Cares only for his flocks and his children,
Death fetches him away
As a flood carries off a sleeping village.

His family cannot save him,
Not his father nor his sons.
Know this.
Seek wisdom, and purity.
Quickly clear the way.

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GROUP FOUR

Yourself

Love yourself and watch -
Today, tomorrow, always.
First establish yourself in the way,
Then teach,
And so defeat sorrow.
To straighten the crooked
You must first do a harder thing -
Straighten yourself.
You are your only master.
Who else?
Subdue yourself,
And discover your master.
Willfully you have fed
Your own mischief.
Soon it will crush you
As the diamond crushes stone.
By your own folly
You will be brought as low
As you worst enemy wishes.
So the creeper chokes the tree.
How hard it is to serve yourself,
How easy to lose yourself
In mischief and folly.
The kashta reed dies when it bears fruit.
So the fool,
Scorning the teachings of the awakened,
Spurning those who follow the dharma,
Perishes when his folly flowers.
Mischief is yours.
Sorrow is yours.
But virtue is also yours,
And purity.
You are the source
Of all purity and impurity.
No one purifies another.
Never neglect your work
For another's,
However great his need.
Your work is to discover your work
And then with all your heart
To give yourself to it.

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GROUP FIVE

The World

Do not live in the world,
In distraction and false dreams.
Outside the dharma.
Arise and watch.
Follow the way joyfully
Through this world and beyond.
Follow the way of virtue.
Follow the way joyfully
Through this world and on beyond!
For consider the world -
A bubble, a mirage.
See the world as it is,
And death shall overlook you.
Come, consider the world,
A painted chariot for kings,
A trap for fools.
But he who sees goes free.
As the moon slips from behind a cloud
And shines,
So the master comes out from behind his ignorance
And shines.
The world is in darkness.
How few have eyes to see!
How few the birds
Who escape the net and fly to heaven!
Swans rise and fly toward the sun.
What magic!
So do the pure conquer the armies of illusion
And rise and fly.
If you scoff at heaven
And violate the dharma,
If your words are lies,
Where will your mischief end?
The fool laughs at generosity.
The miser cannot enter heaven.
But the master finds joy in giving
And happiness is his reward.
And more -
For greater than all the joys
Of heaven and earth,
Greater still and than dominion
Over all the worlds,
Is the joy of reaching the stream.

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