

THE ESSENTIAL TEACHING OF THE BUDDHA

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Among the teachings of the Buddha compiled in the five collections of Pali Nikayas, we can find some very long discourses like ones in the Digha Nikaya. However, there can be some very short and condensed teachings found in the Dhammapada, which belongs to the Khuddaka Nikaya. There are 423 verses altogether in the Dhammapada. They were uttered by the Buddha on some 305 occasions for the benefit of various kinds of people during his life-long travels throughout different parts of ancient India. Every single verse of it is indeed a precious Gem of Wisdom in the Treasury of Truth since it conveys a message of deep meaning and also the very basic principles of the Dhamma, as we read in Verse 183 below:

Not to do any evil,

To cultivate good,

To purify one's mind,

This is the Teachings of the Buddhas.

This verse was uttered by the Buddha when Venerable Ananda asked him whether the fundamental instructions to bhikkhus given by the preceding Buddha were the same as those of Gautama Buddha himself. The Buddha explained that the instructions given by all the Buddhas were the same. He then recited some stanzas that had been spoken by the previous Buddha; among them was Verse 183.

The Buddha's teachings on compassion can be practiced in our daily life. The most simple is meditation which helps to relate directly to our past and present relationships. The specific characteristic of Buddhism which is over two thousand and five hundred years old is that it puts emphasis on practice to transform and purify mind.

As we know, an eight-years-old child can learn this verse by heart but an eighty-years-old man may not have learnt to practice it. If we want to practice well, the first thing we should do is to understand this verse. So, what is evil? What is good? And how to purify one's mind? To know what evil and good are, we certainly have to be close to and learn from the wise men "The mind cannot be transformed by force, using knives and guns. It may seem to be weak, having no color or shape, but it is actually tough and resilient. The only way to change it is by using the mind itself. For only the mind can distinguish between what is to be done and what is to be given up. This is how the darkness of ignorance can be dispelled. When the mind can see the temporary

and ultimate benefits of engaging in virtue and the faults of unvirtuous misdeeds, we will be able to act accordingly.”¹

The story above reveals that what is said in this verse is an essential teaching of all the Buddha. The first thing mentioned in the verse is also the most important thing for anyone who wishes to set their foot on the Path to Happiness – “Not to do any evil.” So what is meant by “evil” here, or how do we define “evil” according to Buddhist viewpoint? Sometimes “evil” can be denoted as “demerit” or “unwholesome action.” We read in the Sammaditthi Sutta:

Killing living beings is unwholesome, taking what is not given is unwholesome, misconduct in sensual pleasures is unwholesome, false speech is unwholesome, malicious speech is unwholesome, harsh speech is unwholesome, gossip is unwholesome, covetousness is unwholesome, ill will is unwholesome, the wrong view is unwholesome. This is called the unwholesome.

What we call ten evil deeds is three kinds of deeds – through body, speech and mind – that harm ourselves and others in the present and in the future while what we call ten good deeds means the actions through body, speech and mind that bring advantage to ourselves and others in the present and in the future. The origin of Evil is attachment, aversion and ignorance, of which suffering is the product, while the origin of Good is non-attachment, non-aversion and non-ignorance from which comes true happiness.

The above are ten evil deeds from which Buddhists are advised to keep away. These deeds are deeply rooted in greed, hatred and delusion which bring suffering to oneself and others not only in this life but also in the coming lives. They deprive us of happiness and good opportunities to see and practice the Dharma.

Particularly, not killing means setting free; not stealing means giving away; not doing unchaste deeds means doing chaste deeds; not lying means right speech, no harsh speech means kind speech, no duplicity means reconciliatory speech and no frivolous speech means considered speech, non-covetousness means unselfishness, non-hatred means compassion and non-foolishness means wisdom. These ten good deeds lead us to peaceful and happy life.

Not only should we avoid doing evil but we should also try our best to “cultivate well following the Buddha’s advice. Good or the wholesome are explained in the Sammaditthi Sutta as opposed to the unwholesome. Abstention from doing the ten unwholesome things means that we have already performed the ten wholesome things.

The performance of good actions gives rise to merit, a quality which purifies and cleanses the mind of the evil tendencies of greed, hatred, and delusion. Merit is important in a way that it supports us along our journey through life. It is connected with what is good and beneficial to

¹ The Dalai lama, *Awakening the mind, lightening the heart*, Delhi, 1997, p.116

oneself and others, and it can improve the quality of the mind. A person will experience happiness here and hereafter through the performance of good deeds. They will produce merit which enables a person to be reborn in the heavens and provides him with the right conditions and support for his attainment of Nirvana.

Human beings' existence is the existence for practicing Dharma to end the cycle of suffering. If we want to bring an end to suffering and gain liberation, "we should enter the path of the three trainings: the trainings of morality, concentration, and wisdom. Among these three, the antidote that will eliminate the delusions is the wisdom realizing selflessness." As the disciples of the Buddha, we should be aware in our mind that our ultimate goal is not to be reborn in the realms of heavens, but to attain Nirvana. Therefore, the abstention from doing ten evil deeds and the performance of ten good deeds are not enough to set us free from the samsara. We must uproot greed, hatred, and delusion completely even in their underlying tendencies, which is referred to in the above verse of Dhammapada as "purify one's mind" because mind is pure only when it is cleansed of those three root evils.

We all know that mind plays a very important role in bodily, verbal and mental actions. "Mind is the forerunner of all evil (or good) states. Mind is chief; mind-made are they." In order to purify our mind, we have to practice mindfulness in every moment. How to have a mindful mind? Each person, each school has their own way. This one recites the Buddha's name, another practices keeping precepts or meditation. Whatever we practice, however, we should be observant of our mind, just watching it and not chasing thoughts. All the conditioned states are compared with guests of the house, they come and go all the time. If the householder chases after them he will be very tired. In the same way, if our mind always chases after the conditioned things it will be weary and overwhelmed with akusala states that cause evil deeds. For me personally, besides studying the Buddha's teachings especially Abhidhamma, to understand the nature of mind, realization of selflessness as object of meditation is necessary. Only through meditation can be attained strong awareness of the selflessness of the person.

However, the defilement and afflictions accumulated through uncountable lives make our mind extremely polluted. To purify it means that we must first replace the evil things with good things. Then we should move on to a higher step, which is to cultivate mindfulness. In other words, we should bring our mind back to the present moment. This can be practiced in many ways depending on each person's level and capacity. We should find a way which suits us most in order to gain the highest efficiency. Living in mindfulness helps us see things clearly and truly as they are. Gradually our mind will be less deluded and more awakened. With purer mind, we can experience happiness and freedom right in this life. Practice of meditation is the true path that leads to the cessation of suffering and its cause. Training one's mind is the only way, which in this case refers to guarding the practitioner from the influence of the self-centered attitude. Moreover, we should train in wisdom to recognize all phenomena as emptiness.

Whether our life is happy or unhappy, and whether we are still bound to the cycle of rebirth or moving ahead to the deathless state, all depends on the good or evil things we perform. So let us take the Dhammapada verse 183 as the best summary of the Buddha's teachings to remind us what we should cultivate in order to attain the ultimate happiness and freedom. The three guidelines of the Dhammapada verse 183 (to avoid doing evil, to cultivate good, and to purify one's mind) are the way to end suffering taught by the Buddha. By learning these principles and applying them properly, we can reach the end of suffering, the liberation of the mind. Even if we cannot reach the final liberation or deliverance, our practice enables us to keep under proper control our deeds and transform suffering. This verse is the teaching of not only Sakyamuni Buddha but of all the Buddha in the past, at present and in the future. It is the core of ethics and also the fundamental moral of all rules in the world that bring peace and happiness to those who practice them regardless of whether they are Buddhists or not.

Bibliography

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