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Māt'uposaka Sutta

The Discourse on the Mother Supporter | S 7.19 [Ee S 7.2.9]

Theme: Filial piety and alms-receiving

Translated by Piya Tan ©2017

1 Introduction

1.1 SOCIAL DUTIES

1.1.1 The Mat'uposaka Sutta (S 7.19) is a short but remarkable discourse where the Buddha shows how a life of monastic-like layman is compatible with living a moral lay life. The common term that unifies the two life-styles is *dhamma* (Skt *dharma*), where we should be aware of two levels of meanings and applications: the social and the spiritual.

For the brahmins, *dhamma* refers to the conventional “social code, common duty, proper conduct,” that is, human behaviour dictated, accepted and practised by society, as defined by the brahmin class.¹ More broadly, however, these are universal conduct that allows society to function wholesomely—that keeps society going and growing well.

1.1.2 This universal sense of *dhamma* as “**social code of conduct**” or “human duties” is, in its various degrees of application, mentioned in the following early Buddhist texts:

Aggañña Sutta	D 27,26	<i>Dhamma</i> as “social code” in the broadest sense	SD 2.19 ²
Makhā,deva Sutta	M 83,3	The practice of the 4 divine abodes	SD 60.8
Māt'uposaka Sutta	S 7.19	A brahmin collects alms to support his parents	SD 50.39
(Dhamma) Cakka,vatti Sutta	A 3.14	Royal code of conduct, especially that of justice	SD 72.10.

Such social aspects of *dhamma*, at best, keep the world in order and support the “good society,” but it is *dhamma* as the spiritual path of awakening that really keeps us on the course of right action and wholesome states. In the end, only *dhamma* in the spiritual sense of self-awakening brings us full liberation from suffering—nirvana.

1.2 LAY RENUNCIANTS

1.2.1 The Māt'uposaka Sutta is fascinating and unique in presenting the case of a lay person—in this case, a brahmin—who lives like a renunciant, collecting alms (*bhikkha*), to support his parents. Such an action is, understandably, not allowable in the case of Buddhist monastics, since they have renounced the world. Of course, theoretically speaking, the needy parents of any monastic are freely allowed to partake of monastic food, even to live within the monastery premises, when it is proper to do so.

1.2.2 The teaching of the Māt'uposaka Sutta is, in an oblique but important way, supportive of full-time lay Dharma workers, who (although they may not actually go on alms-round) are supported by the laity or even monastics who can afford to do so in our own times. Supporting parents is clearly a deed of

¹ Such a def can be found, eg, in brahminical Dharma,śāstra, which number between 18 and 100, with different and often conflicting viewpoints. John Bowker, *The Message and the Book: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions*, Yale University Press, 2012:179 f.

² See SD 2.19 (1.2.1.4).

karmic merit, but teaching Dharma is regarded as the greatest gift, an act of the greatest merit,³ aside from our own practice for self-awakening in this life.⁴

In the case of full-time lay Dharma work, such dependence of alms and generosity of others, is not the rule—it is less likely that the laity would support lay workers if they are already supporting monastics. In other words, the laity will have to work harder to “prove” themselves, so to speak, to earn the patronage and respect of the other laity. Either way, what is given to the lay workers or to the monastics should, properly, be given out of faith.⁵

However, there is more latitude for the laity, because there is no rule forbidding or restricting them from asking for support, even financial help, if they need it. Furthermore, the lay Dharma worker can set up their own right livelihood businesses or be paid for some of their services (where proper) even if it is not a business (such as running a meditation course).⁶ A lay Dharma worker, in other words, needs to know how to manage his own funds in a Dharma-spirited manner.⁷

1.3 RELATED SUTTA

The text following the Māt’uposaka Sutta (A 7.19) is **the Bhikkhaka Sutta** (S 7.20), SD 50.40, which is about a brahmin who claims to live the life of a renunciant (*pabbajita*), like a monk (*bhikkhu*). While the Buddha praises the former brahmin (A 7.19)—who collects alms to support his parents—the Buddha rejects the view and practice of the latter brahmin (A 7.20), who claims to be a renunciant merely by the fact that he lives on alms. Being a renunciant entails more than mere rituals and appearances: it entails one’s wholesome spiritual transformation.

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The Discourse on the Mother Supporter

S 7.19

- 1 Originating in Sāvattihī.
- 2 Then, a mother-supporting brahmin approached the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When the courteous and friendly exchange was concluded, he sat down at one side.
- 3 Sitting thus at one side, the mother-supporting brahmin said to the Blessed One:
“Master Gotama, I seek almsfood in the proper way [according to the Dharma].⁸ Having sought almsfood in the proper way, I support my mother and father.⁹
Having done so,¹⁰ master Gotama, have I properly done my duty?”¹¹

³ See **Kim,dada S** (S 1.42), SD 2.9; **Paññā Bala S** (A 9.5,6(1)), SD 2.21.

⁴ In **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35), the arhat is said to have accomplished the 3 supremacies (*anuttariya*) (M 35,26.2/-1:235), SD 26.5. **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16) records the Buddha as declaring that even better than ritual or external worship (*pūjā*) is that of the “supreme worship” (*paramā,pūjā*), ie, working for awakening (D 16,5.1-3) & the story of Dhamm’ārāma (D 16,5.3.2): SD 9 7.2+14. See also **Gārava S** (S 6.2), where the Buddha places even the Dharma above himself (SD 12.3).

⁵ On monastics neither being hirelings nor accepting payment or money, see **Right livelihood**, SD 37.8 (1.4.3).

⁶ See **Right livelihood**, SD 37.8.

⁷ On the proper management of funds, see **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31,26) + SD 4.1 (4.1.1).

⁸ *Ahaṃ hi bho Gotama dhammena bhikkhaṃ pariyesāmi.*

⁹ *Dhammena bhikkhaṃ pariyesitvā mātā,pitaro posemi.*

4 “Surely, indeed, brahmin, you have properly done your duty. You have sought almsfood in the proper way. Having sought almsfood in the proper way, you [182] support your mother and father. You have made much merit.”¹²

5	<i>Yo mātaraṃ pitaraṃ vā macco dhammena posati tāya naṃ pāricariyāya mātā,pitūsu paṇḍitā idh’eva naṃ pasamsanti pecca sagge pamodatīti.</i>	702	A mortal, who mother or father properly supports— for that service by him to mother and father, the wise, even here, praise him; after death, he rejoices in heaven.	b
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6 When this was said, the mother-supporting brahmin said to the Blessed One:
“Wonderful, master Gotama! Wonderful, master Gotama! Just as if one
were to place upright what had been overturned, or
were to reveal what was hidden, or
were to show the way to one who was lost, or
were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms,
in the same way master Gotama has, in numerous ways, made the Dharma clear.
I go to master Gotama for refuge, and to the Dharma, and to the community of monks, too.
May master Gotama remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth for life.”

— evaṃ —

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¹⁰ “Having done so ... have I,” *kaccāhaṃ* = *katvā* + *ahaṃ*. *Kacca* (abs) = *katvā* (Skt *kṛtya*). *Sadda,nīti*: (describing the use of the absolutive) *apare dhan’ti kacca patito daṇḍo’ti udāharanti* (*Sadd* 312,20,) others illustrate [the use of the absolutive] by [this example: The arrow hit (its target) with a thud"] = 851,29 (with reading *katvā* for *kacca*).

¹¹ *Kaccāhaṃ bho gotama evaṃ,kārī kicca,kārī homīti*.

¹² *Bahuṃ so puññaṃ pasavatīti*.