

How the Ratana Sutta works

Helping ourself to help others

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When we all recite the Ratana Sutta, can we end, or at least, slow down, the Covid-19 pandemic?

We are taught, especially in Sinhala Buddhism, that the “3 suttas”—the Maṅgala Sutta, the Ratana Sutta and Karaṇīya Metta Sutta—are “powerful” suttas for our blessing. In the minds of the faithful, the suttas **themselves** work to help us. We only need to recite them with faith, or better, get the monks to recite them and we listen faithfully (followed by generous donations, lavish food offerings, etc). This is, of course, based on the **Buddhism of merit**: do good, get good, but we remain in samsara.

Protection

When we think that the suttas or verses work in themselves, we are treating them as **mantras**, words of power, taught by the Brahmins, who use religion to uphold the class system: and which the Buddha unequivocally rejects.

Sadly, the idea is very popular and powerful after the Buddha’s time, when we depend on **teachers** to teach us, bless us, and as a “field of merit” (which actually refer only to the noble saints). This idea of sutta as **mantra** is found in ethnic Buddhisms (basically race-based Buddhism), such as Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, Sinhala Buddhism etc. (Notice that the race comes first.)

In the popular “Book of Protection” (Piyadassi, 1999), a collection of the popular “protective verses,” the author reminds us that the **protection** only works when we have 4 “powers.” It means that we must cultivate these 4 qualities for the protection to work: that is, the power of truth, of virtue, of love, and of sound.

The power of truth

The protective verses work because they are **true**, or should be true. After all, they all come from the suttas or are excerpts of the suttas. The truth here does not lie in the **words** of the suttas. If this were the case, then, we don’t need to understand any teaching of the Buddha and can still be awakened like him! Then, even taped or digitized recordings of these powerful sounds can better the world or awaken us!

We must carefully examine and understand the sutta teachings **as taught by the Buddha**. We need to understand these teachings as intended by the Buddha, that is, what they actually mean to convey to us so that we are free from greed, hate and delusion, the real diseases of the mind; the real pandemic that will still rage on even after the Covid-19 pandemic is over.

The power of virtue

The protective chants only work when we are **morally virtuous**, that is, we properly keep at least the 5 precepts (even for a day or a few hours at a time). “Properly” here means we understand what the 5 precepts are, what they mean, how to observe them wholesomely and effectively.

This means that even as **lay Buddhists**, when we keep the precepts, and remember this, we will see the “power” of these protective verses working for us. This won't work when we hand over our remote to the monks, teachers, Gurus, etc.

But many of us feel we are **not good enough** (for all kinds of reasons). We think that the monks (because “they are venerables”) are “purer” or “better” than us. This is a very serious wrong view rooted in the idea of **self-identity**. This wrong view makes us think that when a person looks **holy**, he is holy.

Maybe that's why religious people tend to dress impressively to look holy, or at least “powerful.” They want to con us, infect us with their Virus of Views, and to serve them. The Vampire stories remind us of such negative effects that can turn us into the victims of such Vampires.

The law of inverse dressing

The irony is that the more overdressed a “holy” person is, the less likely he is to be holy or good. This is the “law of **inverse dressing**.” He is at best a well-dressed salesman or actor. We never see the Buddha overdressing himself to look like the powerful religious people we see today! The Buddha is a true **renunciant**, and truly looks like one, too. Hence, we need to look **through** such deception of the well-dressed and over-dressed into the true nature of goodness and remind them of the simplicity of awakening to true reality.

Renunciation rules

It is wonderful when we hear virtuous monastics (monks, nuns, novices, etc) chant the Dhamma together. Again, the chanting only “works” when these monastics are **virtuous**. When they break the rules of **renunciation** that they have vowed to keep, they are fundamentally lying. Their chanting won't work; it's just a sales pitch or parrots-to-be.

Monastics have taken the vows not to use money, nor have wealth, nor be economically engaged, nor own property, nor to enjoy worldly pleasures (including sex of any kind), not to get caught up in politics (renouncing the world), not to take solid food between noon and dawn.

When they break these karmic rules, what they chant are all **lies** to them, and they are also building up very bad karma. How can their chanting of protection work at all? When we support or encourage them, we are also going in the same Boat of Lies heading for the big dark storm of Delusion.

The power of love

“Love” here refers to the purest kind of positive emotion, that is **lovingkindness** (mettā). This an unconditional acceptance of **all** beings, having and showing no hatred or negative emotions to anyone or anything (to living beings and to nature). The underlying idea is that we are all connected in goodness; badness separates us, **blinds** us.

The greatest power of love is invoked when we understand that there is **no self**, nothing permanent—everything is impermanent—then, we understand whomever is right now before us is the one we should attend to with wholesome emotions.

All this will pass, but our wholesome emotions must keep growing through what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think. Then, our whole being **is** love, lovingkindness. Then, what we chant is good and “powerful.” Not only that: what we do and think will be good, too.

The power of sound

The belief that chanting the Ratana Sutta or any sutta to remove the pandemic or any disease for that matter belongs to the teachings of “magical Buddhism.” We think of changing the outside, the world, when the real sickness is or will be **inside us**. We think of curing only the signs and symptoms, instead of removing the **root** of the problem.

Now, we can make the power of **sound** work for us, as taught by the Buddha. Sound, like everything else, is **Impermanent**. When we carefully notice this true nature of sound, whether it is in chanting or just listening, we are in touch with true reality. It is like breathing fresh air in a clean place. We do not immediately see the result, but we remain healthy for life. Our **mind** remains healthy when we see impermanence in this way.

Pandemic lesson

Instead on panicking (that’s when we will only harm ourself or become the prey of others), we should ask: **What do I learn** from the pandemic. The 1st noble truth is that of suffering. **Disease** (the pandemic) is one kind of suffering. More pandemics, worse ones, will come (this pandemic **is** worse than the one before, remember!) Suffering is our 1st living teacher. What can we learn from it?

Here are a few interesting hints. It is reported that the reduction in negative human impact on the environment on account of the widespread pandemic lockdown has contributed to the skies over China and other industrial areas being significantly clear of harmful nitrogen dioxide clouds. There is a sharp drop in air pollution and air particulates in world cities. Even the canal waters of Venice, due to drastically less boat traffic, is now clear with fishes, even dolphins, swimming in them.

The real pandemic is always there inside us when we have false views, we must have the power to deal with this pandemic. The world’s pandemic is only a **sign** of negative human action. We must collectively work together to put the world right: it starts with putting our

mind (our inner world) right first by not believing false teachings and avoiding unhelpful practices.

This is an important meaning of the practice of **renunciation**: letting go of the world because all things are impermanent.

The pandemic lesson: **renounce the world, stay home, discover yourself.**

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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