

3

(Aṭṭhaka) Mahānāma Sutta

The (Eights) Discourse to Mahānāma | A 8.25
or, (Upāsaka) Mahānāma Sutta The Discourse (on the Layman) to Mahānāma

Theme: What makes a true lay follower?

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003

Introduction

1.1 The (Aṭṭhaka) Mahānāma Sutta (A 8.25) is closely related to **the (Upāsaka,sampadā) Mahānāma Sutta** (S 55.37).¹ In fact, in both suttas, Mahānāma asks the Buddha the same question, and the same answer is given in the first part, that is, a lay follower is one who goes for refuge in the 3 jewels and is accomplished in moral virtue (by keeping the 5 precepts).²

1.2 However, while the (Upāsaka,sampadā) Mahānāma Sutta goes on to list and define the 4 spiritual accomplishments of a lay follower (the accomplishments of moral virtue, of faith, of generosity, and of wisdom), the (Upāsaka) Mahānāma here only mentions the first accomplishment—that of moral virtue—in full and then goes on to apply the first two of the threefold purity (*ti.koṭi,parisuddha*) of moral action to the 4 accomplishments.

1.3 This threefold purity of moral action is fully demonstrated in **the Veḷu,dvāreyya Sutta** (S 55.7) according to this pattern:

Having reflected thus (on the golden rule),
he himself refrains from (breaking the precepts),
exhorts other to refrain from (breaking the precepts), and
speaks in praise of (refraining from breaking the precepts). (S 55.7/5:353-356)

1.4 In other words, a true layman keeps the precepts and encourages others to keep the precepts. According to **the Atta,hita Sutta** (A 4.96/2:96) and **Sikkhā Sutta** (A 4.99/2:98 f), such a person is “one who lives for his own good and for the good of others. The third of the threefold purity, stated as “[He] speaks in praise of refraining from (breaking the precept), refers to spiritual friendship and the practice of altruistic joy (*muditā*).

1.5 The Sutta closes with the 8 special qualities of a streamwinner [§4], which shows that he not only himself has faith, moral virtue, generosity, seeing virtuous monks, listens to the Dharma, remembers it, and investigates it, but also inspires others to do the same. In other words, the streamwinner is also one committed *to the propagation of the Dharma*.

1.6 This sutta here repeats in the following **(Upāsaka) Jīvaka Sutta** (A 8.26) where Jīvaka is the protagonist.³

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¹ S 55.37/5:395 = SD 6.2.

² S 55.37.1-4 = A 8.25.1-2.

³ A 8.26/4:222 f.

(Aṭṭhaka) Mahānāma Sutta

The (Eights) Discourse to Mahānāma

A 8.25

1 At one time the Blessed One was dwelling among the Sakyas in Nigrodha’s park, near Kapila,-vatthu. Then Mahānāma the Sakya went up to the Blessed One, saluted him and sat down at one side. Sitting thus at one side, Mahānāma the Sakya said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, **how is one a lay follower?**”

1.2 “When, Mahānāma, one has gone to the Buddha as refuge, to the Dharma as refuge, to the Sangha as refuge, then one is a lay follower.”

2 “And **how, bhante, is one a morally virtuous lay follower?**”

“When, Mahānāma, a lay follower is

one who refrains from harming living beings;

one who refrains from taking the not-given;

one who refrains from sexual misconduct;

one who refrains from false speech;

one who refrains from strong drinks, distilled drinks, fermented drinks and that which causes heedlessness

—then one is a morally virtuous lay follower.

3 “And **how, bhante, does a lay follower live for his own welfare but not for the welfare of others?**” [221]

“When, Mahānāma, a lay follower,

having faith⁴ himself,

having moral virtue himself,

having generosity himself,

having himself the desire to see the monks,

having himself the desire to hear the Dharma,

having himself remembers the Dharma,

having himself investigates the meaning of

the Dharma he has remembered,

but does not rouse *faith* in another;

but does not rouse *moral virtue* in another;

but does not rouse *generosity* in another;

but does not rouse in others *a desire to see the monks*;

but does not rouse in others *a desire to hear the Dharma*;

but does not rouse others to *remember the Dharma*;

but does not rouse others to *investigate the meaning of the Dharma*;

having himself understands the Dharma,

understands its meaning, and practises

⁴ “Faith,” *saddhā*. There are 2 kinds of faith (*saddhā*): (1) “rootless faith” (*amūlaka, saddhā*), baseless or irrational faith, blind faith. (M 2:170); (2) “faith with a good cause” (*ākāravati, saddhā*), faith founded on seeing (M 1:320,8 401,23); also called *avecca-p, pasāda* (S 12.41.11/2:69). “Wise faith” is syn with (2). *Amūlaka* = “not seen, not heard, not suspected” (V 2:243 3:163 & Comy). **Gethin** speaks of two kinds of faith: the cognitive and the affective (eg ERE: Faith & Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963:387): “Faith in its cognitive dimension is seen as concerning belief in propositions or statements of which one does not—or perhaps cannot—have knowledge proper (however that should be defined); cognitive faith is a mode of knowing in a different category from that knowledge. Faith in its affective dimension is a more straightforward positive response to trust or confidence towards something or somebody...the conception of *saddhā* in Buddhist writings appears almost, if not entirely affective, the cognitive element is completely secondary.” (Gethin 2001:107; my emphases).

the Dharma in keeping with the Dharma,

but does not rouse others to *understand the Dharma, understand its meaning and practise the Dharma in keeping with the Dharma;*

—then, one is a lay follower who lives for his own welfare but not for the welfare of others.

THE 8 SPECIAL QUALITIES OF THE STREAMWINNER

4 “And **how, bhante, does a lay follower live for his own welfare and for the welfare of others?**”

“When, Mahānāma, a lay follower

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| (1) having <u>faith</u> himself | and rouses <i>faith</i> in another; |
| (2) having <u>moral virtue</u> himself | and rouses <i>moral virtue</i> in another; |
| (3) having <u>generosity</u> himself | and rouses <i>generosity</i> in another; |
| (4) having himself <u>the desire to see the monks</u> | and rouses in others <i>a desire to see the monks;</i> |
| (5) having himself <u>the desire to hear the Dharma</u> | and rouses in others <i>a desire to hear the Dharma;</i> |
| (6) himself <u>remembers the Dharma</u> | and rouses others <i>to remember the Dharma;</i> |
| (7) having himself <u>investigates the meaning of the Dharma that he has remembered</u> | and rouses others to <i>investigate the Dharma’s meaning;</i> |
| (8) having himself <u>understands the Dharma, understands its meaning, and practises the Dharma in keeping with the Dharma [222]</u> | and rouses others to understand the Dharma, understand its meaning, and practise the Dharma in keeping with the Dharma; |

—then, one is a lay follower who lives for his own welfare and for the welfare of others.

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