

When lay practice is better

How to reach the path in this life itself

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Source: **Sākacchā Sutta 1** (A 5.65) + **Sākacchā Sutta 2** (A 5.163), SD 58.5(2)

1.3.3 Attaining the path

1.3.3.1 The true purpose of the Buddha's teaching is to gain the path of awakening. The path is only reached by the practice of renunciation (*nekkhamma*), that is, the total giving up of greed, hate and delusion. For this reason, true practitioners are called renunciants (*pabbajita*), that is, those who have taken the vows of monkhood and nunhood to renounce the world.

Hence, becoming a monk or a nun is not a status we gain so that we are automatically "venerable" (*āyasmā*), but a reminder to keep true to our practice of the Vinaya and the Dharma, that is, to the state of renunciation, so that we progress on the path of awakening.

Dharma practice as a lay person may seem harder and slower than being a monastic because we seem to face more distractions. Yet, when this familiarity breeds contempt, the lay practitioner actually has a greater advantage than a false monastic.

1.3.3.2 When, as lay practitioners, we understand the nature and purpose of the 5 precepts, we observe them diligently, so that they become the bases for mindfulness and concentration. Then, cultivating the perception of impermanence, we will attain streamwinning in this life itself while the false monastic has fallen into the rut of a subhuman state.

For this reason, the suttas consistently speak of the "4 paths" (*magga*) as the noble community (*ariya,saṅgha*) of "the 4 noble individuals (*ariya,puggala*), that is, streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners and arhats, both monastic and lay. Awakening is not about status, but freeing ourselves from the suffering state and attaining the awakened state.

Both Nakula,mātā and Nakula,pitā—parents of the boy Nakula,—and both Sigāla,mātā and Sigāla,pitā—parents of Sigāla the young houselord [SD 4.1 (5)]—are all lay disciples who are streamwinners. The latter couple later renounced the world and became arhats in our Buddha's time.

1.3.3.3 When, as streamwinners, we practise to cut down the 3 unwholesome roots—greed, hate and delusion—we go on to become once-returners, that is, we have only one 1 more life to live before we finish off the momentum of our remaining karma, as it were.

However, failing that (since delusion is a very tricky karmic root to remove), we weaken the roots of greed and hate (through meditation), we go on to become non-returners.

Upon dying, whether as humans or as devas, we are reborn in the pure abodes (*suddh'āvāsa*), never to return to the sense-world, that is, reborn in a lower world. We finish off our karma through meditation, progressing upwards through the pure abodes until we become arhats.

1.3.3.4 On the other hand, even as streamwinners, we have at the most 7 more lives to finish off our karmic momentum before attaining arhathood. However, if we are reborn in the brahma realms, especially the formless worlds, a life there, such as in the highest formless realm, is 84,000 world-cycles! Even then, throughout that period, we will live morally virtuous lives, gradually building up our mental powers and moving up the path of awakening.

All these ways of progress are rooted in our understanding the Buddha's teachings of the 4 noble truths, experienced in our reflections of the 3 universal characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and nonself, especially the first characteristic [1.3.2.2].

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