

The 12 Keys of Buddhist Mission

Part 1 of 3

Source: SD 61.19 (Māra) Pāsa Sutta 2, S 4.5 © Piya Tan 2011, 2024.

1.3 The Great Commission: A Commentary

1.3.1 “Go forth, bhikshus” [§2.2]

1.3.1.1 “Go forth” (*caratha ... cārikam*), wander to wherever there are those who will hear the Dharma. Proclaim **the Blessed One’s well-taught teaching** (*svākkhāto bhagavatā dhammo*). This is the natural thing to do since the Buddha has arisen in our world, we are touched by the Dharma, and we are moved to present this Buddha Dharma to the world.

The original opening words were *caratha bhikkhave cārikam*, “Go forth, monks!” The Buddha addressed the first 60 arhats (the Buddha, too, was an arhat, the first amongst equal). The Buddha exhorted them to go forth for our sakes, even today: especially today, when we are so far away in time from the Buddha. We do not even know an arhat when we meet one, but we can still know the Dharma by our practice and understanding. The first “going-forth” empowers us even today with the power and freedom for self-understanding and self-liberation.

1.3.1.2 For those of us who are still unawakened, those not even on the path, to **go forth** with the Dharma means that we need to study, understand and live the suttas. We must first go forth ourselves, move ahead with our own study and practice of the Dharma. The reason for this is simple and vital: we need to know and be the Dharma before we have it to give to others. This is the “Assaji effect”; just as the wanderer Sāriputta, on first seeing the arhat Assaji, was moved by his radiant calm and composure.¹

The early saints did not go forth with wealth, title, power or things, or for any gain, fame or praise, but simply out of their Dharma-spirited peace, joy and love. This is the going-forth of the freedom of wise silence, that is, the renunciation of evil, the cultivation of good and the freeing the mind.

1.3.2 “For the welfare of the many, for the happiness of the many” [§2.2]

1.3.2.1 The Buddha exhorts the arhat monks to go forth “for the welfare of the many, for the happiness of the many” (*bahu.jana,hitāya bahu.jana,sukhāya*). There are a number of beautiful ways of explaining this line. I will take the approach of the 2 kinds of happiness: the worldly and the spiritual. As we well know, there are many suttas that teach us **happiness here and now** (*ditṭha,-dhammika sukha*), where we are reminded to keep our body and speech pure for personal purity and mental health, and respecting the life, happiness, freedom, reality and mindfulness of others.

1.3.2.2 Happiness here and now thus encompasses both our own happiness and that of others. At this worldly level, we can only be truly happy when we help others be happy, too. This is living in a socially healthy environment of unconditionally accepting others: this is called *mettā*, the love that embraces all life, since it is what runs through all beings capable of cultivating their minds and reaching the path of awakening. “Gong forth” means helping such beings along to move nearer the path, or at least not away from it by keeping the moral precepts.

1.3.2.3 Early Buddhism teaches us the meaning of true **wealth** (*atthi*), that is, joyful wealth. **The Anaṇa Sutta** (A 4.62) records the Buddha teaching us the 4 joys of wealth, thus:

¹ On the Assaji effect, see SD 58.1 (1.2.2.2).

(1) the joy of ownership	<i>atthi sukha</i>	benefits of having	the result of diligence
(2) the joy of enjoying [using]	<i>bhoga sukha</i>	benefits of being	the result of watchfulness
(3) the joy of debtlessness	<i>anaṇa sukha</i>	benefits of giving	the result of balanced livelihood
(4) the joy of blamelessness	<i>anavajja sukha</i>	benefits to come	spiritual friendship and spirituality

(A 4.62/2:69-71), SD 2.2

The Buddhist practical philosophy of wealth is crystallized in a single word, **atthi**, which is polysemous; it has a number of meanings that can apply at the same time or to the same person. *Atthi* basically means “to have”; when we **have** things, especially useful and beautiful things, and many of them, we are said to be “wealthy.” We may have them, but we may not be happy; something we have is basically good when we can use them in a beneficial way. Then, those things *become* us; it is then not just a matter of *having*, but also of **being** (*atthi*).

We treasure wealth because we have **wants** (*atthi*); this means that other people (and beings) have wants, too. Hence, when we have much or more than others, we are extending ourselves to others by sharing our wealth according to their needs. This is the blessing of giving (*dāna*) or charity (*cāga*).

1.3.2.4 Finally, and the most meaningful joy of wealth is that it makes us see our true **purpose** (*atthi*) in life. When we lack wealth and is needy, our purpose in life has to be *instrumental*, that is, we have needs and wants, and have to work for it, and wealth is the instrument or means for us to gain the many ends that we have in mind. Our wealth is thus of “instrument value.”

Wealthy people are not always happy because wealth has only instrumental value; it can buy or get things, but there is a limit to this, as there are some things we can only work for ourselves, like happiness of body and mind. In other words, happiness is of **intrinsic value**. In an important way, wealth can have an intrinsic purpose: when we use it for the greater happiness of others who have serious needs. When we understand this and respond with compassion and generosity, we are working towards our spiritual happiness [1.3.2.5].

1.3.2.5 Spiritual happiness is the feeling that our life and collective lives (as a family, group, society, etc) has a greater purpose, that is, how the future can turn out for us and for others. Hence, it is simply called “future happiness” or “the happiness that conduces to benefits hereafter” (*sampāriyak’attha saṁvattanika, dhamma sukha*). The term *samparāyika* has both the senses of “a future state or world” and “the next life or world.”

The Dīgha, jānu Sutta (A 8.54) records the Buddha as instructing these qualities as conducing to benefit us hereafter, in the future here and hereafter, that is, the accomplishments of *faith, moral virtue, charity* and *wisdom*. Basically, **faith** (*saddhā*) keeps us firm in our belief in the wholesome meaning and beneficial purpose of our life and work, and that we have the power to inspire joy and goodness in others.

Moral virtue (*sīla*) is the commitment to keeping our body healthy as the basis for our mental health. We see the values of life, happiness, freedom, truth and mindfulness respectively rooting the 5 precepts, that is, moral virtue is the basis for a good and productive family and society.

Charity (*cāga*) is seeing in others the same 5 values that we see as holding up our own life and those of our near and dear ones. In appreciation of the being of others, we share what we *have* (wealth, skills, etc) and what we *are* (kindness, attention, etc). We give because we have faith in the goodness of others and the work they are doing.

Wisdom is the understanding of the nature of knowledge and facts, that they are mostly sense-based and measured. This understanding is a start for wisdom, when we see all that we have, all that we are and our relationships are conditioned by impermanence, conflicts and nonself. We have to accept that all things and people change in some way, and to be ready for it. We must understand the nature of conflict, how they arise, how they can be prevented, and how they can be ended. Most of all, we must see our “self” for what it really is; there is no fixed view of oneself except that we, too, are subject to change, we can never really own things but only have them for the moment.

When we understand that all relationships somehow change, people change physically and mentally, we learn to value how we relate to others, and try to be our best to them while we can.

1.3.3 “Out of compassion for the world” [§2.2]

1.3.3.1 When we learn the Dharma, we begin to understand that “**world**” (*loka*) has 3 senses: (1) the physical space around us (space-time), (2) the people, beings and things that fill that space (beings), and (3) what we make of that space and things (formations). There are serious limits to how we exploit **space-time**, that is, the world around us, and we have to learn to live with it, enjoy it naturally, or lose it.

The world of **beings** is the living world beginning with our own family, society and nature, everything existence in intimate interdependence of one another. When we respect this harmony, especially through the 5 precepts, there is likely to be general happiness and sustainable nature. How we treat others and nature will, in turn, be the way that we will be treated by them in time. This is where good begets good when we allow it to be so. We simply need to show **compassion** for the world since it is not always what it seems, and it rarely turns out to be the way we want it.

1.3.3.2 When teaching Dharma, the rule is that we must have “compassion for the world” (*lokânukampāya*). This world is a crowd of unthinking insects, drawn to the naked flames of emotions and sensations, propped by promises and appearances of life-sucking gurus that smother us with doubts so that we wait on them like trained dancing bears chained by belief.

An important sense of compassion, especially for ourselves, is that we happily accept the situation even when we don’t seem to deserve it. We may not be able to do anything about it now, but a time will come when we can; but by then we may not have the same mind anyway. In this sense, compassion always works. We must know the time to move on; that is the essence of Buddhist training.

1.3.4 “For the good, welfare and happiness of devas and humans” [§2.2]

1.3.4.1 When we are properly taught the Buddha Dharma, it is, as a rule, structured on the 3 trainings, that is, moral virtue, mental concentration and insight wisdom. We start by laying the foundation for the whole Dharma-based life, that is, keeping to a life of wholesome action and speech. When our body and speech are harmoniously restrained, they are unlikely to distract the mind that is directed to samadhi, holding on to a single mental object to prime the mind with inner stillness so light that it will naturally rise above the moorings of the physical senses.

1.3.4.2 Once the mind is able to rise beyond the body, it becomes fully unified with all its powers of joy and light. The joy arises from the freedom the mind enjoys; the light is its own inner radiance in which it sees its own nature and true reality. This is the beginning of self-knowing, which when developed leads to self-liberation. Such a meditator emerges and lives joyfully.

Hence, it is said, the Buddha’s teachings are for “good, welfare and happiness” (*atthāya hitāya sukhāya*). **Good** is moral virtue; we are pure in body and speech; we **fare well** with a calm and clear mind living in true reality; and we are truly **happy** on account of our wisdom that gives insight into life.

1.3.4.3 While almost all world religions place some idea of God or almighty agency at the top of a pyramid supported by preachers, priests, and believers, who in turn stand above unbelievers, and so on, Buddha Dharma sees *the whole universe as self-sustaining with neither beginning nor end*. Just as **time** has neither beginning nor end but keeps running, so too life in the universe keeps running without end.

All beings in the universe—animals, humans, gods, whatever that live—are subject to the same law of impermanence. Aliens who come here from some distant quadrants of the universe may find our glorification of unseen supreme beings quite primitive and inhuman, or would surely see the theologians creating these Gods to be highly imaginative and exploitative.

Surely, if these aliens are intelligent beings, they would understand why the Buddha declares that the Dharma is “**for the good, welfare and happiness of devas and humans**” (*atthāya hitāya sukhāya deva,manussānam*). Considering that the devas and brahmas of the suttas are said to live astronomical distances away from earth, they could well be aliens themselves. Or, at least, we have in Buddhism a place for alien beings, too.

R879 Inspiration 528

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