

The 12 Keys of Buddhist Mission

Part 2 of 3

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

1.3 The Great Commission: A Commentary

1.3.5 “Let not two go the same way” [§2.2]

1.3.5.1 We may well wonder why the Buddha instructed the first 60 arhats to each go by their own path. Is it because there is only one true and noble eightfold path? But that path is not a road put there but an inner journey we make renouncing our self-views, craving, existence and ignorance. Or perhaps, it is to remind the first missionaries that they are celibate renunciants; but they know that very well, and arhats do not need to be reminded of what they have already rightly abandoned.

The only commentarial explanation for this strategy of not having one monk going by the same way (*mā ekena dve agamittha*) is found in **the Saṃyutta Commentary**. It explains thus: “Going in this way when one is teaching Dharma, (the other monk/s) need not remain silent” (*evañ hi gatesu ekasmim dhammaṃ desente, ekena tuñhī, bhūtena ṭhātabbam hoti. Tasmā evam āha*) (SA 1:172,2 f).

1.3.5.3 To keep it easy, we can simply say the Buddha is a good missionary strategist: with each of the 60 arhats going their own way, 60 directions are well covered. This means that a maximum of area will be presented the Dharma and see or hear it for themselves. Indeed, within the first year, each arhat brought back a great number of converts, and the Buddha had to introduce a new and simple way of admitting monks into the sangha, that is, by way of the 3 refuges.¹

1.3.6 “Teach, bhikshus, the Dharma” [§2.3]

1.3.6.1 Despite the long passage of the great commission, the Buddha’s actual instruction is short and simple: “**Teach, bhikshus, the Dharma**” (*desetha bhikkhave dhammaṃ*). Almost everything else in the great commission explains this basic instruction or expands on it. In teaching the Dharma, each of the arhat becomes an extension of the Buddha, since “One who sees Dharma, see me,” says the Buddha.² Indeed, the purpose of any Buddhist mission, if it is Dharma-spirited, is to teach Dharma.

1.3.6.2 What does it mean to “teach Dharma”? It means to present the 6 virtues of the Dharma, the true teaching. Firstly, the Buddha Dharma is **well taught** (*svākkhāta*), as already mentioned: it is well taught in the beginning, well taught in the middle, well taught in the end; it is well taught in all the 3 trainings.

The Dharma is to be seen for oneself **right here and now** (*sandiṭṭhika*). It is not some reward we are promised for some prayers or belief, that is, as a reward after death. Just listening to the Dharma can bring us to the path, just as Sāriputta heard only two lines of the verse spoken by Assaji, and attains the path of streamwinning.

The Dharma **has nothing to do with time** (*akālika*). When we understand and live the Dharma, we find that we always have time for good and joy. Doing bad takes our time away, and we waste our precious life. Finally, when we attain nirvana, we gain the timeless, time-free reality, beyond space-time, the death-free.

The Dharma invites us to **come and see** (*ehi, passika*) it for ourselves. Although we are taught the Dharma, it is not like someone is jumping into the sea of samsara to pull us out of it; rather, it is like we are being taught how to swim well, with all the proper exercise, mental focus and endurance,

¹ See SD 61.20 (1.1.1.1).

² See **Vakkali S** (S 22.87,13/3:120), SD 8.8; SD 10.4 (2.2.5); SD 51.25 (2.2.2.6); SD 55.8 (1.2.2.2).

and the wise strategies. We are able to cross the waters of suffering safely by our own effort and reach the safe farther shore.

Once we start learning the Dharma the right way, it is **accessible** (*opanayika*) to us, inspiring us to progress to see and build our own goodness, our inner calm and our mental clarity. Thus, we become wise, understanding true reality in the manner **to be personally know by the wise** (*paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*).³

Basically, the Dharma relates to or re-enacts the Buddha's awakening, reminding us that we, too, are capable of self-awakening. It is because of the great commission that the Buddha's teaching has come down to us to this day, that we are celebrating it right here and now.

1.3.7 “(The Dharma) that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end” [§2.3]

1.3.7.1 The Commentary explains the threefold goodness of the Dharma—“good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end” (*ādi, kalyāṇam majjhe, kalyāṇam pariyosāna, kalyāṇam*) — in various ways pertaining both to teaching and practice. Moral virtue is the beginning; mental calm, insight and the path are the middle; the fruits of the path and nirvana are the end. Or, a sutta's opening is good, so too are its middle portion and its conclusion (SA 1:172,4-18).

1.3.7.2 In terms of time, we can reflect on **the 3 jewels** (*ti, ratana*), that is, the Buddha, the Dharma and the noble sangha. Our past is the recollection of **the Buddha** as the self-awakened one, the first arhat amongst many others. We live emulating the Buddha in renouncing evil, seeking the good and freeing the mind.

Our living present in **the Dharma**: the records of the Buddha's awakening and teachings of how we can emulate him or any of the great arhats. We see the Dharma in the way we live and everything connected with us. They are all teaching us Dharma; we only need to learn to see and listen deeply. In the unceasing changes of reality lies the Dharma: we are ourselves that change. We only need to see it.

The future is the **sangha** that is the noble path of all those who keep to the 3 trainings and attain streamwinning in this life itself and with the last breath. As lay practitioner, we see *renunciation* in our moments of breath; as monastics, we keep to the Vinaya and live the Dharma of full renunciation leading to awakening.

1.3.8 “With its meaning and phrasing” [§2.3]

1.3.8.1 The Buddha's teachings are preserved in the letter (*vyañjana*) in Pali and propagated in the spirit in interpretation and translation. As a rule, the teachings should be properly taught both in the letter and the spirit. The Pali idiom, however, places “spirit” first, thus: *sāttam sabyañjanam*.

The Dīgha Commentary explains the phrase is as follows:

One who is concerned only with the explanation of food, women, men and so on, does teach “without the meaning.” The Blessed One, having abandoned this manner of teaching, teaches the 4 focuses of mindfulness and so on. Therefore, he teaches the Dharma “**with the meaning**.”

One whose teaching lacks the various range of phrases, or who confuses the pronunciation of the various words, is said to be teaching “without the phrasing.” But the Blessed One teaches the Dharma giving it the full phrasing, without any slurring of distinct sounds. Therefore, he teaches the Dharma “**with the phrasing**.” (DhA 1:176)

Essentially, the Commentary is saying that by the phrase “with the meaning” is meant that the Buddha speaks only Dharma, that is, on “only suffering and the ending of suffering,” as he states in

³ Dhammānussati, SD 15.9.

the (**Khandha**) **Sutta** (S 22.86) = the (**Avyākata**) **Anurādha Sutta** (S 44.2), the **Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22), and the **Yamaka Sutta** (S 22.85).⁴ And “with the phrasing” refers to the Buddha’s clear, resonant and articulate tone so that it is simply beautiful to hear.⁵

1.3.8.2 The Commentaries often give an idealist, even technical, descriptions of the Buddha. Hyperbole (including astronomical numbers) is often a characteristic of the oral tradition. While it is true that the Buddha, as a rule, speaks Dharma, he is often recorded as being “**the first to greet others**” and **to initiate a conversation**.⁶

When meeting monks, especially those on retreat in a remote dwelling, the Buddha would first **ask after them** in a mundane manner, thus: “I hope you (three) find it bearable, **Anuruddhā**.⁷ I hope you’re able to keep going, I hope you have no trouble with almsfood,” as recorded in the (**Anuruddha**) **Upakkilesa Sutta** (M 128).⁸

Often, when meeting others who are not monastics, the Buddha and his visitor “**exchanged friendly words and cordial greetings** ... when the friendly greetings were concluded (*sammodimsu sammodaniyam katham sārāṇiyam vītisāretvā*), the visitor would ask a question, or the Buddha went on to discuss Dharma.⁹

As a rule, the arhats, by their nature, live joyfully together, “all dwelling in concord, in mutual joy, without disputing, **blending like milk and water, looking at each other with kind eyes**.”¹⁰ They dwell with one another “keeping up acts of lovingkindness through deed, ... speech and ... mind, both openly and privately.” (M 128)¹¹

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⁴ S 22.86,21.2/3:119 = S 44.2 (SD 21.13); M 22,38/1:140 (SD 3.13); S 22.85,37/3:112 (SD 21.12); also SD 40a.1 (11.1.1); SD 58.1 (1.2.2.2).

⁵ The Buddha’s voice is said to have **8 qualities**; it is frank, clear, melodious, pleasant, full, carrying, deep and resonant; it does not travel beyond his audience (DA 2:452 f; MA 2:771 f). See **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30,2.22.1) + SD 36.9 (4.1) mark no 28; (4.3) Table. See also SD 36.2 (4.3.3.3); SD 54.1 (1.1.2.4).

⁶ Buddha’s habit of **first greeting others**: D 5,7 (18) (*pubba,bhāsī*) (SD 22.8); D 4,6 (SD 30.5); SD 45.16 (2.5.3(2)); initiating the conversation (*puretaram ālapitvā*) (DhA 16.6/3:384), SD 61.14 (2.1.5).

⁷ *Anuruddhā*, 3 voc pl, lit “Anuruddhas” (as in M:H), ie, Anuruddha, Nandiya and Kimbila. This is an example of a **multiple vocative**, unique to Pali, used in addressing a group by its leader. I have used the original Pali. Also in **Nalaka,pāna S** (M 68,4.1/1:463), SD 37.4. See **Aggañña S** (D 27,3), SD 2.9.

⁸ M 128,10.2/3:155 f (SD 5.18).

⁹ See eg **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3,1.9), SD 21.3.

¹⁰ “Looking at each other with kind eyes” (*aññam-aññam piya,cakkhūhi sampassantā*). The Buddha’s remark (actually, a wish or question) here is fully understandable, because he has just left the quarrelsome monks of Kosambī [§§2-4]. Rajah Pasenadi makes a similar remark to the Buddha in **Dhamma,cetiya S** (M 89,11/2:120 f). This is stock: M 1:206, 398, 3:156; A 1:70, 3:67, 104; S 4:225. **Parisā S** (A 3.93) uses the rain simile to show how spiritual friendship (defined in the words here) (§11) builds up positive qualities in one (A 3.93,5/1:243), SD 6.12 (3).

¹¹ **M 128**,12.4 (SD 5.18). This passage contains the first 3 of the 6 “conditions for conciliation” or “principles of cordiality” (*cha dhammā sārāṇiyā*) [**Kosambiya S** (M 48), SD 64.1]. The remaining 3 are: (4) sharing of gains with virtuous fellow brahmacharis; (5) keeping high moral virtues; (6) having compatible right view and practice (M 48,6/1:322 f, 2:250; D 3:245; A 3:288 f, 5:89; DhA 294; J 5:382). Cf *sārāṇiyam dhamma,katharṇ suṇāti*, DhA 4:168 & BHS *saṃrañjaṇiyam dharmarṇ samādāya*, Divy 404). For details, see (**Chakka**) **Sārāṇiya Dhamma S 1** (A 6.11), SD 55.15.