

The 12 Keys of Buddhist Mission

Part 3 of 3

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

1.3 The Great Commission: A Commentary

1.3.9 “Proclaim the holy life, utterly whole and pure” [§2.3]

1.3.9.1 The Buddha instruct the 60 arhats to “**proclaim the holy life**” (*brahmacariyaṃ pakāsetha*).

The word **holy life** (*brahma, cariya*) is used here (in the texts) with the following senses: *giving, service, moral discipline of the 5 precepts, the 4 immeasurables, abstinence from sexual intercourse, contentment with one’s own partner, effort, the limbs of the uposatha observance, the noble path, and the entire teaching*. [The Commentary refers to sutta passages illustrating each of these senses.]

Here, it is used in the sense of “teaching” (*sāsana*).

Thus in this context (of the great commission), it should be understood as follows:

“He teaches the Dharma that is good in the beginning, and so on ... utterly whole and pure. And, teaching it in this way, he reveals the holy life, the entire teaching by way of the 3 trainings (moral conduct, concentration and wisdom).” (DA 1:177,19-179,22)

1.3.9.2 The Dīgha Commentary explains the phrase, “**utterly whole and pure**” (*kevala, paripuṇṇaṃ*) as follows:

It is here “**utterly whole**” (*kevala, paripuṇṇaṃ*) in the sense of having everything, that there is nothing lacking from it and nothing excessive in it, nothing to add and nothing to remove.

It is “**pure**” (*parisuddhaṃ*) because it is without defilement. In the case of one who teaches the Dharma with the intention of obtaining gain or honour, the teaching is impure.

But the Blessed One teaches without regard for worldly ends, with a heart made gentle by the cultivation of lovingkindness, suffused with welfare for others, with a mind set in uplifting others (from suffering and the rounds of rebirth).

Therefore, he teaches the pure Dharma. (DA 1:177,8-18)

1.3.9.3 The Pali term for “**holy life**” is *brahma, cariya*, which is explained thus in the Khuddaka, pāṭha Commentary as follows: “Either the conduct is (morally) perfect or it is the life of the brahmas” (*brahmaṃ cariyaṃ brahmānaṃ vā cariyaṃ brahma, cariyaṃ*, KhpA 151,23.) Hence, it is called “the holy life.” A further meaning of the term is that such a morally perfect life will bring one rebirth in one of the formless brahma worlds, especially when one attains non-returning.¹

Properly speaking, the holy life is keeping to the moral precepts with a life of celibacy, that is, total renunciation. This, of course, refers to the Buddhist monastic life based on the Vinaya for the practice of the Dharma, aspiring for the path in this life itself. The purpose of the **Vinaya** is to keep one’s body and speech restrained so that one has custody of one’s senses. With the senses restrained, one is better prepared to calm the mind and direct it to the mind-object to attain samadhi, and then dhyana (*jhāna*).

With dhyana, the mind is “**utterly whole and pure**” (*kevala, paripuṇṇaṃ parisuddhaṃ*) in that it is totally and blissfully undistracted. One is then virtually a mental being. Emerging from this state, with the mind that is still calm and clear, one is able to see directly into the 3 characteristics

¹ On the non-returners and the purer abodes, see SD 10.16 (13.1.6); SD 23.14 (Table 3).

(impermanence, suffering and nonself) of true reality. When this is properly done, one then gains awakening.

1.3.10 “There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are falling away through not hearing the Dharma” [§2.4]

1.3.10.1 It was Brahmā Sahampati who, beseeching the newly awakened Buddha to teach the Dharma, who first said these words:

“There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are falling away through not hearing the Dharma.” (*santi sattā appa,raj’akkha,jātikā assavanatā dhammassa parihāyanti*)²

Beings “**with little dust in their eyes**” (*appa,raj’akkha,jātikā*) are “those rooted in wisdom, with eyes of such a nature having only a little dust of greed, hatred and delusion in their eyes”³ When our eyes are filled with dust, we can neither open them nor see what is before us or around us. When there is only a little dust in our eyes, we only need to blink and clear the eye of the dust or grit that is greed, hatred or delusion. This means that we have enough mindfulness to pay attention to teachings regarding true reality and the wisdom to see it for ourselves and be free.

1.3.10.2 The fact that we are reading this study on the great commission and interested in the Buddha Dharma evinces that we are among those with “little dust” in our eyes in this age of polluted environment. We are not today blinded by darkness but rather by the bright lights of false teachings and worldly knowledge, by privatized religions, by a class Buddhism for the rich and powerful.

The basic teachings of Buddha Dharma serves as a safe passage for us to find our way around in the bright lights of religion and worldliness so that we return to the physical safety of our homes, the warm joy of a secure mind, and a good idea of where we are, so that we can go back to the suttas and stillness of our minds.

1.3.11 “There will be those who will understand the Dharma” [§2.4]

1.3.11.1 The Buddha’s great commission closes on a positive note: “**There will be those who will understand the Dharma**” (*bhavissanti dhammassa aññātāro*), that is, there will be those who will penetrate it.⁴ As soon as the Buddha started to teach the Dharma, that is, the 4 noble truths, to the 5 monks at the deer park in Isi,patana, outside Benares, they understood, and Koṇḍañña became a streamwinner.⁵

Five days later, the Buddha taught them the 5 aggregates in some detail, explaining why they are nonself (*anattā*). At the end of the teaching, they all became arhats: the first 6 arhats in the world.⁶ And as we have noted, within the first year of the ministry, there were a total of **60 arhats**, as a result of the Buddha’s personal teaching. The Buddha then sent them out on the great commission to bring the Dharma to others with little dust in their eyes, as noted in this short **Māra Pāsa Sutta 2** (S 4.5).

1.3.11.2 Even on his deathbed—as recorded in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16)—the Buddha teaches the Dharma to his last convert, **the wanderer Subhadda** of Kusinārā. The Buddha tells him

² This para and the foll are first spoken by Mahā Brahmā when beseeching the Buddha to teach the Dharma: **Mv 1.5.7-12** (V 1:5-7); **M 26**,20/1:169; **S 6.1**/1:138 f; also SD 12.1 (2.1.3).

³ *Appa,raj’akkha,jātikā ti paññā,maye akkhimhi appaṃ raga,dosa,moha,rajaṃ etesaṃ evaṃ,sabhāvā,ti appa,raj’akkha,jātikā.* (VA 5:962)

⁴ *Bhavissanti dhammassa aññātāro ti paṭivijjhātāro* (VA 5:962).

⁵ **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11/5:420-424 = Mv 1,6.16-31 @ V 1:10-12), SD 1.1.

⁶ **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59/3:66-68), SD 1.2.

that only in a Dharma-Vinaya with the noble eightfold path will there be found the recluses of the 4 kinds, that is, the streamwinner, the once-returner, the non-returner and the arhat.

“Empty of recluses are the other, outside doctrines,
but, Subhadda, if these monks are to live rightly here [in this teaching], **this world will not be empty of arhats.**”
(D 16,5/27/2:151), SD 9

This declaration is not a triumphalist or exclusivist statement, but a reality reflecting the religious conditions of the Buddha’s time. It should be read with the Buddha’s declaration in **the Puppha Sutta** (S 22.94):

“I do not quarrel with the world, bhikshus, but the world quarrels with me. One who speaks Dharma does not quarrel with anyone in the world. Of that to which the wise men of the world do not assent, I, too, say that it is not so. Of that to which the wise men of the world assent, I too say that it is so.”
(S 22.94/3:138), SD 72.5

The Buddha is saying that he neither rejects all worldly wisdom nor all other religious ideas, but only those propositions that are simply imaginative going beyond the limits of possible experience.⁷

1.3.12 “I, too, bhikshus, will go to Senani,nigama in Uruvela to teach the Dhamma” [§2.5]

1.3.12.1 In closing the great commission, the Buddha will not sit back, as it were, to rest on his laurels. Even though his own spiritual work is done—he is fully awakened—his work out there still remains unfinished. There are countless beings out there still unawakened. He will now do his part in the continuing work of awakening the world:

“I, too, bhikshus, will go to Senani,nigama in Uruvela to teach the Dhamma”
(*aham pi bhikkhave yena uruvelā senānigamo ten’upasaṅkamissāmi dhamma,desanāyā*).

In just a two-letter enclitic indeclinable, **pi**, meaning “also, too”—that is, “I, too” (*aham pi*)—the Buddha shows that he, too, is part of the great commission. He continues to teach and preserve the Dharma-Vinaya so that it reaches even to this day.

R881 Inspiration 530
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⁷ See S:B 1085 n185 and R Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 2001:261.