

Eight Worldly Conditions (Atthalokadhamma)

By Venerable Narada Thera

This ill-balanced world is not absolutely rosy. Nor is it totally thorny. Rose is soft, beautiful and fragrant. But the stem on which it grows is full of thorns. What is rosy is rosy; what is thorny is thorny. Because of the rose one will not meddle with the thorns, nor will one disparage the rose on account of the thorns.

To an optimist this world is absolutely rosy; to a pessimist, absolutely thorny. But to a realist this world is neither absolutely rosy nor absolutely thorny. It abounds with beautiful roses and prickly thorns as well from a realistic standpoint.

An understanding person will not be infatuated by the beauty of the rose but will view it as it is. Knowing well the nature of the thorns, he will view them as they are and will take the precaution not to be wounded.

Like the pendulum that perpetually turns to the right and left, four desirable and four undesirable conditions prevail in this world which everyone, without exception, must perforce face in the course of one's lifetime.

They are gain (labha) and loss (alabha), fame (yasa) and defame (ayasa), praise (pasamsa) and blame (ninda), happiness (sukha) and pain (dukkha).

Gain and loss

Businessmen, as a rule, are subject to both gain and loss. It is quite natural to be complacent in obtaining a gain or profit. In itself there is nothing wrong. Such righteous or unrighteous profits produce some pleasure which average men seek. Without pleasurable moments, though temporary, life would not be worth living. In this competitive and chaotic world rarely do people enjoy some kind of happiness which gladdens their hearts. Such happiness, though material, does conduce to health and longevity.

The problem arises in case of loss. Profits one can bear smilingly, but not so the losses. More often than not they lead to mental derangement and sometimes to suicide when the losses are unbearable. It is under such adverse circumstances one should exhibit a moral courage and maintain a balanced mind. All have ups

and downs while battling with life. One should always be prepared for the losses in particular. Then there will be less disappointment.

When something is stolen naturally one feels sad. But by becoming sad one would not be able to retrieve the loss. One should think that someone had benefited thereby though unrighteously. Let him be well and happy.

Or one can console oneself thinking - "it's only a minor loss". One may even adopt a highly philosophical attitude - "There is nothing to be called me or mine". Under such unavoidable circumstances one should try to maintain a balanced mind.

In the time of the Buddha once a noble lady was offering food to the Venerable Sariputta and some monks. While serving them she received a note stating that her husband and all her sons who had gone to settle a dispute were way-laid and killed. Without getting upset, calmly she kept the note in her waist-pouch and served the monks as if nothing had happened. A maid who was carrying a pot of ghee to offer to the monks inadvertently slipped and broke the pot of ghee. Thinking that the lady would naturally feel sorry at the loss, Venerable Sariputta consoled her, saying that all breakable things are bound to break. The wise lady remarked - Bhante, what is this trivial loss? I have just received a note stating that my husband and sons were killed by some assassins. I placed it in my pouch without losing my balance. I am serving you all despite the loss.

Such valour on the part of courageous women are highly commendable.

Once the Buddha went seeking alms in a village. Owing to the intervention of Mara the Evil One, the Buddha did not obtain any food. When Mara questioned the BUDDHA rather sarcastically whether He was hungry or not, the Buddha solemnly explained the mental attitude of those who are free from Impediments, and replied:- "Ah, happily do we live, we who have no impediments. Feeders of joy shall we be even as the gods of the Radiant Realm."

On another occasion the Buddha and His disciples observed vassa (rainy period) in a village at the invitation of a brahmin, who, however, completely forgot his duty to attend to the needs of the Buddha and the Sangha. Throughout a period of three months, although Venerable Moggallana volunteered to obtain food by his psychic powers, the Buddha making no complaint, was contented with the fodder of horses offered by a horse-dealer. Visakha, the Buddha's chief female lay disciple, used to frequent the monastery to attend to the needs of the Buddha and the Sangha, decked with a very valuable outer garment. On entering the monastery, she removes it and gives to the maid for safe custody. Once the maid inadvertently left it in the temple and returned home. Venerable Ananda,

noticing it, kept it in a safe place to be given to Visakha when she visits the monastery. Visakha, discovering the loss, advised the maid to see to it but not to take it back in case any Bhikkhu has touched it. On inquiry the maid understood that Venerable Ananda had kept it in safe custody. Returning home she mentioned the story. Visakha visited the monastery and inquired of the Buddha what meritorious act she should perform with the money obtained by selling the costly garment. The Buddha advised her to build a monastery for the benefit of the Sangha. As there was nobody to buy the garment because of its high cost, she herself bought it and built a monastery and offered to the Sangha. After the offering she expressed her gratitude to the maid saying: "If you had not inadvertently left my garment, I would not have got an opportunity to perform this meritorious act. Please share the merit. "

Instead of grieving over the temporary loss and reprimanding the maid for her carelessness, she thanked her for granting an opportunity for service.

The exemplary attitude of cultured Visakha is a memorable lesson to all those who are quickly irritated over the misgivings of helpless servants.

Losses one must try to bear cheerfully with manly vigour. Unexpectedly one confronts them, very often in groups and not singly. One must face them with equanimity (upekkha) and think it is an opportunity to cultivate that sublime virtue.

Fame (yasā) and **defame** (ayasa)

Fame and defame are another pair of inevitable worldly conditions that confront us in the course of our daily lives.

Fame we welcome; defame we dislike. Fame gladdens our mind; defame disheartens us. We desire to become famous. We long to see our names and pictures appear in the papers. We are greatly pleased when our activities, however insignificant, are given publicity. Sometimes we seek undue publicity too.

To see their picture in a magazine some are ready to pay any amount. To obtain an honour some are prepared to offer any bribe or give a fat donation to the party in power. For the sake of publicity some exhibit their generosity by giving alms to one hundred monks and even more, but they may be totally indifferent to the sufferings of the poor and the needy in the neighbourhood. One may charge and punish a starving person who, to appease his hunger, were to steal a coconut in his garden, but would not hesitate to present thousand coconuts to get a good name.

These are human frailties. Most people do even a good action with an ulterior motive. Selfless persons who act disinterestedly are rare in this world. Even if the motive is not very praiseworthy those who do something good are to be congratulated on having done a good act. Most worldings have something behind their sleeves. Well, who is 100% good? How many are perfectly pure in their motives? How many are absolutely altruistic?

We need not hunt after fame. If we are worthy of fame, it will come to us unsought. The bee will be attracted to the flower laden with honey. Flower does not invite the bee.

True indeed, we feel naturally happy, nay extremely happy when our fame is spread far and wide. But we must realize that fame, honour and glory only lead up to the grave. They vanish in thin air. Empty words are they, though pleasing to the ear.

What about defame? It is not palatable either to the ear or mind. We are undoubtedly perturbed when unkind words of defame pierce our ears. The pain of mind is still greater when the so-called report is unjust and absolutely false.

Normally it takes years to erect a magnificent building. In a minute or two, with modern devastating weapons, it could easily be demolished. Sometimes it takes years or a lifetime to build up a good reputation. In no long time the hard-earned good name can be ruined. Nobody is exempt from the devastating remark beginning with the ill-famed "but". Yes, he is very good, he does this and that, but.....His whole good record is blackened by the so-called but. You may live the life of a Buddha, but you will not be exempt from criticism, attacks and insult.

The Buddha was the most famous and the most maligned religious teacher in His time.

Great men are often not known; even if they are known, they are misknown.

Some antagonists of the Buddha spread a rumour that a woman used to spend the night in the monastery. Foiled in this base attempt, they spread a false news amongst the populace that the Buddha and His disciples murdered that very woman and hid her corpse in the rubbish-heap of withered flowers within the monastery. The conspirators were later exposed by themselves. When His historic mission met with success and when many sought ordination under Him, His adversaries maligned Him, saying that He was robbing the mothers of their

sons, depriving wives of their husbands, and that He was obstructing the progress of the nation.

Failing in all these attempts to ruin His noble character, His own cousin, a jealous disciple of His, attempted to kill Him by hurling a rock from above.

Being a Buddha, He was not killed.

If such be the sad fate of faultless, perfect Buddha, what can be the state of imperfect ordinary mortals?

The higher you climb a hill, more conspicuous you become and appear much smaller in the eyes of others. Your back is revealed but your front is hidden. The fault-finding world exhibits your short-comings and misgivings but hides your salient virtues. The winnowing fan threshes out the husks but retains the grains; the strainer, on the contrary, retains the gross remnants but drains out the sweet juice. The cultured take the subtle and remove the gross; the uncultured retain the gross but remove the subtle.

When you are misrepresented, deliberately or undeliberately unjustly reported, as Epictetus advises, it is wise to think or say — O by his slight acquaintances and faint knowledge of myself I am lightly criticised. But if I am known better, more serious and much greater would be the accusations against me.

It is needless to waste time in correcting the false reports unless circumstances compel you to necessitate a clarification. The enemy is gratified when he sees that you are hurt. That is what he actually expects. If you are indifferent, such misrepresentations will fall in deaf ears.

In seeing the faults of others, we should behave like a blind person.

In hearing unjust criticism of others, we should behave like a deaf person.

In speaking ill of others, we should behave like a dumb person.

It is not possible to put a stop to false accusations, reports and rumours.

The world is full of thorns and pebbles. It is impossible to remove them. But if we have to walk in spite of such obstacles, instead of trying to remove them, which is impossible, it is advisable to wear a pair of slippers and walk harmlessly.

The Dhamma teaches:-

Be like a lion that trembles not at sounds.
Be like the wind that does not cling to the meshes of a net.
Be like a lotus that is not contaminated by the mud from which it springs up.
Wander alone like a rhinoceros.

Being the kings of the forest, lions are fearless. By nature they are not frightened by the roaring of other animals. In this world we may hear adverse reports, false accusations, degrading remarks of uncurbed tongues. Like a lion, we should not even listen to them. Like the boomerang they will end where they began.

Dogs bark, caravans peacefully move on.

We are living in a muddy world. Numerous are lotuses that spring therefrom. Without being contaminated by the mud they adorn the world. Like lotuses we should try to lead blameless noble lives unmindful of the mud that may be thrown at us.

We should expect mud to be thrown at us instead of roses. Then there will be no disappointment.

Though difficult we should try to cultivate non-attachment. Alone we come, alone we go. Non-attachment is happiness in this world.

Unmindful of the poisonous darts of uncurbed tongues alone we should wander serving others to the best of our ability.

It is rather strange that great men have been slandered, vilified, poisoned, crucified or shot.

Great Socrates was poisoned. Noble Jesus Christ was ruthlessly crucified. Harmless Mahatma Gandhi was shot.

Well, is it dangerous to be too good?

Yes, during lifetime they are criticised, attacked and killed. After death they are deified and honoured.

Great men are indifferent to fame or defame. They are not upset when they are criticised or maligned for they work not for name or fame. They are indifferent

whether others recognise their services or not. To work they have the right but not to the fruit thereof.

Praise (Pasamsa) and Blame (Ninda)

Praise and Blame are two more worldly conditions that affect mankind. It is natural to be elated when praised and to be depressed when blamed. Amidst praise and blame, the Buddha says, the wise exhibit neither elation nor depression. Like a solid rock that is not shaken by the wind they stand unmoved.

Praise, if worthy, is pleasing to the ears; if unworthy, as in the case of flattery, though pleasing, is deceptive. But they are all sounds which will have no effect if they do not reach our ears.

From a worldly standpoint a word of praise goes a long way. By praising a little a favour can easily be obtained. One word of merited praise is sufficient to attract an audience before one speaks. If, at the outset, a speaker praises the audience, he will have an attentive ear. If he criticises the audience at the outset, the response will not be satisfactory.

The cultured do not resort to flattery nor do they wish to be flattered by others. The praiseworthy they praise without any jealousy. The blameworthy they blame not contemptuously but out of compassion with the object of reforming them.

Great men are highly praised by the great and small who know them well though they are utterly indifferent to such praise.

Many who knew the Buddha intimately extolled the virtues of the Buddha in their own way. One Upali a millionaire, a new convert, praised the Buddha enumerating hundred virtues ex tempore. Nine sterling virtues of the Buddha that were current in His time are still being recited by His followers looking at His image. They are a subject of meditation to the devout. Those well-merited virtues are still a great inspiration to His followers.

What about blame?

The Buddha says - "They who speak much are blamed. They who speak a little are blamed. They who are silent are also blamed. In this world there is none who is not blamed."

Blame seems to be a universal legacy to mankind.

The majority of the people in the world, remarks the Buddha, are ill-disciplined. Like an elephant in the battlefield endures all arrows shot at him, even so, the Buddha says, do I suffer all insults.

The deluded and the wicked are prone to seek only the ugliness in others but not the good and beautiful.

None, with the single exception of a Buddha, is hundred per cent good. Nobody is hundred per cent bad either. There is evil in the best of us. There is good in the worst of us.

He who silences himself like a cracked gong when attacked, insulted and abused, him, I say, the Buddha exhorts, is in the presence of Nibbana although he has not yet attained Nibbana.

One may work with the best of motives. But the outside world very often misconstrues him and will impute motives never even dreamt by him.

One may serve and help others to the best of one's ability sometimes by incurring debt or selling one's articles or property to save a friend in trouble, but later, the deluded world is so constituted that those very persons whom one has helped will find fault with him, blackmail him, blemish his good character and will rejoice in his downfall.

In the Jataka stories it is stated that Guttala the musician taught everything he knew to his pupil without a close-fist, but the ungrateful man he was he unsuccessfully tried to compete with his teacher and ruin him.

Devadatta, a pupil and cousin of the Buddha who had even developed psychic powers, not only tried to discredit the Buddha but also made an unsuccessful attempt to crush him to death by hurling a rock from above while he was seated at the foot below in meditation.

On one occasion the Buddha was invited by a brahmin for alms to his house.

As invited the Buddha visited his house. Instead of entertaining Him, he poured a torrent of abuse with the filthiest words.

The Buddha politely inquired - Do visitors come to your house, good brahmin.

Yes, he replied.

What do you do when they come?

Oh, we prepare a sumptuous feast.

If they fail to turn up please?

Why, we gladly partake of it.

Well, good brahmin, you have invited me for alms and you have entertained me with abuse. I accept nothing. Please take it back.

The Buddha did not retaliate, but politely gave back what the brahmin gave him. Retaliate not, the Buddha exhorts. Vengeance will be met with vengeance. Force will be met with force. Bombs will be met with bombs. "Hatreds do not cease through hatreds but through love alone they cease" is a noble utterance of the Buddha.

There was no religious teacher so highly praised like the Buddha and so severely criticised, reviled and blamed like the Buddha. Such is the fate of great men.

In a public assembly a vile woman named Cinca feigning pregnancy, maligned the Buddha. With a smiling face the Buddha patiently endured the insult and the Buddha's innocence was proved.

The Buddha was accused of murdering a woman assisted by his disciples. Non-Buddhists severely criticised the Buddha and His Disciples to such an extent the Venerable Ananda appealed to the Buddha to leave for another village.

"How, Ananda, if those villagers also abuse us?"

Well then, Lord, we will proceed to another village.

Then, Ananda, the whole of India will have no place for us. Be patient. These abuses will automatically cease."

Magandiya, a lady of the harem, had a grudge against the Buddha for speaking ill of her attractive figure when her father, through ignorance, wished to give her in marriage to the Buddha. She hired drunkards to insult the Buddha in public. With perfect equanimity the Buddha endured the insults. But Magandiya had to suffer for her misdemeanour.

Insults are the common lot of humanity. The more you work and the greater you become, the more are you subject to insult and humiliation.

Jesus Christ was insulted, humiliated and crucified.

Socrates was insulted by his own wife. Whenever he goes out to help others his intolerant wife used to scold him. One day as she was unwell she failed to perform her usual unruly task. Socrates left home on that day with a sad face. His friends inquired why he was sad. He replied that his wife did not scold him on that day as she was unwell.

Well, you ought to be happy for not getting that unwelcome scolding, remarked his friends.

Oh no! When she scolds me I get an opportunity to practise patience. Today I missed that opportunity. That is the reason why I am sad, answered the philosopher.

These are memorable lessons for all.

When insulted we should think that we are given an opportunity to practise patience. Instead of being offended we should be grateful to our adversaries.

Happiness (Sukha) and **Pain** (Dukkha)

Happiness and pain are the last pair of opposites. They are the most powerful factors that affect mankind.

What can be borne with ease is sukha (happiness); what is difficult to bear is dukkha (pain).

Ordinary happiness is the gratification of a desire. No sooner the desired thing is gained that we desire for some other kind of happiness. So insatiate are our selfish desires.

The enjoyment of sensual pleasures is the highest and only happiness to an average person. There is no doubt a momentary happiness in the anticipation, gratification and recollection of such material pleasures highly prized by the sensualist, but they are illusory and temporary.

Can material possessions give one genuine happiness? If so, millionaires would not think of committing suicide. In a certain country which has reached the zenith of material progress, about ten percent suffer from mental diseases. Why should it be so if material possessions alone can give genuine happiness?

Can dominion over the whole world produce true happiness? Alexander, who triumphantly marched to India, conquering the lands on the way, sighed for not having more pieces of earth to conquer.

Are Emperors and Kings who wear crowns always happy?

Very often the lives of statesmen who wield power are at stake. The pathetic cases of Mahatma Gandhi and Kennedy are illustrative examples.

Real happiness is found within, and is not to be defined in terms of wealth, power, honours or conquests.

If such worldly possessions are forcibly or unjustly obtained, or are misdirected, or even viewed with attachment, they will be a source of pain and sorrow for the passengers.

What is happiness to one may not be happiness to another. What is meat and drink to one may be poison to another.

The Buddha enumerates four kinds of happiness for a layman. They are the happiness of possession (atthi sukha) i.e., health, wealth, longevity, beauty, joy, strength, property, children, etc.

The second source of happiness is derived by the enjoyment of such possessions (bhaga sukha).

Ordinarily men and women wish to enjoy themselves. The Buddha does not advise all to renounce their worldly pleasures and retire to solitude.

The enjoyment of wealth lies not only in using it for ourselves but also in giving it for the welfare of others. What we eat is only temporary. What we preserve we leave and go. What we give we take with us. We are remembered for ever by the good deeds we have done with our worldly possessions.

Not falling into debt (ananasukha) is another source of happiness. If we are contented with what we have and if we are economical, we need not be in debt to any. Debtors live in mental agony and are under obligation to their creditors. Though poor, when debt-free, we feel relieved and are mentally happy.

Leading a blameless life (anavajjasukha) is one of the best sources of happiness for a layman. A blameless person is a blessing to himself and others. He is admired by all and feels happier, being affected by the peaceful vibrations of others. It should be stated however that it is very very difficult to get a good

name from all. The noble-minded persons are concerned only with a blameless life and are indifferent to external approbation.

The majority in this world delight themselves in enjoying pleasures while some others seek delight in renouncing them. Non-attachment or the transcending of material pleasures is happiness to the spiritual. Nibbanic bliss, which is a bliss of relief from sufferings, is the highest form of happiness.

Ordinary happiness we welcome, but pain, which is rather not its opposite difficult to endure.

Pain or suffering comes in different guises.

We suffer when we are subject to old age which is natural. With equanimity we have to bear the sufferings of old age.

More painful than sufferings due to old age are sufferings caused by disease, which, if chronic, we feel that death is preferable. Even the slightest toothache or headache is sometimes unbearable.

When we are subject to disease, without being worried, we should be able to bear it at any cost. Well, we must console ourselves thinking that we have escaped from a still more serious disease.

Very often we are separated from our near and dear ones. Such separation causes great pain of mind. We should understand that all association must end with separation. Here is a good opportunity to practise equanimity.

More often than not we are compelled to be united with the unpleasant which we detest. We should be able to bear them. Perhaps we are reaping the effects of our own Kamma, past or present. We should try to accommodate ourselves to the new situation or try to overcome the obstacle by some means or other.

Even the Buddha, a perfect being, who has destroyed all defilements, had to endure physical suffering caused by disease and accidents.

The Buddha was constantly subject to headache. His last illness caused Him much physical suffering. As a result of Devadatta's hurling a rock to kill Him, His foot was wounded by a splinter which necessitated an operation. Sometimes He was compelled to starve. At times He had to be contented with horse fodder. Due to the disobedience of His own pupils, He was compelled to retire to a forest for three months. In a forest on a couch of leaves spread on a

rough ground, facing piercing cool winds, He slept with perfect equanimity. Amidst pain and happiness He lived with a balanced mind.

Death is the greatest sorrow we are compelled to face in the course of our wanderings in samsara. Sometimes, death comes not singly but in numbers which may even cause insanity.

Patacara lost her near and dear ones - parents, husband, brother and two children - and she went mad. The Buddha consoled her.

Kisa Gotami lost her only infant and she went in search of a remedy for her dead son, carrying the corpse. She approached the Buddha and asked for a remedy.

"Well, sister, can you bring some mustard seed?"

"Certainly, lord!"

"Where no one has died."

Mustard seeds she found, but not a place where death has not visited. She understood the nature of life. When a mother was questioned why she did not weep over the tragic death of her only son, she replied. Uninvited he came. Uninformed he went. As he came so he went. Why should we weep? What avails weeping?

As fruits fall from a tree - tender, ripe or old - even so we die in our infancy, prime of mankind, or even in old age.

The sun rises in the East only to set in the West.

Flowers bloom in the morning to fade in the evening.

Inevitable death which comes to all without exception we have to face with perfect equanimity.

"Just as the earth whate'er is thrown Upon her, whether sweet or foul,
Indifferent is to all alike,
Nor hatred shows, nor amity,
So likewise he is good or ill,
Must even-balanced ever be."

The Buddha says -

When touched by worldly conditions the mind of an Arahat never wavers.

Admist gain and loss, fame and defame, praise and blame, happiness and pain,
let us try to maintain a balanced mind.

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