

THE LAYMAN'S DISCIPLINE TODAY

By Russell Webb

Reason and necessity have dictated the need to up-date the last section of the *Sigālovāda Sutta** - this discourse of the Buddha remaining by far the most important exposition of the duties and responsibilities of the layman in society. And this revision, if we may be permitted to term it such, should be expressed in terms not only to be easily understood but readily appreciated by those who look for guidance on such matters.

Western society has developed rapidly over the last few decades to a point where, if not similarity, at least appreciation of Asian Buddhist social ideals, once discernible, no longer obtain. It is thus highly misleading, and indeed absurd, to reproduce, parrot-fashion, discourses framed in the context of the 6th century B.C. Indian social *milieu* and assume that they will be digested whole by the sceptical and, in many cases, amoral, Occident.

An irritating sentiment occasionally expressed by Western Buddhists is that there is no need to amend the *suttas*, which are timeless in content. Certainly, it is undesirable and would in any case be quite reprehensible to compose a treatise on the pretence that this is what the historical Buddha actually preached. However, whilst the *spirit*, and in most example the *letter*, of the *suttas* remain entirely relevant and meaningful in the 20th century West, there can be no denying the fact that the social framework, especially in north western Europe and North America, has undergone a radical change commensurate with the general breakdown of a theocentric code of ethics bound up with Christianity.

In view of the fact, therefore, that mastery of *sila* – the first stage of the Buddhist path – has always been underlined prior to aspiring to further spiritual advancement, it is surely desirable to examine in some detail the above-mentioned *sutta* in order to ascertain whether the recommended injunctions can still apply in changed circumstances, whether customs and practices of the *milieu* have fallen into disuse and whether these changed circumstances could well inspire new courses of action in keeping with the spirit of the Dhamma for the laity.

* *Diigha Nikaaya* 31. This, together with the *Mangala*, *Parābhava* and *Vyagghapajja Suttas*, may be read in *Everyman's Ethics* (tr. Naarada) – No. 14 in *The Wheel series* of the Buddhist Publication Society (Kandy, 1959). The same *suttas* (excluding *Vyagghapajja*) appeared in a similar anthology from Nārada under the title, *The Light of the Dhamma* (published by Mrs. Sujatha Hewavitarne, Colombo, 1939). This included the following *suttas* relevant to *siila Cuulakammavibhanga*, *Dhammika*, *Kimsiila*, *Metta* and *Punnovāda*.

This last facet requires boldness and a critical faculty, and very few Asian Buddhists in the West are sufficiently equipped by way of knowledge or practical experience to even suggest changes in emphasis or action. As an example, note how critical Buddhists were of Paul Carus' sincere attempt to grapple with the problem – relevant more today – of armed aggression. In his *Gospel of Buddha* he includes a treatise of his own which purports to record a conversation between the Buddha and General Sinha in which the Enlightened One sagaciously and pragmatically advises on defensive action in the event of aggressive incursions from an outside power. Although we may criticise Carus for including a personal composition in an anthology of genuine Buddhist texts, the plain fact is that a nation has a duty to its people to take such precautionary steps. And if Buddhism can help mitigate the attendant *dukkha* then so much the better, as virtually every Buddhist country can testify from painful experience today, let alone past centuries!

Coming now to the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, which remains the most comprehensive analysis of man's duties in his community, we may pass without commenting on two-thirds of the advice given to Sigāla, so "modern" or timeless is it in content, and being with the final section dealing with "coverage of the six quarter". To recap, the layman is asked to regard his parents as the East, his teachers as the South, his wife and children as the West, his friends and colleagues as the North, his servants or employees as the Nadir and his spiritual preceptors as the Zenith.

The duties of offspring and parents come first in the *sutta*, the dutiful son or daughter thinking of their parents as follows:-

1. "Having supported me I shall support them."

It should be considered a privilege to wait on our parents or, for that matter, any of our (especially aged) relatives. The temptation to vade responsibility by expecting the Welfare State to look after them in their old age or infirmity should be resisted, if humanly possible. Of course, with penal taxation being what it is (at least in Britain), the State is progressively restricting freedom of choice in such spheres of action but resistance should still be maintained.

2. "I shall do their duties."

3. "I shall keep the family tradition."

4. "I shall make myself worthy of my inheritance."

No. 2 implies a continuance of whatever wholesome or charitable practices, if any, were indulged in by our parents. Nos.3 and 4 would seem to have little relevance in a permissive and egalitarian society where family traditions are non-existent save amongst the small number of hereditary peers and where

family scandals are no longer viewed with the seriousness they commanded in the Victorian era. This may sound pessimistic, but such “duties” can only be left to each individual’s conscience in the hope that he will resist unhealthy “winds of change”. After all, in order to attain Nibbana some sacrifices have to be made and these necessitate going against the stream in many respects.

5. “I shall offer alms in their memory.”

This religious practice is virtually dead in the West but could well be revived by means of encouraging the endowments of hospitals, “homes” and other such institutions. Western Buddhists might do well to consider the Eastern custom of endowing a *vihara* or engaging in some other *Dhamma-dana* or charitable deed in their parents’ memory.

On their part, parents are exhorted to:-

1. “Restrain their children from evil.”

2. “Encourage them to do good.”

Ignoring for the sake of argument whether there are or are not states of “absolute good” or “evil”, knowledge of conventional “right” and “wrong”, “good” and “bad”, cannot be left to chance or to the whims and fancies of the child. Nothing is more obnoxious than the sight of “progressive” parents who refuse to train their offspring along conventional lines of elementary right as opposed to wrong behaviour on the grounds that such instruction might have an inhibiting or regressive effect; the same remarks may apply to corporal punishment. Parents should naturally set a good example in front of their children, for example, by controlling their language and moderating their intake of alcohol and tobacco or, better still, abstaining altogether. Since a disciplined person is a credit to any society, it is incumbent upon parents to inculcate the basic virtue of obedience, honesty, thrift, contentment and truthfulness into their children.

3. “They train him for a profession.”

A good education is a priceless heritage, hence no more worthwhile sacrifice can be contemplated than that involving the instruction of the child in the arts and sciences of the day, including, of course, moral and religious guidance. All aspects should be cultivated not for the sake of passing examinations but in the spirit of that renowned saying of Francis Bacon: “Reading maketh a full man, writing an exact man and conference a ready man.” Apart from higher education, there is the problem of finding or choosing a suitable salaried occupation. Family connections can well be employed here but no doubt this “duty” was framed in a society composed of men who were expected to follow

their father's trade or profession, and this is seldom the case today, at least in urban societies.

4. "They arrange a suitable marriage."

The wife has been honoured in the texts with the title "assistant for life", but in today's society this should be applicable to the husband as well. Both should mutually complement each other's qualities but perhaps one of the most important of these should be that of a shared guiding philosophy in life, hence "mixed marriages" should only be embarked upon after very careful deliberation. Again, this "duty" is somewhat outmoded because an increasing number of young people are sufficiently well educated and psychologically balanced to choose their own partners, although naturally parents' consent and approval should be sought.

5. "They hand over their inheritance to them."

...if anything is left after paying crippling death duties and other measures designed to minimise the advantage of passing on property or other material possessions! However, if present, and if deserved, then certainly material goods and chattels long accumulated may well come in useful even if they end up in the pawnshop!

Next, we come to the duties between pupil and teacher. And it would be more appropriate to deal with this relationship in the context of student-tutorships, rather than that of ordinary school pupil vs. teacher or master because early Indian educational procedure took the form of a teacher having responsibility for not only imparting knowledge to a handful of pupils but for their moral welfare as well. In spite of this, however, we will recognise many points of similarity between the ideal student and the ideal pupil – that is, the person who has not been the victim of "progressive" doctrinaire conditioning enforced by armchair educationists and sociologists who are quite content to allow children and adolescents to run amok on the grounds of "free expression" and assuming that they will "find out" the difference between right and wrong in due course. This perverted view is the keynote of liberalism which assumes everyone to be invariably good and pure, thus ignoring the corrupting influences of human acquisitiveness and envy, paving the way for anger, violence – in a word, egocentricity.

"In five ways should a pupil minister to a teacher":-

1. "By rising from the seat in salutation."
2. "By attending on him." – through assisting in general classroom duties?
3. "By eagerness to learn."

4. “By personal service.”

One wonders how far this last injunction differs from 2. Taken together they could be made to mean that the student should go out of his way for his tutor in the matter of personal errands or drawing his attention to some new development which could prove beneficial to the latter’s studies/thesis that he is currently engaged on.

5. “By respectful attention while receiving instructions.”

The teachers/tutors are advised to reciprocate in the five ways:-

1. “They train them in the best discipline.”

That is, those elementary and customary rules of courtesy, good manners and basic citizenship so essential for the continued wellbeing of a truly civilised and cultured society. At Oxford and Cambridge, undergraduates were assigned to a moral guardian whose function it was to ensure, within reason, that their charges were always on their best behaviour, at least within the precincts of the college. Certainly basic moral instruction, preferably *not* made dependent on theistic beliefs, should form part of the curricula, and preferably be instilled at school level.

2. “They see that they grasp their lessons well.”

3. “They instruct them in the arts and sciences.”

- pass on their own knowledge?

4. “They introduce them to their friends and associates.”

As far as No. 4 is concerned, surely a bold and radical measure at the time of enunciation! Certainly at colleges there is no reason why staff members should not further the aim of a community of interests with their protégés, and fields already exist for joint endeavours – the laboratory, the workshop, the art studio, the theatre, the concert hall, the archaeological or geological site.

5. “They provide for their safety in every quarter.”

It has long been recognised that the teacher or tutor is *generally* responsible for his students’ welfare, quite apart from their *physical* security. He should take an active interest in the health and nourishment of his protégés as also in their general living standards.

We now turn to the relationship between a man and his wife, and straightaway the duties incumbent on the former party plainly require reinterpretation. “A husband should minister to his wife”:-

1. "By being courteous to her."
2. "By not despising her."

- an allusion to "wife battering"?

These injunctions are according to Nārada's translation, but even so it is obvious that no ideal husband would act otherwise, in East or West. Pali literalists may well claim that these "duties" were justified in view of the belittling attitude displayed towards women of the time. Be that as it may they sound quite ridiculous today and are best taken together to mean, perhaps, "enjoying her company", "seeing more in her than others", "loving and cherishing her in sickness and in health". (Married couples might object to the qualified nature of the first two enjoinders but, short of maudling sentimentality, how many would really in their heart of hearts actually admit that these were not the case?)

3. "By being faithful to her."
4. "By handing over authority to her."

As examples of the latter, running of the household, deciding on the upbringing and education of the children, etc.

5. "By providing her with adornments."

For "adornments" read occasional, unexpected, presents, whether after a business weekend away or not, quite apart from her birthday and the wedding anniversary.

In her turn, the wife is expected to reciprocate in five ways:-

1. "She performs her duties well."

This alludes to the virtue of good housekeeping.

2. "She is hospitable to relations and attendants."

That is, even to the in-laws as well as to business colleagues of her husband, mutual acquaintances, friends of the family and to neighbours as occasion demands.

3. "She is faithful."
4. "She protects what he brings."

Rather than squandering his income or her housekeeping allowance on a new, but perhaps unnecessary, dress or suit, for example, she would be well advised

to economise where possible and save for their mutual benefit – a holiday, say – or for that of their children.

5. “She is skilled and industrious in discharging her duties.”

In spite of “Women’s Lib.,” every aspiring bride should be proficient in cooking, repairing clothes and general household chores. If she has not been taught them by her mother or at school, then evening classes should be deemed necessary. The foregoing should not, of course, excuse the husband from sharing in their mutual obligations.

Our comments on the next set or reciprocal duties, that of a “clansman” with his “friends and associates”, could well vary depending on how we interpret these terms. Taking the “clansman” as an ordinary layman, we may suppose that his “friends and associates” are (a) close, personal friends who share his tastes and interests, (b) neighbours and acquaintances, (c) business colleagues and/or (d) fellow members of his social club, professional institute or learned society. Let us now see how our “clansman” makes out when he is enjoined to minister to his “friends and associates” in five ways and whether his reactions should be expected to take into consideration the differing categories as mentioned above:-

1. “...by liberality.”

Whilst he could only be expected to display a generous and open-ended nature to group (a), he should nevertheless, endeavour to cultivate this attitude *vis-à-vis* the remaining groups.

2. “By courteous speech.”

In our sophisticated society today the art of communicating with others has developed into types of language according to group and circumstance. Thus, with group (a) completely frank and confidential conversation would be expected. With (b), it would be polite but perhaps not so cordial as with (a). With (c), it would be polite and helpful although in many such circles deviousness, evasion and even outright lying have come to be recognised as an “occupational hazard”. With (d), the attitude would come closer to (a) than to any of the others, especially in view of the community of interests.

3. “By being helpful.”

This attitude should be displayed to all the groups although naturally with (a) it would be expected that an open-hearted relationship would prevail and that he really would put himself out for them.

4. “By being impartial.”

- being thoughtful and considerate.

This must surely rank as the most difficult injunction to implement. “Human nature”, “blood is thicker than water”, “kith and kin”, all these sayings and more are indicative of the deep-seated psychological and atavistic “reasons” to justify bias towards those whom we know well, live with, those with ideals that reflect our own. In short, we are continually led astray by “self” or by phenomena to which we feel attracted or repulsed. From this dichotomy, all our subsequent mental images are built up and so we either “like” or “dislike” persons or views, peoples or environments. Groups (a) and (b) would expect our support if attacked physically or mentally, and we would expect the same action from them. Tact would be called for in our dealings with (b) and diplomacy with (c). It cannot be otherwise until we finally see through appearance, but by that time we would have detached ourselves from society whose approbrium would cease to affect our mental equilibrium.

5. “By sincerity.”

This can certainly be implemented in all his relationships, but being conscientious has acquired a new significance in business circles and is the hallmark of success and promotion.

The “associates” minister to their friend also in five ways:-

1. “They protect him when he is heedless.”
2. “They protect his property when he is heedless.”
3. “They become a refuge when he is in danger.”
4. “They do not forsake him in his troubles.”
5. “They show consideration for his family.”

Only certain of the aforementioned groups would be expected to react to their “clansman’s” specific problems. Also, we should clearly define what is meant by being “heedless”. Suggested interpretations could be: “being of an irresponsible nature”, “taking no thought of possibly adverse consequences of his actions”, “careless”, “being the worse for drink”. Items 3 and 4 can be classed as one for all practical considerations, although in modern urban communities our first reaction to item 3 would be recourse to the strong arm of the law, assuming of course that we have a clear conscience! For item 1, then, groups (a) and (d) would be expected to rally round. Particularly in the case of a professional body, whenever an attack on one of its members is made or threatened the ranks are invariably closed. “Property” could well mean “business interests” and not just owner-occupied premises, the latter being more adequately protected by means of a “Householder’s Comprehensive” insurance

policy. Group (a) and possibly (b) and (d) would render assistance in the eventuality of item 4 and, with the addition of (c), for item 5. As far as the latter goes, of course, domestic quarrels should rightly be resolved by parental intervention or, in the case of sudden demise of the breadwinner, then group (c) would doubtless already have recourse to a benefit scheme allied to life insurance in order to redress any hardship.

The succeeding series of relationships are interesting in that they imply, at least in the opening instance, a decidedly contemporary attitude. "In five ways should a master minister to his servants and employees":-

1. "By assigning them work according to their ability."

For "master", of course, read "employer". A modern business enterprise is obviously not going to employ those who are incapable of fulfilling certain key roles. However, enlightened firms have long instituted training schemes and given their employees sufficient incentives to encourage them to take advantage, in the firm's time, to better their position and thus be equipped to accept responsibility and "work according to their ability".

2. "By supplying them with food and wages."

Since the Second World War works canteens, luncheon vouchers, etc. , have usually supplemented weekly wages or monthly salaries so as to ensure that the employees do not neglect their (essential) nourishment.

3. "By tending them in sickness."

Most factories have medical aid near to hand in the event of industrial injury and virtually every employer (in Britain at least) is legally bound to compensate for days lost due to illness.

4. "By sharing with them any delicacies."

Bonus schemes and profit sharing, whether achieved by an agreed formula between directors and staff or by means of "workers' control", are a common feature of today's commercial and industrial scene. Such incentives naturally lead to greater effort, achievement and pride in the work or concern for the company's future.

5. "By granting them leave at times."

Paid, annual leave for a minimum period of weeks has become a rightly-accepted condition of employment.

For their part, employees are enjoined to:-

1. "Rise before him" (the employer).

2. “Go to sleep (retire) after him.”

Although it is a widespread rumour that directors arrive late and leave early, the truth is that many directors have a personal stake in the company’s fortunes and therefore often work at home in the evenings or at weekends, apart from at business lunches or dinners. Whilst it would be highly desirable from a morale point of view for every director to arrive early to “encourage the others”, the fact is that many do and stay late into the bargain.

3. “Take only what is given.”

Pilfering, especially at the docks, is unfortunately quite common. Another aspect is that of “stealing time”: absenting oneself from work and claiming sick relief or simply wasting office time through gossip or other means. What is ideally required, therefore, is “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s wage”.

4. “Perform their duties well.”

- in a conscientious, honest manner, without threatening “industrial action” for every petty “grievance” and eliminating restrictive practices and “closed shop” tactics which invariably force up the price of commodities and make life particularly uncomfortable for those in the community living on fixed incomes (pensioners, for example).

5. “Uphold his good name and fame.”

There should be expected at least a modicum of pride in working for a firm, especially if it is working in competition with a similar concern where business, and therefore jobs, could be jeopardised.

Finally, we examine the relationship between a man and his spiritual preceptor. The layman is asked to render:-

1. “Loveable deeds.”

2. “Loveable words.”

3. “Lovable thoughts.”

4. “Open house to them.”

5. “Their material needs.” – generosity in supplying needed material possessions or basic necessities.

The first three injunctions are an accurate reflection of the adoration accorded (and expected in certain lay circles) the priest or monk in (rural) Asian society. As far as Buddhism is concerned, it is not the individual bhikkhu you are saluting but the institution he represents by the wearing of the saffron robe. In

other words, you are paying homage to the Sangha, the Community of those who are prepared to renounce sense pleasures, pursue an arduous path to freedom from greed, hate and delusion and who might, if they felt competent, benefit society with their spiritual experiences. In the West, however, the practice has long been only to respect such an individual for what he himself exemplified. In short, he should *earn* the respect given him and not simply *expect* it as a matter of course. Corrupting influences should, therefore, be weeded out as the Sangha should never be used for purposes other than those which tend towards “dispassion, insight, enlightenment, Nibbana”.

In the West also the alms round (*pindapāta*) would never be accepted, certainly not legally. Therefore, as *viharas* in the Occident have realised, the only viable alternatives are (a) to bring the raw food/or already cooked and requiring heating, to the *vihara*, (b) invite the bhikkhus to one’s house, or (c) give money for the bhikkhus themselves to purchase and cook their meals (which must occur in the majority of cases). “Material needs” should constitute articles that are going to prove of practical use, *not* expensive luxuries such as cameras or ‘white elephants’ such as interminable numbers of (quite often cheap and garish) *Buddharuupas*. In short, whenever one wishes to donate to the Sangha or a *vihara*, it would be as well to ascertain exactly what is most required.

In return, the religious are expected to minister to their supporter in six ways; they:-

1. “Restrain him from evil.”
2. “Persuade him to do good.”
3. “Love him with a kind heart.”
4. “Make him hear what he has not heard.”
5. “Clarify what he has already heard.”
6. “Point out the path to a heavenly state.”

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