

# **THE LAYMAN IN BUDDHISM**

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There is a mistaken notion that the Buddha addressed all his sermons to the Brotherhood, and that laymen play a very insignificant part in His teaching; that He would that all men renounce the world and join the Order. It is true that most of his discourses were addressed either to individual seekers or members of the Order – but the Buddha as the Teacher of mankind, realized that all were not fit to follow the high road. So His teaching gradually leads the learner on, from the lower to the higher and we laymen are those who yet remain on the lower level. Someday, somewhere, we too shall tread the road that leads to the end of suffering – the way of release.

But those who are not yet strong enough to climb the heights, can see them by slow and easier steps and gradually become fitter to take the steeper slopes. For as the ocean grows deep by gradual stages so is progress in the path; there is no short cut or easy lifts. Progress must be made by each one of us and moral growth comes after steady effort. Thus over and over again, the Blessed One enjoins us to be “alert,” to “arise from sloth”; He bids us “put by dreams” for what good is dreaming? He praises, “not standing still or lying down”. Ever and again the clarion call is, to “grow in states that are good”. He summons us even in his dying utterance, as in his first message to mankind, to “fare along, putting forth energy, to be staunch and strong in effort and persevering”. He bids us “not to shrink back but to struggle on”. “See to it that you make your life not barren but of great fruit. Train yourself to become this and then that. Rest not content thinking what is done is enough, and that there is nothing further to be done. I declare to you. Let there be no falling back in your aim while there is something further to be done; until you have done what was to be done”.

## **Family Life**

The Layman’s life is spent in the society of his fellowmen, in a human community. The Central Society is the family and in the days of the Blessed One, the next, was the clan to which one belonged and then the village. This was so in all early agrarian societies and the moral growth of the layman took place in himself and in relation to his family, clan and King. It is so even in our very complex competitive society. Take for example the Panchasila. The laymen are exhorted to avoid the taking of life, the taking of what is not given, un-chastity, the speaking of

falsehood and the use of intoxicants. These injunctions imply a Society of humans and even non-humans. The injunctions to avoid do not imply a negative cloistered virtue. It implies growth. By not taking what is not one's own, a person grows in honesty. By avoiding un-chastity one grows in purity; by avoiding falsehood one grows truthful and by avoiding intoxicants that work the wit abuse one grows, in abstinence and, charity of mind and purpose.

These are the first steps in the Layman's growth. But as a Householder he grows by the performance of duties, first, in the immediate society of his family, and then in the larger society outside the family. The externals of family life and societies have varied from time to time, from the early village communities to the large urban ones of this modern world. But the spirit that binds the individual to others in his society has rarely changed – times may differ, but human affection remains the same. In the Sigalovada Sutta, the Blessed One has laid down a simple code of Layman's duties set in a simple social group, many centuries ago. "His is the Vinaya of the Houseman. Hence is in one who practises what has been taught in it, growth is to be looked for and not decay." So remarked Buddhaghosa on this undying ethic of domestic and social conduct. So fundamental are the human interest, so same and wide the wisdom that envisages these, that the utterances are as fresh and practically as binding today, as they were at Rajagaha. Happy would have been the village and clan on the kindly spirit of fellow feeling, the noble spirit of justice which breathes through these sayings of the Blessed One.

Young Sigala was, one morning carrying out the ritual which in Brahminic literature, consisted of worshipping the quarters and invoking the aid of the guardian deities. Here is one such ancient prayer: "Ye gods that are in the Eastern quarter. Do ye be gracious to me, do ye bless us. To you be Homage." In the Sigalovada Sutta, the Blessed One takes the old parable of guardian gods and infuses it with new meaning; new meaning regarding the quarters and the relations between them and ourselves. As good and loving gods take in the older ethic, compassion on their devotees, so in the newer ethic, the Senior exercise a protecting kindness over the Junior, even as the Blessed One as Teacher, feels love and compassion towards those whom He teaches.

What are the six quarters for us modern Layman? Parents are the East as life begins for us with them and their care. Teachers are the South – Dakkhina whence rich gifts come.

Wife and Children are the West for as the west holds the later day light, so domestic cares follow the youth in his later day as a man. Friends and

Companions are the North. Uttara, as one gets beyond troubles, by the aid of friends.

Servants and work-people are the Nadir; they are beholders to us, and Religious teachers are the Zenith from whence come beneficent influences.

The Blessed One then proceeds to give in detail how these quarters are to be safeguarded in the newer-sense. The details relate to the society of the villages on the banks of the Ganges centuries ago. But the spirit that binds one to the six quarters, is ageless, timeless. It is benevolence, goodwill and vibrant care to protect. These are the things that keep a society flourishing even as in the age-old simile it is the linchpin that serves the rolling of the car.

### **The Good Layman**

The good layman appears in the Jataka – the book which in many ways is a pageant of life. It gives a picture of the layman as fulfilling his duties no matter what his station in life be, and going on to his reward. It is a vision of man in this world and in many worlds, but always the honest in his dealings prudent and thrifty using the wealth not for hoarding but well being. This the merchant Ittisa learnt in his day. The good layman is diligent and untiring. So in the Vannupatha Jataka, the leader of the caravan saves himself and his party by his courage and perseverance. If I give in everyone will perish and so he did not flag or tire in finding water in the sandy desert. And so in this Book of life of man and beast, the lesson of the good life for the layman is held up for our benefit, and centuries ago the Book of life provided the themes for the artist, to teach the unlettered, how a layman must walk the good walk, in body, speech and mind. Always the theme is effort to live the good life – to grow in moral stature no matter what one's walk in life be, by performing one's duty well, be he chief or merchant, farmer or artisan; wealth is to be acquired by honest effort and used for well-being a means to an end. Power was good only if used in the service of one's fellows; Caste had no meaning save in personal worth, for the noble is not of birth, but worth. Benevolence, towards all things will guard one from harm as well as radiate goodwill to all.

Here is the Layman's 'Credo' on goodwill. "This must be done by him who wish to know what is good for him. He must be able, upright and truly straight, gentle of speech, and having no vain conceit of self. He should do no mean thing for which other men who are wise will censure him. Let none deceive another; Let him not in anger or ill will desire another ill-fore, and let a man practise good will for all the world, good will unhampered, without cruelty or ill feeling." This is indeed the highest state.

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