

THE VALUE OF PARITTA (SUTTAS)

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“Recent research in medicine, in experimental psychology and what is still called parapsychology has thrown some light on the nature of mind and its position in the world. During the last forty years the conviction has steadily grown among medical men that very many causes of disease, organic as well as functional, are directly caused by mental states. The body becomes ill, because the mind controlling it either secretly wants to make it ill, or else because it is in such a state of agitation that it cannot prevent the body from sickening. Whatever its physical nature, resistance to disease is unquestionably correlated with the psychological condition of the patient.”

“Mind not only makes sick, it also cures. An optimistic patient has more chance of getting well than a patient who is worried and unhappy. The recorded instances of faith healing include cases in which even organic diseases were cured almost instantaneously”.

In this connection it is interesting to observe the prevalence, in Buddhist lands, of listening to the recital of the Dhamma for protection and deliverance from evil, and for promoting welfare and well-being. The selected discourses for recital are known as **Paritta suttas**. **Paritta** in pali, **Paritrana** in Sanskrit and **pirit** in Sinhala, mean principally ‘protection’. They are used to describe certain suttas or discourses (spoken by the Buddha) that are regarded as affording protection and deliverance from harmful influences. The practice of reciting and listening to the **paritta suttas** began very early in the history of Buddhism. It is certain that their recital produces mental well-being in those who listen to them with intelligence and are confident in the truth of the Buddha’s words. Such mental well-being can help those who are ill to recover, and it can also help to induce the mental attitude that brings happiness, and to overcome its opposite. Originally in India those who listened to paritta, sayings of the Buddha, understood what was recited and the effect on them was correspondingly great. The Buddha himself had **pirit** recited for him, and he also requested others to recite **pirit** for his own disciples when they were ill. This practice is still in vogue in Buddhist lands.

The Buddha and the Arahats can concentrate on the **paritta suttas** without the aid of another. However, when they are ill it is easier for them to listen to what others recite, and thus focus their minds on the Dhamma that the Sutta contains than think of the Dhamma themselves. There are occasions, as in the case of illness which weakens the mind, when hetero-suggestion has been found to be more effective than auto-suggestion.

According to the Dhamma the mind is so closely linked with the body that mental states affect the body's health and well-being. Some doctors even say that there is no such thing as a purely physical disease. Unless, therefore, these bad mental states are caused by previous evil acts (**akusala Kamma-vipaka**), and so are unalterable, it is possible so to change them that mental health and physical well-being will follow.

The vibratory sounds produced by **paritta** are soothing to the nerves and produce a state of peace of mind and bring harmony to the system.

How can bad influences springing from evil beings be counteracted by the recitation of **paritta suttas**? Well, they are the result of evil thinking. They can, therefore be destroyed by the good states of mind caused by listening intelligently and confidently to **paritta** sayings, because of the power of concentration that comes into being through attending whole-heartedly to the truth of the sayings.

Paritta sutta recital is a form of **sacca-kiriya**, of depending on the truth for protection, justification or attainment. This means complete establishment in the power to gain one's end. The saying: 'The power of truth protects a follower of the truth' (**Dhammo have rakkhati dhammacarim**) is the principle behind these sutta recitals. If it is true that virtue protects the virtuous, then a person who listens to these sayings with complete confidence in the Buddha's words, which spring from complete enlightenment, will acquire so virtuous a state of mind that he will conquer any evil influence.

The recital of **paritta suttas** also results in material blessings through the mental states caused by concentration and confidence in listening intelligently to the recital. According to the Buddha, right effort is a necessary factor in overcoming suffering (**viriyena dukkham accheti**). Listening to one of these recitals in the proper way can also generate energy for the purpose of doing good, and following the path of worldly progress with diligence.

It is understood that listening to these **paritta suttas** must produce in the intelligent and confident listener only wholesome states which can cure and prevent illness. There is no better medicine than truth (Dhamma) for both mental and physical ills which are the cause of all suffering and misfortune. So the recital of **paritta suttas** may, when they are listened to rightly, bring into being mental conditions of health necessary for material progress, physical welfare and well-being.

THE BOOK OF PARITTA OR BOOK OF PROTECTION

It is both interesting and refreshing to note that there is hardly a Buddhist home in Ceylon where this Book of Paritta or Book of Protection is not found. It is

given an important place in the Buddhist home. It is even treated with veneration.

Now what does this book contain? It is a collection of twenty three suttas or discourses almost delivered by the Buddha and found scattered in the five collections. **Nikayas**, which form the **Sutta Pitaka** or the “Basket of Discourses”. These suttas found in the Book of Paritta (Protection) are preceded by an enunciation of the Three Refuges (**saranagamana**); the Ten Precepts (**dasa sikkhapadani**); the questions asked of a novice (**samanera panha**) also known as the young one’s questions (**kumara panha**). The most popular among these three suttas are the Good Omen Discourse (**Mangala Sutta**), the Jewel Discourse (**Ratana Sutta**) and the Loving Kindness or Universal Love Discourse (**Metta Sutta**).

Among the discourses of the Paritta Book are also included such important suttas as the **Dhammacakkapavattana**, Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Truth (the sermon of the Buddha delivered at the Deer Park at Isipatana, Benares); **Sacca-vibbanga**, the Analysis of the (four) Truths, and the **Bojjhanga**, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment.

It is customary for monks when they are invited to the homes of the laity on occasions of domestic importance such as birthdays, house-warming, illness and similar events to recite from the Book of Paritta (protection) the popular suttas mentioned above. On special occasions monks are invited to recite the Paritta Suttas not for short periods but right through the night. At the commencement of this recital, the monks (generally about twelve) who have been invited will recite the three popular suttas mentioned above. Thereafter a pair of monks will commence reciting the remaining suttas for two hours. They will then retire and will be followed by another pair for another two hours. In this manner the recital will last till dawn.

While the recital lasts there will be found a vessel or jar of water placed on a table before the monks. On this table there is also the Book of Paritta written on ola leaves, and also a ball of thread which is unloosened and passed on to the monks and the laity who hold the thread while the recital of the three popular suttas goes on. At the close of the recital of the entire book at dawn the thread is broken into portions and distributed among the laity. The water is also distributed among them. These are meant as a symbol of the protective power of the Paritta that was recited. They have their psychological effects.

A question may arise whether recitals from the Book of Paritta will in every case result in the protection sought for. In this connection the same reply given by the Venerable Nagasena to King Milinda, why the recital of paritta does not

in all cases protect one from death, is worth remembering. Due to three causes Paritta may have no effect: Kamma hindrances (**kammavarānena**); hindrances from defilements (**kilesavarānena**); a lack of faith (**asaddhanataya**).

