

## TWENTY STUMBLING BLOCKS

By The Late Ven. Sumangalo (Penang)

Sometimes words uttered by a man tell us what kind of a man he is. But most often it is a man's actions that tell whether he is good or bad. Then, too, there is a different group of people – those who seem to be neither very good nor very bad.

Still another group of humans is composed of those who seem to be bad but we are not sure that they are really bad. Another group is composed of those who seem to be good but we wonder if they are really good.

Let us look at the first group. A man who always speaks well and kindly and never uses harsh or cruel language is **PROBABLY** a good man. If he shows us actions that are the same as his words then we may be sure that he is truly good.

Still another group of people has more numbers than any other. I often call these people “The Dishwater Society”. The reason for this name is clear. Dishwater should be neither very hot nor very cold. This group of people comprises of individuals who are neither very good nor very bad. Like dishwater, they are only lukewarm.

Still another group is composed of people who are bad because of their surroundings and because it is very difficult for them to be good. Then there are people who are good because it is easy for them to be good.

So very many of us are kind, quiet, polite and considerate of others when our surroundings and circumstances are satisfactory. Often, when these conditions change, they act in exactly the contrary manner.

We cannot call a person good who only behaves well and has a peaceful mind when he has plenty to eat, a good bed, a good house and all the conditions of his life are satisfactory to him. It is possible that this person belongs to the Dishwater Society.

But when we see people who endure unpleasant situations, have not enough to eat, perhaps have no home and insufficient clothing and have much to suffer, yet these same people preserve peace of mind and heart and have no ill-will towards anyone and speak only in a kind way, then we may be sure these are truly good people.

The Sixth Patriarch (Wei Lang-Hui Neng) once told a group of pilgrims that there are twenty stumbling blocks that are on the path to enlightenment. He also

said that if we know these stumbling blocks are in the road it is easier for us to avoid them. Here are the Twenty: -

- (1) **IT IS HARD FOR A POOR MAN TO BE GENEROUS.** There is a concealed meaning in this statement. It does not necessarily mean generosity with money or food or services. It means generosity of attitude and generosity of mind and heart. A poor man can easily get into the habit of feeling sorry for himself. This is a habit that works against developing generous attitudes.
- (2) **IT IS HARD FOR A RICH MAN TO LEARN THE WAY TO ENLIGHTENMENT.** Prosperity and riches are greater stumbling blocks than poverty. Riches often become a god. This god has many worshippers and always leads them into unhappiness. The great Chinese historian said that there is no record that riches ever made anyone happy. What he meant is that the Worship of Riches is a stumbling block. Riches rightly understood and rightly used are not a stumbling block.
- (3) **IT IS HARD TO SEEK ENLIGHTENMENT AT THE COST OF SELF-SACRIFICE.** Most of us want to do everything the easy way. We do not want to get away from our comforts. Must learn to take the hard and unpleasant along with the soft and pleasant. In order to acquire new ideas we must give up many old ideas. It is like moving new furniture into a room. The old furniture must be moved out. False ideas must be moved out to make room for the true ideas.
- (4) **IT IS HARD TO SEE THE BUDDHA-WORLD IN THE PRESENT WORLD.** The notion that we go to Heaven or to Hell when we die is what is known as HALF-truth. Heaven and Hell have no limits in either time or space. Probably some of the people here are Hell and maybe the man or woman sitting next to such an individual is in Heaven. To have a self-centred mind is to travel the road to Hell. To have the Buddha-mind is to have Heaven – both here and hereafter.
- (5) **IT IS HARD TO HEAR THE BUDDHA’S TEACHING IN THE TURMOIL OF THIS WORLD.** The sound of Radio and TV and the attraction of the cinema, of gossip, of talk about ways to make money, about ways to have pleasure, about politics, about power and fame all distract our minds make it difficult for us to concentrate on the Holy Teachings. It is good once or twice a month or at regular intervals to observe 8 precepts.

- (6) **IT IS HARD TO KEEP THE MIND PURE AGAINST THE INSTINCTS OF THE BODY.** The body is always making selfish demands. We want to eat and drink and be merry. We like fancy clothing and jewellery and amusement. We usually get whatever it is that we wish most strongly. If we want pleasure of the world that is what we get. If we want to enter the Buddha-world here and now that is what we get.
- (7) **IT IS HARD NOT TO DESIRE THAT WHICH IS BEAUTIFUL AND ATTRACTIVE.** Lord Buddha told us that everything eventually falls to pieces and passes away. The most beautiful diamond, even though diamond is the hardest substance we know will eventually lose its beauty and turn to dust. If we seek to realize the true nature of things we will attach greater value to that which always endures. Lord Buddha said “Only the Truth endures forever.”
- (8) **IT IS HARD FOR A STRONG MAN NOT TO USE HIS STRENGTH TO GRATIFY HIS DESIRE.** The Buddha taught us that the more power we have the more self-control we must use. The Emperor Asoka was a very powerful monarch but he became the gentlest of men and set such a good example to his subjects that bloodshed ceased in India, during his reign.
- (9) **IT IS HARD NOT TO GET ANGRY WHEN ONE IS INSULTED.** Lord Buddha said insults are spitting at the sky. The spittle falls back in the face of the man who sent it out. The true follower of the Buddha goes quietly along his way when he sees that one of his companions is quarrelsome. The Buddha told us in the Dhammapada that is not good to keep company with fools.
- (10) **IT IS HARD TO REMAIN INNOCENT WHEN TEMPTED BY SUDDEN CIRCUMSTANCES.** Let us say that I see a great treasure and no one is guarding it at the moment. I know I can steal it and no one will ever know that I am guilty. But there is one great drawback. **MY CONSCIENCE** will always know who is the thief and I shall suffer as a result. Temptation must be resisted. This resistance gives us a strength of character just as exercise of a young man’s arms gives him strong muscles.
- (11) **IT IS HARD TO APPLY ONESELF TO STUDY.** It is so much easier to put it off, until tomorrow. There are always excuses. There are always more pleasant things to do. If All Buddhists knew the Dhammapada by heart this would be a happier and far more peaceful world.

- (12) **IT IS HARD NOT TO LOOK DOWN ON A BEGINNER.** It is human nature to think: “I am cleverer than this other fellow: he is just beginning and I am much experienced in Study of the Buddha’s Way.” We must resist this temptation and seek to help beginners.
- (13) **IF SUCCESSFUL, IT IS HARD TO KEEP HUMBLE.** We all know how easy it is to get what is known in slang as “a swollen head” or a “big head” – success tends to make us vain. If we are truly Buddha’s followers then we must remain humble even though we attain riches, fame, power and all the honours of this world. The story about the richest man in the world who helped to bootblack has always been interesting to me. The late Mr. Rockefeller had a bootblack whose job was to polish the shoes of all the many persons in the household. One day the bootblack caught a bad cold and felt very weak. Mr. Rockefeller told the bootblack to go to bed and then the rich man sat down and polished forty pairs of shoes himself. It is good to remain humble under all circumstances. Not long ago I sat in an aeroplane from Djakarta to Australia with this rich man’s son. I noticed that the trousers of this very very rich young man were quite old. He was not too proud to wear old trousers. He had learned how to be humble.
- (14) **IT IS HARD TO GET A GOOD FRIEND.** We know many people. But how many of these people are really true friends? It is better to travel alone, the Buddha told us, than to keep company with those who are not true friends. Better to have a few good friends than to be surrounded by swarms of false friends.
- (15) **IT IS HARD TO ENDURE DISCIPLINE TO MAKE ONESELF A FAITHFUL PRACTISING BUDDHIST.** We all like to do what is easier. To discipline oneself is indeed hard. But the Buddha told us that each must do this job for himself. Moreover, the time to start is now – not tomorrow or next week.
- (16) **IT IS HARD NOT TO BE DISTURBED AND UPSET BY THE EXTERNAL CONDITIONS SURROUNDING US.** But it is an actually demonstrated fact that after self-discipline and learning self-control, we can be calm even in midst of a storm and can shut out all the outside influences. The ears can refuse to hear noise and we can be free of outside influences, but this takes self-discipline.
- (17) **IT IS HARD TO TEACH OTHERS BY BEING MINDFUL OF NATURES.** No two persons are alike. The Buddha constantly spoke of

*Upava* which is a sanskrit and pali word meaning a device or even a *Trick* used to teach people according to the individual development of each separate person. We must make allowance for these differences or else our teaching will be a failure.

- (18) **IT IS HARD TO ATTAIN A PEACEFUL MIND.** First of all we must determine what is it we want. If we want the attractions of this world, then we can never know real peace of mind. If we set out determined on Peace of mind and are steadfast, then we can get that bit of Heaven here and now. Nothing can ever be accomplished unless a beginning is made.
- (19) **IT IS HARD NOT TO GET INTO ARGUMENTS ABOUT RELIGION.** The best way to keep out of such arguments is to remember that religion is NOT something to argue about; it is a life to be lived.
- (20) **IT IS HARD TO FIND AND PRACTISE A GOOD METHOD.** The real reason why so many of us never find a good method is because we are using somebody else's method. Keep in mind that each of us is a different temperament and must seek his own best way or method. It is said that a tall man cannot sleep in a short bed. The method must be suited to the individual.