DHAMMAPADA

English Translation of Title: The Path of Righteousness (or Virtue)

Author: The Dhammapada consists of sayings attributed to the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama); finally translated into Pali by unknown writers.

Literary Form: Aphorisms, some in poetic form

Date of Composition: Around third century B.C.

Major Themes

Practicing what the Buddha preached is a sure path of freedom from suffering.

Suffering follows from bad conduct as surely as peace follows from good conduct.

Mental states are caused by our perceptions; therefore, we must purify perceptions.

Cultivating awareness eventually leads to Nirvāṇa.

There are Four Noble Truths: Life is sorrowful; Craving is the cause of sorrow; Removing craving removes sorrow; By following the Eightfold Path one destroys sorrow.

The Eightfold Path consists of: right knowledge, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

After the death of the Buddha, his disciples were concerned about the preservation of his teachings. All of Buddha's teachings had been imparted orally. His followers assembled at the first council of Rajagriha, India in 477 B.C. to rehearse and commit the Buddha's discourses to memory. From this source evolved the Pali canon of Buddhist scriptures, which was divided into three baskets (the Tipitaka), the most important of the three being the Suttapitaka (the basket containing Buddha's discourses). The Suttapitaka itself was divided into five collections. The fifth of the five collections is called Khuddanikāya and consists of several books, which are works of poetic art—collections of aphorisms, songs, poems, fairy tales, and fables. The Dhammapada is the second book of the Khuddanikāya.

The title Dhammapada has been translated as "The Path of Virtue," "The Way of Truth," "The Way of Righteousness," or "Words of Truth."

The Dhammapada, in its Pali version, is an anthology of 423 sayings of the Buddha in verse. It is divided into 26 chapters, each chapter dealing with one subject. In one recension or another the Dhammapada was dispersed throughout the Buddhist world. The next most noteworthy versions are the four Chinese versions from the Sanskrit, the earliest of which, an anthology of 500 stanzas, was brought from India in A.D. 223. One of these, together with the rest of the Tipitaka, was printed from blocks in A.D. 972, nearly seven centuries before Guttenberg. Next in importance is the Udānavarga in a near-Sanskrit version found in Turkestan, and comprising some 1,050 stanzas. There are two other versions known as the Gāndhāri Dhammapada and the Patna Dhammapada.

The Pali version of the Dhammapada is the most well-known version. Since the stanzas of the Dhammapada are pithy sayings of the Buddha, the Buddhists of Sri Lanka found it necessary to compose a commentary on the Dhammapada, which explains the meaning of each stanza and tells where, when, and why each stanza was uttered by the Buddha. The Dhammapāda Commentary was composed about 450 A.D. and its compiler remains unknown. Its authorship is mistakenly attributed to Buddhaghasa.

The Dhammapada is composed in a very lucid, chaste, and elegant Pali. The entire work is in verse. The majority of the verses are in a meter very close to the vedic anushtubh (eight syllables in each foot), while some verses are close to the vedic trishtubh (eleven syllables in each foot) or the vedic jagati (twelve syllables in each foot). The work
rendered in a charming and smooth style. The verses display a wealth of similes drawn from everyday life. There are flashes of humor produced by the clever use of puns, and the verses are easy to memorize.

Since the Dhammapada’s appearance in a Latin version in 1850, it has been repeatedly translated into the principal European and Asian languages. The depth and universality of its doctrine, and purity and earnestness of its moral teachings, combined with the refined simplicity and pellucid poetical beauty of its language, has earned for it an honored place in world literature.

The Dhammapada is also the most important single work belonging to the canonical literature for practicing Buddhists. Through the centuries, the Dhammapada has been memorized by novices who were expected to recite the entire text from memory before they received the higher ordination as monks. The bhikku (friar) Kassapa in the Foreword to Narada Thera’s translation of the Dhammapada writes, “If I were to name any book from the whole Tipitaka as having been of most service to me, I should without hesitation choose the Dhammapada. And it goes without saying that, to me, it is the best single book in all the wide world of literature. For forty years and more it has been my constant companion and never-failing solace in every kind of misfortune and grief. There is no trouble that man is heir to, for which the Lord over Sorrow cannot point out cause and prescribe sure remedy.”

The Contents of the Dhammapada

The Dhammapada is divided into twenty-six chapters, offering sage advice in a pithy and metaphorical manner, and dealing with such topics as the mind, the self, the world, the awakened one, happiness, the path, hell, the elephant, the mendicant, and the Brahmins.

The book is short, amounting to something like thirty-four printed pages in a modern English edition.

Chapter one, called “The Pairs,” presents pairs of possibilities for human conduct, each leading to a different kind of destiny. The negative is presented first, leading to unhappiness, and this is followed by the positive, leading to happiness.

The first verse of chapter one states the fundamental principle of Buddhist psychology. Our mental states depend on our perception, not on how things are in themselves. If we perceive a red-faced, wildly gesticulating person as an angry, hostile attacker, our mental state will be quite different from that which would arise if we saw the same person as rehearsing a play or as releasing his own inner tensions. Therefore, the Dhammapada declares that if one acts with polluted perception, suffering follows as a wheel follows the draught-ox’s foot, whereas if one acts with tranquil perception, happiness follows him, as a shadow that never leaves.

The Buddha’s half-brother Nanda was infatuated by sensual pleasure. It was this state of mind that the Buddha described in verse 13: “Even as rain penetrates an ill-thatched house, so does lust penetrate an undeveloped mind.” Nanda was afterwards completely converted to Buddhism when verse 14 was uttered: “Even as rain does not penetrate a well-thatched house, so does lust not penetrate a well-developed mind.” Mind is purified by concentration and contemplation.

Chapter two is entitled “Appamādo-vaggo.” “Appamādo” means awareness, heedfulness, vigilance, and watchfulness. The importance of awareness was the Buddha’s greatest discovery. In history, it ranks with the taming of fire, agriculture, or the Pythagorean theorem as a milestone in humanity’s journey upwards. The Buddha discovered that if awareness is focused with deep concentration and equanimity upon all aspects of human experience, suffering is overcome and replaced by tranquility and quiet joy. Verses of chapter two highlight the supreme importance of awareness. It is said that the first verse of this chapter, verse 21, which states that the path to the deathless (that is, Nibbāna, or Nirvana, (the ultimate freedom) is awareness, whereas unawareness is the path of death, completely transformed the character of King Asoka the Righteous, who was originally stigmatized as Asoka the Wicked.
Control of the Mind

Control of the mind is the theme of chapter three. The verses remind us that the quivering, wavering mind is hard to guard against and hard to check. Yet, as the last verse, verse 43, states, “What neither mother, nor father, nor other kinsmen can do, a well-directed mind does.” The Dhammapada commentary states that a well-directed mind is directed towards the ten kinds of meritorious deeds: (1) generosity, (2) morality, (3) meditation, (4) reverence, (5) service, (6) transference of merit, (7) rejoicing in others’ merit, (8) hearing the Doctrine, (9) seeing Buddhas, and (10) straightening one’s right views. The well-directed mind is contrasted with the ill-directed mind which turns to ten kinds of evil: (1) killing, (2) stealing, (3) unchastity, (4) lying, (5) slandering, (6) harsh speech, (7) vain talk, (8) covetousness, (9) ill-will, and (10) false belief.

Chapter four, “Puppha-vagga” (“Chapter on Flowers”) uses the imagery of flowers to illumine the spiritual path. For example, the last verse states that a disciple of the Buddha outshines the wretched, ordinary folk just as a sweet-smelling, lovely lotus could bloom upon a heap of rubbish.

Chapters six and seven contrast the behavior of the childish and immature to that of the wise and sagacious. Verse 64 conjures up an attractive poetic image: “Though the fool associates with a wise man all his life, he no more understands the dhamma [righteousness] than a spoon the flavor of soup.” Verse 97 is a good example of an Indian riddle. Taken one way it means, “The man who is not credulous, who understands Nibbana, who has cut off the links, who has destroyed opportunities [of good and evil], who has ejected all desires, he, indeed is the supreme man.” But, depending on a series of puns, verse 97 might mean, “The man who is faithless, who is ungrateful, and who has cut off alliances; who has destroyed opportunities, and is an eater of vomit, is the supreme man.”

Chapters nine and ten deal with evil conduct and punishment. They highlight the Buddhist theory of ‘karma, which states that evil deeds will return to haunt a person not only in this life but also in the next, for evil deeds form an evil character and such a person must inevitably face increased suffering. Similarly, good deeds bring happiness.

Chapter eleven contains the two verses, 153 and 154, the first paean of Joy (udana) uttered by the Buddha, immediately after his Enlightenment. “Through many a birth I wandered in samsara, searching for, but not finding, the house-builder. Misery is birth again and again” (153). “House-builder, you are seen. The house you shall not build again! All your rafters are broken, your roof-beam destroyed. My mind has achieved the end of cravings and attained the unconditioned” (154).

Chapters twelve and thirteen deal with the self and the world. By conquering the self, one conquers the world. Verse 171 points to the false attractiveness of the world, adorned like a royal chariot, where fools flounder.

Chapter fourteen, “The Buddha,” describes the qualities cultivated and perfected by the Buddha, the Awakened One. Verses 183, 184 and 185 were originally recited by Buddhist monks every fortnight, as they indicate the ideal life of a monk.

Chapter fifteen, “Happiness,” points out that happiness comes from returning good for evil. The Sakyas, members of the Buddha’s own clan, quarrelled with their neighbors, the Koliyas, about the use of the water of the river Rohini. The Buddha dissuaded both clans from fighting, finally uttering verses 197 and 198.

Chapter sixteen, “The Pleasant,” sets forth the fundamental Buddhist teaching that the pleasant leads to attachment, attachment results in craving, and craving is the root cause of suffering.

Chapter seventeen, “Wrath,” dwells on the dangers of anger. Verse 222 asserts that whoever can hold back arisen wrath, like a swerving chariot, is a real charioteer, while other folk merely hold the reins. Verse 223 advises us to conquer anger by love, evil by good, the miserly one by giving, and the liar by truth.

The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path

Chapter twenty, “The Path,” provides a summary of the Buddha’s philosophy of life. Verses 277, 278,
and 279 state the three pillars of Buddhist metaphysics: (1) all compound things are transitory (anicca); (2) all compound things are sorrowful (dukkha); and (3) everything that is, is without self (anatta). Verse 273 states that the four Sayings are the best of truths and the Eightfold path is the best of paths. The four sayings are Buddha’s four Noble Truths, namely: (1) life is unsatisfactory and sorrowful, (2) craving is the cause of sorrow, (3) removal of craving will remove sorrow, (4) the Eightfold Path leads to the destruction of sorrow. The Eightfold Path consists of: right knowledge, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The opening verse of chapter twenty-one captures the entire theme of the Dhammapada: “If by giving up a limited pleasure, one may behold a larger happiness, let a wise man give up the limited for the greater.” The last six verses of this chapter are some of the most lyrical in the Dhammapada. They give a memorable picture of the “greater happiness” of those who follow the Noble Eightfold Path.

Chapter twenty-four focuses on craving. Buddhism has elaborated an extensive psychology of desire—a great understanding of its nature, its arising, and its conquest. After all, the Buddha attributed all sorrow finally to craving and Nibbāna is equivalent to the cessation of all craving.

Chapters twenty-five and twenty-six describe the Buddha’s spiritual elite. They are identified by their conduct, not by externals. The last two verses describe the sage as the fearless, the noble, the hero, the conqueror, the desireless and the enlightened.

NARAYAN CHAMPAWAT

Further Reading

Translations


Related Study