

THE "GOOD LAY BUDDHIST"

This passage from the *Anguttara Nikâya* treats the issue of merit and the householder life directly, as Shâkyamuni instructs the good Buddhist to seek "The Four Conditions":

Housefather, there are these four conditions which are desirable, dear, delightful, hard to win in the world. Which four? ...

[1] *Wealth being gotten by lawful means...*

[2] *Good report gotten by me along with my kinsmen and teacher*

[3] *Long life and attain a great age...*

[4] *When the body breaks up, on the other side of death may I attain happy birth, the heaven world! ... Anguttara Nikâya (IV, VII, 61)*

The text then proceeds to specify how the moral and wealthy Buddhist householder should attain these goals by doing the "The Four Good Deeds":

Now, housefather, that same Aryan disciple, with the wealth acquired by energetic striving, amassed by strength of arm, won by sweat, lawful and lawfully gotten, is the doer of four deeds. What are the four?

[1] *[He] makes himself happy and cheerful, he is a contriver of perfect happiness; he makes his mother and father, his children and wife, his servants and workmen, his friends and comrades cheerful and happy. This ... is the first opportunity seized by him, turned to merit and fittingly made use of.*

[2] *Then again, the ... disciple ... with that wealth makes himself secure against all misfortunes whatsoever, such as may happen by way of fire, water, the king, a robber, an ill-disposed person ... He takes steps for his defense and makes himself secure...*

[3] *Then again... the disciple... is a maker of the five-fold offering (bali), namely: to relatives, to guests, to departed hungry ghosts, to the king, and to the gods (devatâ)...*

[4] *Then again, the ... disciple... offers a gift to all such recluses and brahmins as abstain from sloth and negligence, who are bent on kindness and forbearance, who tame the one self, calm the one self... to such he offers a gift which has the highest results, a gift heavenly, resulting in happiness and leading to heaven.*

This teaching passage ends with the praise of one whose wealth has been used fittingly, who has "seized the opportunity," and who has "turned wealth to merit."

The provisions and actions articulated here are congruent with the popular Nepalese texts that echo similar householder concerns for family, wealth, rituals, and protection. This, in the laity's spiritual imagination shaped by popular narratives and ritual, Buddhist merit-making "cheats death" by reuniting couples after death and reuniting the rich with their wealth. Merit-making is also not strictly individualistic, as actions by husbands and wives, patrons and shipmates, monks and kings may affect the destinies of others. Finally, heavenly rebirth was recognized in numerous passages as an exalted religious goal for good Buddhists to strive for as well. In short, householder practice across the Buddhist world is centered on merit-making (often collective in practice and effect), showing respect for local deities, and heaven seeking. To focus on elite texts designated to guide the rare meditation master or philosopher is to miss the center of Buddhism in society.

Householder texts like this and Buddhist rituals concerned with less than *nirvâna*-seeking have been consistently discounted as sources for understanding the "true Buddhist" in the western historical imagination. So many false assumptions and ridiculous socio-cultural assertions about Buddhism, ancient and modern, could have been avoided by comprehending the world view and ethos of the Buddhist householder tradition. In the *Anguttara* summary above and in the Nepalese texts, we see that Buddhism fosters family ties, encourages an "energetic striving" after economic success, promotes the worship of hungry ghosts and local gods, justifies the rightful seeking after worldly happiness and security, applauds the religious virtues of faith and heaven-seeking, and underlines the virtue of being a donor and patron. This pragmatic conception of the *dharma*, however nuanced in every local community, shaped the domestication of Buddhism from Sri Lanka to the Himalayas, from Central Asia to Japan.

I suggest that by broadening focus beyond the elite to include householders, committing to memory (and analysis) "The Four Good Deeds" alongside "The Four Noble Truths" as distillations of normative Buddhism, we can convey how Buddhist tradition developed three interlocking tracks of legitimate spiritual striving:

PRAGMATIC WELL-BEING ritual/merit-making	MORAL CULTIVATION merit-making	NIRVÂNA SEEKING meditation
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