

Blessings... You Can D.I.Y

*The Mangala-sutta and its reflection on life,
education, family, social matters,
ethics and mind training*



*Venerable Prof. Dr. Khammai Dhammasami
DPhil (Oxford), Oxford Buddha Vihara, Britain*



“The principle of the whole teaching of the Buddha is self-reliance. We have to depend on ourselves to make good of our life and the opportunity it presents. Accordingly the idea of blessings with a role for a mediator is ruled out in Buddhism. This underlines the difference between the concept of blessings in Buddhism and other beliefs. We should approach the subject of blessings, first and

foremost, with the attitude of self-dependence. Then, the mind will not be confused or disturbed by superstition. In other words, the Buddha’s main point in the Mangala-sutta is that blessings come from our own efforts and those efforts have many dimensions: educational, social, economic, psychological and spiritual. The Mangala-sutta describes the kinds of effort we should make in order to be blessed in life and in the very here and now. They range from good friends to favourable locations, good education to proper job training, improving personality to engaging in the philosophy of life and liberation from suffering.”

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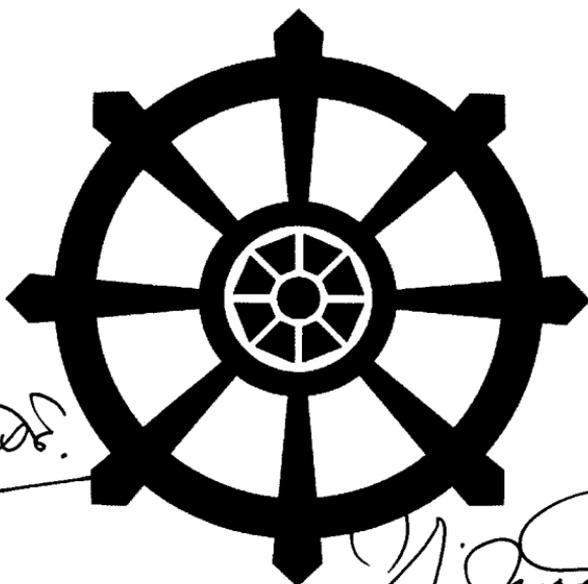


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About the Author

Venerable Dr. Khammai Dhammasami is the only Theravada Buddhist monk from South-east Asia to have obtained a doctorate degree from the world famous University of Oxford. He has been a professor at International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University,

Yangon since 2006 and also Trustee and Fellow since 2009 at the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, Oxford University, Britain where he resides.

Venerable Dr. Dhammasami was born Khammai in Laikha in central Shan State, the Union of Myanmar in 1964; ordained at the age of eight at the Mahasi meditation branch, Sri Mangala Monastery, in his hometown. He completed his Pali study (Dhammacariya Degree) while still a novice (*samanera*).

He taught Pali and Abhidhamma at Sasana Mandaing Pali University, Bago (Hamsavati), Myanmar and northern Thailand until he was 25 before proceeding to Sri Lanka for his further study. He has three Masters Degrees in Buddhist philosophy and Pali from Buddhist and Pali University and University of Kelaniya in Sri Lanka and a doctorate degree from Oxford University, Britain.

He started teaching meditation in 1993 in Sri Lanka and moved to Britain in 1996 where he has been conducting weekly vipassana meditation courses. He also conducts vipassana meditation classes regularly for London and Oxford University students. Outside Britain, he has taught meditation in Malaysia, Canada, Singapore, USA, Spain and now holds meditation retreats annually in Hungary and Serbia.

He has published two books on vipassana meditation: *Mindfulness Meditation Made Easy* (1999) and *Different Aspects of Mindfulness Meditation* (2000) in Penang, Malaysia; the first book has been reprinted once in Malaysia, twice in Thailand and once in Sri Lanka; it has also been translated into Korean and Thai.

Currently, Venerable Prof. Dhammasami serves the founder-abbot of the Oxford Buddha Vihara, Oxford, Britain, which has a branch in Singapore and Malaysia. He was Research Associate at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University; Nalanda University, India; Maha Pragna Buddhist College, Jakarta, Indonesia. Currently he also serves on the Governing Council at the Somaiya Centre for Buddhist Studies, Mumbai University, India. He is also Executive Secretary of both the International Association of Buddhist Universities (www.iabu.org) and the Association of Theravada Buddhist Universities (www.atbu.org). He was Secretary General of the United Nations Day of Vesak celebrations, held in Bangkok, for the years 2006, 2007 and 2009 and one of its Vice-Chairmen in Hanoi (2008).

In recognition of his contributions to the growth of Theravada Buddhism, Vipassana meditation and in bringing Buddhist universities around the world together, the Government of the Union of Myanmar has conferred on him two titles: *Maha-saddhamma-jotika-dhaja* (2009) and *Agga-maha-saddhamma-jotika-dhaja* (2012). Mahachulalongkorn University of Thailand has also awarded him an honorary PhD in 2010 for his scholarship in Buddhist studies.

He speaks Shan (mother tongue), Burmese, English, Thai and Pali. He also has some limited knowledge of Laos, Sinhalese and Sanskrit.

He translated from Thai into English *Mind-city: the capital of the world*, a dhamma book composed by the current Sangharaja (the Supreme Patriarch) of Thailand and published in 2009. In the same year, he helped to publish a

Pali commentary on the Apadana by the current Chairman Sayadaw of the State Sangha Mahanayaka Committee of Myanmar, the Most Ven. Prof. Kumarabhivamsa (Bamaw Sayadaw)

Besides some academic articles, the Venerable has also composed 3 other dhamma books: *Dhamma Made Easy* (Inward Journey Publisher, Penang: 1999); *Your Queries and Some Dhamma Answers on Life and Buddhism*, Mind and Wisdom Development Centre, a unit of the Young Buddhist Association of Thailand under Royal Patronage, Bangkok (2011 May); and *Kathina Practice: Historical, Social and Psychological Reflections*, (in Myanmar and English) Oxford Buddha Vihara (Singapore), Singapore (2011 October).

Forward for the Third Reprint

Within two months of its first publication, *Blessings... You Can D.I.Y* is being prepared for a third reprint, this time by the Oxford Buddha Vihara (Singapore) and its devotees. There are some slight updates made for this reprint. For example, one paragraph is added at the end of the introduction to make it clearer; and the diagram is enlarged.

I wish to thank Venerable Vayaminda (my senior assistant at the OBVS), Ms. Mary Ng (Secretary of the OBVS Committee) and Venerable Pannyajota Khammon (my assistant at the OBV in KL) for bringing out this edition.

All our collective humble efforts are made, let us emphasize once again, to honour of Lord Buddha Gautama in celebration (*sambuddha-jayanti*) of the 2600th anniversary of his full enlightenment.

Venerable Dhammasami

Preface

Eleven years ago in 2000, I used the *Mangala-sutta* as the focus of discussion during a six-day vipassana meditation retreat held at the residence of Dr. Kyaw Thinn, a psychiatrist consultant, and his wife Sao Phong Keaw, in Birmingham, Britain. Since then they have requested me to publish a collection of my discussion of the *Mangala-sutta* many times; but I delayed it because I wanted to edit it for the wider readership.

The aim of the original discussion was to look at one of the very popular discourses of the Buddha, usually associated with worldly progress, from the point of view of meditation practice. We all enjoyed the discussion.

A decade passed and the draft still remained on my desktop unedited, meaning it was waiting in the queue of my to do list, despite being always considered a work in progress! During those times what I have managed a few times was to read through a few pages, but always left the whole draft almost untouched. I always realized whenever I looked at the draft, that I needed to do some more work on it. But, little did I know that it would take much more time than I ever imagined and that the final draft would become very different from the original one.

I have shortened some points and expanded others where necessary, while leaving the original focus unchanged. In the course of editing, I have also gone through a few books on the *Mangala-sutta* by other writers in four languages: English, Myanmar, Thai and Shan. At the end of this endeavour, I would like to believe I have achieved one vital insight: The *Mangala-sutta* is more profound than many have realized and there is yet to be a book in any language, easy enough to be referred as a comprehensive guide for a Buddhist practitioner. This book has not been able to fill that gap either. This book instead indicates my continued attempt to understand this short and popular sutta; I certainly have more work to do to develop my understanding of this sutta.

This book, *Blessings...You Can D.I.Y.*, was first published with its Thai translation (by Ms. Montatip Khunwattana) in February 2012 to rejoice in the generous support of the sangha and laity in Bangkok, Thailand for the Oxford Buddha Vihara. I am glad that not long after that, a reprint

took place in Myanmar. For any understanding of the Mangala-sutta I have I owe entirely to the scholars and practitioners in both countries and elsewhere.

All my humble efforts that have gone into writing this little book are dedicated, in general, to all beings who venerate, recite and study the *Mangala-sutta*, and in particular to the meditators who engaged in the discussion of this sutta with me for the first time during the meditation retreat in 2000 and to the Mangala Group, a group of young devotees of the OBV who name themselves after this sutta.

Above all, let us dedicate our efforts in compiling and printing this book to the Buddha Gotama who attained Full Enlightenment on the Visakha full-moon day 2,600 years ago at Buddhagaya in India and who then through his great compassion for all beings shared his great wisdom on *the true and highest blessings* at the Jetavana Monastery in Sravasti.

I want to express profound gratitude, respect and *anumodana* to the authors whose work I have read or referred to in this work. I am also thankful to Venerable Phra Mahasena Suraseno (Pali VI, BA, MA), my assistant at the OBV in the UK, for the diagram; Venerable Pannyajota Khammon of Mongkut, BA (Hon.), MA (Sri Lanka), my assistant at the OBV in Kuala Lumpur, for formatting this book and general assistance he renders to enable this reprint in Yangon; and last but not least, *Nang Devi Sarpay* and its owner, author and novelist Nang Ei Ei

Zar and her family for their generosity in bringing out this reprint.

May all beings progress steadily and peacefully on the path of the 38 blessings.

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The Discourse on Greatest Blessings (Mangala-sutta)

(Translation partly adapted from Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

Introduction

Evam me sutam. Ekam samayam bhagavā sāvatthiyam viharati jetavane anāthapiṇḍi kassa ārāme athakho aññatarā devatā abhikkantāya rattiyā abhikkanta vaṇṇā kevala kappam jetavanam obhāsetvā yena bhagavā tenupasaṅkami upasaṅkamtvā bhagavantam abhivādetvā ekamantaṃ atthāsi. Ekamantaṃ ʃhitā kho sā devatā bhagavantam gāthāya ajjhabhāsi

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Buddha was dwelling at Anathapindika's monastery, in Jeta's Grove, near Savatthi. Now when the night was far spent, a certain deity whose surpassing splendour illuminated the entire Jeta Grove, came to the presence of the Buddha and, drawing near, respectfully saluted him and stood at one side. Standing thus, he addressed the Buddha in verse:

***Bahū devā manussā ca maṅgalāni acintayum
ākankhamānā sotthānaṃ brūhi maṅgalamuttamaṃ***

"Many deities and men, have pondered on blessings,
yearning after good. Pray, tell me the greatest blessing!"

[The Buddha:]

[Stanza No. One]

***asevanā ca bālānaṃ paṇḍitānañca sevanā
pūjā ca pūjanīyānaṃ etaṃ maṅgalamuttamaṃ***

"Not to associate with the fool (1), but to associate with the
wise (2); and to honour those who are worthy of honour (3)
— this is the greatest blessing.

[Stanza No. Two]

***padirūpa desavāso ca pubbe ca katapuññatā
attasammāpaṇidhi ca etaṃ maṅgalamuttamaṃ***

To reside in a suitable locality (4), to have done preparation
(meritorious actions) in the past (5) and to set oneself in the
right course (6) — this is the greatest blessing.

[Stanza No. Three]

***bāhusaccañca sippañ ca vinayo ca susikkhito
subhāsītā ca yā vācā etaṃ maṅgalamuttamaṃ***

To have general knowledge (no. 7), knowledge of arts,
science and vocations (no. 8), discipline and manners
(no.9), and the art of truthful and pleasant speech (10)—
this is the greatest blessing.

[Stanza No. Four]

mātāpitu upatthānaṃ puttadārassa saṅgaho
anākulā ca kammantā etaṃ maṅgalamuttamaṃ

To support mother and father (11), to cherish wife and children (12), and to be engaged in unconflicting (peaceful occupation) (13)— this is the greatest blessing.

[Stanza No. Five]

dānañ ca dhammacariyā ca ñātakānañ ca saṅgaho
anāvajjāni kammāni etaṃ maṅgalamuttamaṃ

Sharing (14), to be righteous in conduct (15), to help one's relatives (16), and to be blameless in action (17) — this is the greatest blessing.

[Stanza No. Six]

āratī viratī pāpā majja pānā ca saṃyamo
appamādo ca dhammesu etaṃ maṅgalamuttamaṃ

To loathe evil (18) and abstain from it (19), to refrain from intoxicants (20), and to be mindful in the dhammas (21) — this is the greatest blessing.

[Stanza No. Seven]

gāravo ca nivāto ca santuṭṭhī ca kataññitā
kālena dhammassavanaṃ etaṃ maṅgalamuttamaṃ

Respect (22), humility (23), contentment (24) and gratitude (25) ; and to listen to the dhamma on due occasions (26) — this is the greatest blessing.

[Stanza No. Eight]

khantī ca sovacassatā samañānañ ca dassanaṃ
kālena dhammasākacchā etaṃ maṅgalamuttamaṃ

To be patient (27) and receptive to advice (28), to associate with monks (29) and to have dhamma discussions on due occasions (30) — this is the greatest blessing.

[Stanza No. Nine]

*tapo ca brahmacariyañ ca ariyasaccāna dassanaṃ
nibbānasacchikiriya ca etaṃ maṅgalamuttamaṃ*

Self-restraint (31), holy practice (32), the seeing of the Noble Truths (33) and the realisation of nibbana (34) — this is the greatest blessing.

[Stanza No. Ten]

*phuṭṭhassa lokadhammehi cittaṃ yassa na kampati
asokaṃ virajaṃ khemaṃ etaṃ maṅgalamuttamaṃ*

The mind unshaken by the whims of fortune (35), carefree (36), stainless (37) and fearless (secure) (38) — this is the greatest blessing.

[Stanza No. Eleven]

*etādisāni katvāna sabbattha-maparājitā sabbattha sotthiṃ
gacchanti taṃ tesam maṅgalamuttamaṃ ti*

Having achieved these blessings, they are everywhere undefeated, in happiness established. These are the greatest blessings.

Chapter I

Introduction

The concept of blessing in Buddhism is different from that of many other religions. For example, in the Abrahamic religions, i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the concept involves asking for blessings from God, the creator; for them, blessings are necessarily associated with God and come from God. To be blessed means to receive a favour from God. In many of them, blessings are conveyed by a clergy who acts as a mediator. Hinduism also has ceremonies such as *puja* in which a devotee makes an offering of a material substance such as flowers, fruits or sweets to a deity and in return receives blessings from the deity. What is similar amongst those beliefs is that they believe that God is the source of all blessings. The opposite of blessing in its formal sense is understood to be a curse.

Buddhism believes in no God and therefore the concept of blessing is necessarily different. According to Buddhism, blessing does not come from anywhere but one's own wholesome efforts. The *Mangala-sutta* illustrates this fundamental point. Buddhist monks are not mediators. When they recite some discourses of the Buddha, such as the *Mangala-sutta*, on special occasions, for instance, a birthday, it is to help devotees focus their minds on how to create blessing for themselves, which is believed to subsequently bring protection (*paritta*) to the devotee.

How Did the Buddha Deal with the Question of Blessing?

In his important work *Life's Highest Blessings* Dr. R. L. Soni says that

“In Indian society in the Buddha's time (as in our own), people were addicted to superstitions about omens of good and bad luck besides being divided on their nature and implications”

On this Bhikkhu Khantipalo also comments that:

“In all countries and times there have been superstitions about these things and this is as true of western technological societies (the increasing dependence upon astrology), as it was of India in the Buddha's days.

In Australia in the show biz world, to whistle in the dressing room before putting on an act will bring misfortune which can only be averted by leaving the room, turning round three times and swearing! Another generally unlucky sign is for a black cat to

cross one's path. In Nepal, though, they consider an overturned shoe to be very inauspicious when one is setting out on a journey. And sailors the world over are well known for their attachment to good signs and dread of ill omens. Less specialized examples can be found in crossing one's fingers and in "touching wood" against disaster, and in the practice of throwing salt over the left shoulder (into the Devil's eye) whenever salt is spilt."

The number 13 is considered to be an unlucky number by many. Some people try to avoid bad luck by keeping away from anything numbered thirteen; hence the hotels and tall buildings avoid labelling the thirteenth floor as thirteenth. Some say that this urban legend is traced to Jesus Christ's last supper when there were thirteen people around the table, counting Christ plus his twelve apostles.

I am told that in Sweden if you see a pregnant woman, that is considered auspicious, meaning a good omen and blessing. However, the Tai people say just the opposite; they consider seeing a pregnant woman to be a bad omen for the task at hand. Some of them believe that seeing a pregnant woman ruins the sacredness or an opportunity for success of the work they do. My mother told me in 1986 in Laikha, my hometown, that when she was pregnant with me, whenever she went into the market, people would behave as if it was inauspicious and turn their backs on her. We all know that the Buddha asked one of his disciples, Angulimala, to go and bless a pregnant woman, contradictory to the belief amongst the Tai people. The

Buddha himself also went to bless the new-born baby who would later become Arahat Sivali.

The introduction to the *Mangala-sutta*, inserted after the Buddha passed away, says that for twelve years people debated intensely what blessings were. On seeing a sign (*dittha*) or hearing a sound (*suta*), the people interpreted them either as a lucky omen (*mangala*) or bad omen (*amangala*). People were preoccupied with what we may call phobia today and were gripped with fear and anxiety.

So, as Dr. Soni points out:

“It was natural that someone should inquire the views of the Great Teacher, the Buddha, on the subject.” “His words of wisdom had already been an immense success not only with ordinary people but also with those in positions of power and those with great learning.” “The views expressed by the Lord in the *Mangala-sutta* are a masterpiece of practical wisdom.”

Without directly answering what are the good and bad signs to be regarded as blessings (*mangala*), the Buddha participated in the debate through this *Mangala-sutta*. The teaching from this *sutta* is well known, not just to monastic students, but also to the public in all Theravada countries. In Sri Lanka every Buddhist child learns it by heart at school. In Thailand a learned monk from Chiang Mai even wrote a Pali commentary on the *Mangala-sutta* in the sixteenth century; this text, called *Mangalattadipani*, is so important to Pali students in Thailand today that it forms part of their formal curriculum. It is the only Pali text composed in Thailand which has spread to Myanmar, where there seems to have been an equally voluminous

text, also with the same name, *Mangalattha-dipani*, but composed in Burmese, by Mangalabongyaw Sayadaw at the court of Amarapura in the mid nineteenth century. In Myanmar the *Mangala-sutta* has formed a part of the syllabus for centuries in monastic training. In short, the popularity of the *Mangala-sutta* has long been established in these countries.

Self-Reliance and Self-Dependence

The principle of the whole teaching of the Buddha is self-reliance. We have to depend on ourselves to make good of our life and the opportunity it presents. Accordingly the idea of blessings with a role for a mediator is ruled out in Buddhism. This underlines the difference between the concept of blessings in Buddhism and other beliefs. We should approach the subject of blessings, first and foremost, with the attitude of self-dependence. Then, the mind will not be confused or disturbed by superstition.

In other words, the Buddha's main point in the *Mangala-sutta* is that blessings come from our own efforts and those efforts have many dimensions: educational, social, economic, psychological and spiritual. The *Mangala-sutta* describes the kinds of effort we should make in order to be blessed in life and in the very here and now. They range from good friends to favourable locations, good education to proper job training, improving personality to engaging in the philosophy of life and liberation from suffering. Here I cannot do better except to quote Dr. Soni again. He says:

“The Discourse is a charter in outline of family responsibility, social obligations, moral purification and spiritual cultivation. Within the compass of a dozen stanzas are

included profound counsels and golden rules, which admirably point out the way life's journey should go if it is to reach the haven of perfect harmony, love, peace and security. Beginning with emphasis on the need for a suitable environment, the Discourse lays appropriate stress on personal discipline, righteous conduct and adequate discharge of duties to one's near and dear ones. Then the higher virtues of humility, gratitude, patience and chastity are introduced. And step by step are reached serenity, perception of truth and Enlightenment.”

How Many Blessings?

Based on a stanza in the introduction which, as already said, was added to the original text after the Buddha, we say there are thirty eight "*mangalas*". However, the Buddha himself did not put on a number how many *mangalas* or blessings there are. Instead, he just referred to the blessings in the last stanza as “such as those blessings (*etadisani*)”. So, theoretically and practically there can be and are more blessings for us. However, for the sake of convenience, let us say there are 38 kinds of blessings and we will conduct our discussion on this basis.

“Synthesis of the *Mangala-sutta*

Let us summarise the wisdom of some of the scholars who have deeply studied this important *sutta*. A learned Mahathera from Thailand, Phra Dhammavisuddhikavi (Phramaha Phichit Thitavanno, Pali, IX & MA), summarizes all the 38 blessings into three stages: (1)

building a life of blessing (blessing nos. 1 – 18); (2) development of the mind (19-30); and (3) practising with a view to end suffering (31-38). Similarly, Sermsak Nariwong, a Thai scholar from Britain, groups the 38 blessings into three: creating value in life (nos. 1 -17); modifying one's own mind (18-30) and the direct to nirvana (31-38). Thai scholars differ from others in that they count support for wife and children (*putta-darassa sangaho*) separately as two and consider to abhor and to avoid evil (*arati virati papa*) together as one.

In 20th century Myanmar there was a scholar by the name of, Mingalar U Ba Than, who did so much to popularize the *Mangala-sutta* among the populace in his country, to the extent that the word *mangala* (pronounced as *mingalar* in Burmese) came to be his honorific prefix. He says that the whole 38 blessings can be generally categorised into the three Buddhist trainings, namely moral ethics (*sila*), meditation (*samadhi*) and wisdom (*pannya*). The blessing Nos. 1 - 21 belong to moral ethics, Nos. 22 – 30 to meditation while the last eight to wisdom. He seems to take not only moral ethics (*sila*), consisting of right action, right speech and right livelihood, but meditation and wisdom in their broad spectrum. Mingalar U Ba Than essentially reads the whole *sutta* through the scheme of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Dr. R. L. Soni also synthesizes it into three phases but from a different angle: with a simile of building a house, residing in it and then leaving it for a temple. The blessings Nos. 1 – 10 are considered as preparation for both worldly and spiritual success, that is to build a house; 11- 26 as wayfaring the world, which is likened to residing in the house that has been built; and 27 – 38 as spiritual growth, which is about leaving home to a temple. Soni expands his

analysis by saying that the first phase, preparation stage, which is like building a house, covers (a) “material for the foundation of life's building” (Nos. 1-5), (b) “the necessary plan for the construction work” (No. 6), and (c) “completing the structure of a house”, compared to life here.

The second stage, wayfaring of the world, which is comparable to occupying the house which has been constructed, covers (a) “proper discharge of domestic duties and social obligations (Nos. 11-17); (b) “a matter of personal conduct” (Nos. 18-20); (c) “conserving the progress hitherto achieved through the practice of all the twenty *mangalas* mentioned so far” (No. 21); and, (d) “cultivation of the higher virtues, which are absolutely essential for venturing into the cultivation of the Dhamma's highest aspects” (Nos. 22-26).”

The third and last phase is like moving from a house to a temple, to follow a religious way of life and it is called the stage of spiritual growth. (A) the blessings (Nos. 27-28) “lead to ability in the practice of the spiritual life” and (b) the next two (Nos. 29-30) put one in “contact with those leading a religious life”, (c) while the next four (31-34) “open the gates of realization of the Dhamma”. “And, (e) the last four *mangalas* (35-38) constitute the Great Awakening which transforms the temple into a lighthouse for humanity.”

T.Y. Lee (www.justbegood.net) in his *A Life of Blessings*, however, categorises the 38 blessings into five: essential blessings (Nos. 1-6); supporting blessings (Nos. 7-13); personal blessings (Nos. 14-21); higher blessings (Nos. 22-30) and supreme blessings (Nos. 31-38). Lee sees the *sutta*

as “a very detailed guide for individual development” and a gradual path. Lee further comments that the *sutta*

“sets out a logical and well structured sequence such that each group of blessings helps to lay the foundations for further blessings. It includes the most basic blessings, or qualities, each person should have and leads gradually to the higher qualities required to attain the ultimate blessing of nibbana.”

I am entirely in agreement with the above scholars that the *Mangala-sutta* is logically structured as a gradual path. However, I wish to emphasize one thing here that the earlier qualities or blessings are retained and indeed made advanced further through the qualities or blessings that one continues to acquire. Let me explain this; the blessings Nos. 1 and 2 are taught when one is young and but these blessings should be definitely retained throughout one’s life. The Buddha is said, therefore, to have told Venerable Ananda, his personal secretary, that a good friend is crucial to make progress in the practice of Noble Eightfold Path.

And those first two qualities become more and more advanced as one starts acquiring other blessings. For instance, when one has learnt to be grateful (no. 25) and patient (no. 27) and is engaged in a dhamma dialogue (no. 30), the quality of the first two blessings increases and one’s selection of friends and company will be more conducive to peace and realization of the four truths. Indeed, the first two blessings will only remain strong when further blessings such as abstaining from evil (nos. 18 – 19) and humbleness (no. 23) come into existence to strengthen them. So, the 38 blessings are interdependent and complementary. It is just like the symbolic wheel of

the Noble Eightfold Path, the eight spokes depend on each other, so are the 38 blessings. It is precisely for this reason that I wish to reflect on the *Mangala-sutta* from the viewpoint of the Satipatthana meditation practice, drawing some of the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path to highlight this important *sutta*.

Before that, I wish to say briefly about the way I think we can also synthesize the 38 blessings. The first two stanzas may start as home education providing foundation of life and are valid throughout our life. Following the Cakka-sutta of the Anguttara-nikaya, the famous Thai scholar-monk, P.A. Payutto, groups these two stanzas into four blessings, instead of six, and calls them the foundation for a successful life. It may be worth quoting the Cakka-sutta directly here:

"If you dwell in a civilized place,
make friends with the noble ones,
rightly direct yourself,
and have made merit in the past,
there will roll to you
crops, wealth, status, honour, & happiness."
(Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation)

Stanza numbers 3 roughly deals with formal education as we understand it today. Both of the stanza numbers 4 and 5 teach social obligations and social ethics. Stanza number 6 deals with moral ethics and self-control. The next two stanzas, 7 and 8, discuss about psychological development that has much bearing on one's success or failure in both social and religious life, leading to number 9 which offers the intensive practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. The last stanza is the benefits of the previous blessings.

In other words, my own understanding of the *Mangala-sutta* is summarized in the diagram on **page 59**. It is an integral approach with all the first 34 factors of blessings being interdependent. This sutta is a blue print for a fruitful and worthy life; all the teachings of the Buddha found in other *suttas* can be reflected in the context of this very important *sutta*.

Chapter II

Four Foundations of a Successful Life

The First Three Blessings: Learning About Human Environment

The first three blessings, contained in one stanza, discuss the importance of the human environment. Friendship in its widest sense means the human environment you are in: parents, siblings, relatives, schoolmates, classmates, teachers, spouse, physician, employer and employees and many more — all these people are your environment. In the *Kosala-Samyutta*, the Buddha says that at home mother is a friend. The Buddha who often refers to himself as a teacher includes also himself in the list of friends. The environment that surrounds you is conditioning you. They influence the way you think and act.

According to the Buddha the aim of having a friend is to get help in leading a righteous and prosperous life. The highest purpose of having a friend in life is to obtain assistance in the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. Regarding the vitality of a good friend for a successful practice of the path to liberated happiness, we are told that one day King Pasenadi of Kosala Kingdom came to report to the Buddha about the wonderful conversation between him and Venerable Ananda. The King said that on one occasion Venerable Ananda told him that a good friend is worth as much as half of a holy life. That prompted the Buddha to correct Venerable Ananda's remark. The Buddha said a good friendship is worth more than half the holy life; indeed, it is worth the whole of the holy life itself, because a good friend helps you develop the Noble Eightfold Path as a way of life. In plain terms, this means when you have a good friend you have already secured all the purposes of spiritual achievement. However, if you have fallen into bad friendship, you have lost all of it. This is because a bad friend cannot distinguish what is beneficial from what is harmful.

This is why the Buddha emphasizes the need:

- to carefully choose your own associates:
- not to associate with the fool but only with the wise and
- to appreciate and express that appreciation of good friend.

The learning of these values has to start at home when we are young; we need to be taught and given a role model. Parents, for instance, have to teach their kids how to say thank you when receiving

something from others. Here again, having wise and caring parents as friend helps us make the best start in life. I should point out here that some scholars interpret the first three blessings as something to be taught to and practised by children only. But it will become clear in the course of our discussion that this is not the case. We need friends beyond the playground. Friendship matters all the way in our life, not just for children and home education but in all of our social and economic progress as well as our achieving enlightenment.

Outside the home environment, a good friend is important and it is equally important to be able to recognize the characteristics of a good friend. The famous *Singalovada-sutta* helps us find a good companion and avoid a bad one.

A good friend is one:

- who protects you and your interests;
- who encourages you to do good things;
- who never abandons you when you are in trouble;
- who asks you to refrain from doing bad things;
- who does not gossip about you;
- who appreciates your good qualities and achievements; and
- who acknowledges his own weak points; and who is not boastful.

On the other hand, with regard to the last point, the Dhammapada adds that a bad friend is one:

- who boasts to you about something he has done;
- who seeks undue fame;

- who wants every work, great or small, to be referred to him, and
- who constantly desires more and consequently
Furthermore, the *Anguttara-nikaya* also says that a bad friend is a person:
 - who wants to make known the weak points of other people even when he is not asked, but is reticent about the reputation and achievement of other people even when he is asked; and
 - who talks of his quality and praises himself even when not asked but never opens his mouth about his weakness.

The *Singalovada-sutta* continues to elaborate that a bad friend is:

- someone who is selfish; who talks much about the past and future, not the present;
- who persuades you to gossip;
- who ruins you with intoxicants and drugs;
- who encourages you to associate with immoral acts, and
- who says good things about you in your presence and criticises you in your absence.

With regard to the last point, the *Kalyanamitta-sutta* of the *Samyutta-nikaya* adds that a good friend is the one who points out our faults directly to us.

In essence, a person who acts to the contrary to what has been described as characteristics of a bad friend, is a good friend.

A good friend is open to criticism. The best example is found in the *Pavarana-sutta* of the *Samyutta-nikaya*: the Buddha had a meeting every fortnight in which he asked the assembly of monks to point out his faults, if any. When everyone was silent, Venerable Sariputta, one of his two chief disciples, then asked any member of the assembly to criticise him. That was how other monks became motivated to follow their model. The Buddha founded the monastic order to operate in that open and caring way. It is not at all easy to be open like that. We feel easily offended when criticised. Here a person who is not receptive towards other people's opinions is compared with a spoon which does not experience the taste of a curry although a curry is never cooked without being given a stir with a spoon. He is not a good friend. Like the spoon, he is indifferent to the consequences of his own action. A person who is flexible and receptive is like the tongue that experiences the taste of a curry. He learns from his mistakes and becomes mature. That is why a fool who acknowledges that he is foolish is indeed a wise man.

Someone who has a vision for both the short and long term welfare is a wise man. If a country has such a man as a ruler, they have the best of friends, according to the *Kalyanamitta-sutta* of the *Samyutta-nikaya*. Two best friends, belonging to different spheres, are recorded in the *Puggala-vagga* of the *Anguttara-nikaya*: it states that Buddha and a universal monarch (*cakkavatti/cakravarti*) are the two that people may be fortunate enough to have as best friends. They both have short and long term advice for the people. The Buddha represents moral and spiritual strength while the *cakkavatti*, who is considered an ideal Buddhist ruler with true concerns for the social and spiritual progress of his subjects, symbolises a peaceful and

prosperous political environment. They bring happiness, peace and progress to many. Just imagine what happens in any country where there is no peace but political turmoil, people can neither feel secure, nor make progress in social and spiritual development.

The *Mitta-sutta* of the *Anguttara-nikaya* also advises us to observe some characteristics of a worthy friend; he is someone:

- who gives you something people do not easily give away;
- who does something for you that people feel reluctant to do;
- who is patient with you;
- who enlightens you about your hidden nature;
- who protects your secret;
- who never abandons you in times of difficulty, and
- who does not look down on you when you are down.

The opposite is the characteristic of a bad friend.

Another characteristic of a good friend or person that the Buddha often stressed on is being grateful to parents, teachers and those who have helped you. Actually,

- to be generous,
- to be able to let go and
- to look after parents have been mentioned as the specific characters of a good man.

A good friend is important even for a recluse. The *Goliyani-sutta* in the *Majjhima-nikaya* records how one of

the two chief disciples of the Buddha, Venerable Sariputta, advised forest-dwelling bhikkhus to find a good friend, as well as to be a good friend themselves. This prompted his friend and the other chief disciple, Venerable Moggallana, to enquire if a good friend is needed only for the forest-dwellers. Venerable Sariputta replied that if a forest-dwelling bhikkhu, when he is amongst the Sangha, should develop the will to listen and be a good friend himself, it is even more important for a city-dwelling bhikkhu to do so. The Buddha often commended Venerable Sariputta and Venerable Moggallana, his two chief disciples, as good friends to the bhikkhus.

A good friend is not always popular and loved. Venerable Channa, the former charioteer to Prince Siddhattha, often rebuked monks who offered him constructive criticism for his behaviours. He did not care about others, whether they were chief disciples, senior disciples or an arahat, because he had known the Buddha since before the Master renounced his princely life; he was arrogant because of his closeness to the Master. However, to be a good friend, the monks were asked by the Buddha to go on having the same concern for him and advising him on what is right and what is wrong, even though he might not appreciate their concerns. We all know that the Buddha just before his *Mahaparinibbana* forbade anyone from speaking to or advising Channa, as a noble punishment handed to someone who was disobedient. Channa Thera soon realized the need and value of good friends and with that, he became one of the liberated.

Besides the need for having a good friend, there is a need for us to be good friends towards others. The *Kalyanamitta-sutta* of the *Samyutta-nikaya* stresses that

each and every one should be determined that they will try to be good friends themselves. All the teachings of the Buddha are but to train people to become a good friend to one another. And, good friendship manifests in many forms such as a good parent, good neighbour, good teacher, good citizen and so on.

In the end, one has to acquire a good friend by doing wholesome and moral things, meaning one's own pure heart and action are one's own best friend. The *Kosala-samyutta* states that the merits one acquires by fulfilling one's duty as a spouse, as a member of society will be the good friend that helps one till the next life. Our true friend is our own karma, which never leaves us. So, if we have accumulated some bad karma, that means we take a bad friend with us wherever we go. At the same time, to possess good karma means to always have our best friend looking after us all the time.

Learning to distinguish between good and bad friends means one knows how to appreciate those worthy of honour and to reprimand those who deserve it. This is the **third** blessing. Honouring people who deserve honour includes paying homage to parents, teachers and dhamma practitioners; giving due recognition to people for their work and ability; acknowledging people's contributions, and giving people the responsibility their ability demands in all spheres of social groupings. In other words, it also means not to give a fool a responsible position in society. It is only possible to receive this blessing if we have already learnt and received the **first two** blessings.

In some cultures, this blessing is misunderstood as indicating that students must honour their teachers, children

their parents, the people their government, and the ruled their ruler. While such a practice is correct and praiseworthy, it is by no means a one-way system. Teachers should also honour their students, parents their children, and the ruler his subjects. Honour should be given to anyone worthy of it in an appropriate way. To me, the Buddha is very clear that this blessing is a two-way system because he specifies no subject and object of honour in terms of persons i.e. who should honour whom. In brief, honour is earned through maturity of years (*vayavuddhi*) and capability (*gunavuddhi*).

In brief, **the first three** kinds of blessings discuss about human upbringing and life long surroundings, from personal friends to the leadership of a community, a nation as well as an international community.

Four Foundations of a Successful Life

The next stanza covering three more blessings, nos 4-6, adds three more factors to complete the four foundations for a flourishing life of a human being.

Blessing number four is about the value of another environment: *a suitable location*. If the right person is in the right location, he will progress and achieve his full potentials. An unsuitable location is an obstacle. This is true for all human endeavours, be it education, health, family and business matters or dhamma practice.

The fifth blessing is about the need to invest time. One who has invested five years of his life in something obviously has an advantage over a new comer. Often, this blessing is interpreted by many teachers as having some good karma

in the past lives. While that is undeniable, “past” (*pubbe*) can also mean the past in this very life. If we confine the past only to past lives but not the past of the present life, we will miss out a lot. I am now 47 and whatever I have done or made an effort to achieve so far, all these can be considered as past karma or time investment. I have spent some years accumulating something and all that adds to my “previous merits”. When you have accomplished one moment of mindful breathing, you are indeed laying down a foundation for the next mindful moment. An effort in one meditation session serves as a good foundation for the next. There is a great deal of difference between those who have a good foundation and those who haven't.

For somebody to do well in secondary school, he has to spend time learning at the primary school. From a secondary school, he can then go on to university. Thus building on things learnt in the past. The time and energy invested becomes a good foundation for the next steps in life. This foundation can be interpreted as *parami*.

Here what do we actually mean by merit? Merit means something uplifting and growing. For example, when you are doing a good thing with the right attitude at the right time such as an act of generosity or purifying one's action and speech "*sila*", one feels uplifted spiritually and grows in dhammic qualities. The opposite of uplifting is pressing or depressing, which means being unhappy. There may be things that uplift you socially as well as spiritually in the long term and this is what we call merit. Merit is necessarily accumulated through various types of investment and one of them is what we are talking about here, and that is *time*.

Blessing is not only about the right environment, the right place and time investment but it is also about setting

oneself on the right course at the present moment. Otherwise, the previous blessings may be unable to fulfil their true potentials. So, the **sixth** blessing is about individuals putting themselves on the right course and working hard.

In the *Anguttara-nikaya*, the Buddha describes the four necessities as four engines (*cakka*) of life. They are good friends, suitable locations, a good foundation and the individual's right effort. We use the analogy of a plane with four engines. If one engine is not working you will still be safe because the remaining three are working. But if the plane has only one engine and that engine fails, then it is the end of it. If you have two engines, then it is better than one. But if you have four it is much safer as well as faster in reaching your destination. So, a life that travels on four engines makes the most progress.

Chapter III

Blessings in the Worldly Affairs

Four Aspects of Formal Education

According to the Buddhist philosophy of blessings, the four foundations of life are to be strengthened with four aspects of formal educational training as described in stanza number three (*bahusaccanca* etc). They are about acquiring general knowledge (no. 7), specialized knowledge of arts, science and vocations (no. 8), discipline and manners (no.9), and the art of truthful and pleasant speech (no. 10). General knowledge is invaluable for survival as well as communication and thinking skills. This philosophy of education informs us that textbook-based education is not complete but forms only one aspect of true education. The skills to acquire all these four aspects should be taught in the school.

In the world today, most of the formal education syllabuses before the university level are aimed at offering a means to acquire general knowledge, while higher education is about giving specific skills. In between at the university entrance level, students are prepared for a good essay writing, basic independent thinking and a skill to research for relevant information. In the olden days, in the Theravada countries the popular study of the Jataka stories was partly meant for this. It is clear in this stanza that Buddhism encourages not only the study of Buddhist scriptures but also the subjects of arts, sciences and vocation. Apart from book learning, education should stress and instil discipline and manners in students. The art of speaking is considered very important and as part of education. In day to day human encounter, what one says is usually viewed as how one thinks. What one says and how one says it determines in some measure whether one wins or loses friends, which is why the art of pleasant speech (*suvaco*) is recommended as part of metta meditation. The *Singalovada-sutta* also states that courteous speech is part of one's duties towards friends and associates. In brief, the *Mangala-sutta* stresses the importance of acquiring physical, verbal and mental skills as part of education. The *sutta* also conveys the message that education is not and should not be confined to the classroom.

Social Commitments

Charity begins at home

Following the blessings related to education are the blessings related to social commitments, numbers 11, 12, 13. They include looking after parents (no. 11), caring for one's spouse and children (12), and having a peaceful

occupation (13). The Buddha regards the social commitments as a part of dhamma practice because a loving and caring family environment is conducive to moral and spiritual progress.

With regard to cultivating gratitude towards parents, the Buddha says that providing material and spiritual support are equally important. This can be seen in the statement below:

Even if one should carry about one's mother on one shoulder and one's father on the other, and so doing should live a hundred years ... moreover, if one should set them up as supreme rulers, having absolute rule over the wide earth abounding in the seven treasures – not even by this could one repay one's parents. And why, bhikkhus? Parents do a lot for their children: they bring them up, provide them with food, and introduce them to the world.

Yes, bhikkhus, whoever encourages their faithless parents, and settles and establishes them in faith; or whoever encourages their immoral parents, and settles and establishes them in morality; or whoever encourages their stingy parents, and settles and establishes them in wisdom – such a person, in this way repays, more than repays, what is due their parents. (*Anguttara-nikaya*, II:32)

This is all about being grateful, which is another blessing (no. 25) in itself. Particularly, being grateful to parents is a very positive attitude and strength. It is about deliberately putting an effort in remembering the gratitude due to our parents. Today, there is a negative trend in some parts of the world where some children start losing this constructive

response to life and become selfish; they hardly know how much parents have to sacrifice and give up for them; they even blame their parents for everything that goes wrong in their lives. The *Singalovada-sutta* adds that being grateful to parents means:

- to actually support them with materials;
- help them fulfil their duties;
- keep the family tradition;
- conduct oneself well towards the parents, and
- to be worthy of their inheritance.
- One should also continue to honour parents according to one's religious belief even after they have died.

So, it is important for children to learn this concept as well as to develop positive qualities of gratitude and appreciation for what their parents have done for them. Otherwise, they may grow up and grow old being self-centred, thinking only of themselves, believing that the world owes them everything but they owe nothing to anyone.

By keeping this blessing about looking after parents next to the education programs, perhaps the Buddha had in mind how and when this attitude should be taught in life. The teaching about these social commitments might usefully form part of formal advanced education.

Gratitude is not meant to be a one-way practice i.e. from children towards parents. Parents should themselves fulfil their duty of looking after their offspring and this should also be coupled with parents living in a mutually caring relationship so as to create a well-rounded peaceful family for the children. The *Singalovada-sutta* says that one's duty

towards one's offspring does not end when they reach the age of 18 or 20. And certainly, it is not confined to meeting material needs only. As a parent, one should always be there for the children offering them relevant support, both material and moral, at different stages of their life. From my understanding of the *Mangala-sutta* and other *suttas*, children should be supported by their parents for their

- emotional development;
- ethical development;
- spiritual development;
- education;
- professional training and even marriage.
- And, last but not least, children should inherit whatever their parents may leave behind.

As for the spouse, the text as it is emphasizes the responsibility of the head of the family and this has to be understood in the Indian cultural context of the time. However, the overall message is that if the husband is the breadwinner and head of the family he should look after his wife well and at the same time the couple should look after each other with values such as

- courtesy,
- respect,
- fidelity,
- listening to each other in decision making and
- sharing wealth,
- exchanging gifts, which is evident in the *Singalovada-sutta*. One spouse should not be dominant over the other; instead each should be recognised for his or her role in maintaining the family.

In brief, the blessing numbers 11 and 12 are about caring for one's immediate family. A stable, loving and caring family is a blessing and is something that the individuals involved can create. The husband needs to be sympathetic towards his wife, understanding and identifying with her physical, emotional and mental states. The *Samyutta-nikaya* (S.I.215) also says that the couple should strive for sharing in the four kinds of goodness: (a) *truthfulness* in thoughts, speech and deeds; (b) *understanding* in terms of exercising restraint, helping each other to overcome faults, resolving differences, adapting to each other and improving them; (c) *patience*, not reacting impulsively to each other's affronts, enduring difficulties and overcoming obstacles together and (d) *sacrifice*, giving up personal comfort for the sake of one's partner and being generous to the relatives of one's partner. (Payutto: 63).

How you earn a living matters

For one's family to be peaceful, one needs to engage in peaceful and un-conflicting occupation. This is to stress that the nature of the occupation one is engaged in has an impact on one's family life. I have not really come across a satisfactory definition of an unconfused occupation (*anakula ca kammanta*). That said, the Pali commentary emphasizes the way in which one carries out a job that leads to conflict and confusion, for example:

- lack of punctuality or lack of understanding of proper times and length of time,
- Lack of appropriateness
- Laziness, lack of interest in the work at hand and lack of effort, and
- Lack of measure for maintenance or safeguarding of the work.

The Venerable Bhikkhu Pesala, a learned English bhikkhu, explains it as the way of being mindful in one's action. Sermsak Nariwong, a Thai scholar from Britain, thinks of it in terms of the work accomplished with the four bases of power (*iddhipada*). Others seem to agree that despite the word *kammanta*, often translated as occupation or livelihood, it is not the type of occupation that can confuse you but the way you undertake it. For the type of wrong occupation is dealt with later in blessing number 17.

Here, I would think that conflict of interest is one such that causes confusion. For example, consider the construction of a controversial dam, a road, airport or a pipeline, which can do a lot of damage to the environment and the people in that area. The government often use power to quell opposition by sending in troops. I think such work would be regarded by the Buddha as creating confusion and suffering. In other words, it may be beneficial commercially to the businessmen but harmful to the people living in the area. It may also potentially be unethical, for example, in that in some places it involves forced labour. When the motive is very selfish, the action may lead to confusion and harm. When one has this kind of occupation, life becomes complicated. Even if one does not break the law, if one's action harms oneself, others and the environments, then that work or occupation can create confusion for oneself and others. Not to mention about occupation for a lay person, even when a monk builds his own hut to live, he needs to make sure that he creates no confusion and harm. He must not disturb pathways nor human and natural environment; the Buddha indeed laid down a rule that a monk has to consult and obtain the consent of the other members of the monastic community before constructing his hut. This is one of the thirteen rules that require the community participation (*sanghadisesa*) in

solving it, because the Buddha sees that harmony is created when there is no confusion and harm done to oneself and others. Dr. Soni sums up nicely when he says: “Not only should one's work bring no conflicts but one should avoid disturbing others”.

Social obligations towards the wider society we live in

Social obligations also include four further actions described in stanza number five. The first is sharing (blessing no. 14), a very important practice for social and spiritual development; the more we share, the more we develop harmonious living. If the blessing numbers 11 (supporting parents) and 12 (supporting wife and children) encourage sharing within the immediate family, and number 16 (supporting relatives) is about sharing with the extended family, then this blessing number 14 (generosity) is about sharing with wider society starting from the poor, the old and infirm, religious practitioners who live on donation and society at large. Paying tax can be considered part of this social and moral contribution.

Indeed, all the practices of blessing related to sharing are necessarily considered part and parcel of moral development in the *Mangala-sutta*. Unless two people share, they cannot live well together. Unless people share, as human beings we can not live together in a society in harmony. My parents would not be able to build a school just for me. Nor would they build a hospital just to provide me with treatment when I get ill. Whenever I want to travel, I need a good motorway. It would be unreasonable to expect my parents or grandparents to build such a big motorway for me so that I can travel by car. We have to learn how to share with each other. One dollar is nothing to you and me but it means a lot to someone who does not

have anything; it means survival to those homeless people. It is the cost of stationery for a whole year for a child in some of the villages in my hometown, Laikha. When we share with them, then they have something to eat and survive with, and they suffer fewer problems. They feel a sense of being cared for by somebody. They can also enjoy peace. Only when your neighbours and friends have peace do you have peace. Everything is related in this world according to the teaching of the co-dependence (*Paticcasamuppada*). I cannot live alone. You cannot live alone. We need people who have been trained as doctors, nurses, engineers, architects, bricklayers, builders, drivers, farmers and pilots and many more professionals so that we can live each day.

We need good friends, neighbours and constructively participating citizens; so we have to learn how to live in harmony with each other. The best way to do that is to learn how to share. So, taxes are part of sharing; one should rejoice and think of its meritorious nature when paying tax, instead of moaning. One has to pay tax anyway and why not get some merit out of it through some skilful thoughts (*yoniso manasikara*). With those taxes, the government build hospitals, schools, roads, motorways, community centres, parks and all other essential things for the people. Without having to build a park ourselves, we can just go and enjoy the park. Why? Because everybody, not only this generation but through so many generations, has been sharing with each other. Sharing (*dana*) is the beginning and foundation of the Buddhist practices of perfection (*parami*). As Sermesak Nariwong says giving has two positive sides: to relieve the suffering or fulfil the needs of others and to improve one's own mind through letting go. (P. 101)

Good behaviour strengthens the power of a generous heart

The blessing of being a generous person has to be sustained through righteous living, which is blessing number 15. It is about righteous conduct in the sense of law abiding as well as in the sense of tuning one's conduct to the ethical foundations such as having consideration and respect towards society and the law of cause and effect (*kamma*). Such wholesome conduct and attitude help the generous acts to become more fruitful. The Venerable Nandavamsa, a Tai scholar-monk, and Dr. Soni interpret this blessing as the practice of the ten meritorious actions. Dr. Soni explains this blessing when he writes: "Living by the Dhamma means making efforts to maintain and increase one's practice of the ten wholesome paths of *kamma*". From the Buddhist philosophical point of view, we can say that it is about strengthening generosity (*dana*) with some moral conduct (*sila*) and understanding (*kammassakata-sammaditthi*). Without a belief in the law of *kamma*, one may not consider behaving righteously. Some of the righteous conduct will be given separately in stanza number six headed by *arati virati*.

Belonging to the same group of blessings on social obligation is the need to support relatives and friends; by sharing with and supporting them in anyway one can, one is establishing a secure physical environment, which is blessing number 16. (Psychological security comes much later.) Even the Buddha is said to have had as one of his three aims for enlightenment as helping his relatives and friends (*nyatatthacariya*); the other two being to liberate himself and to help the wider society. The relatives and friends are those who directly care about us and to whom we owe so much gratitude.

What you do matters

If stanza number **four** gives us a message that looking after the immediate family needs to be carried out in a way that is free from conflict (*anakula*), then stanza number **five** tells us that our contribution towards the society should also come from blameless pursuits, (*anavajjani*). Bhikkhu Pesala considers blameless action to mean right livelihood, which is part of the Noble Eightfold Path and says “knowledge and skills should enable one to earn a living without harming others”. The Most Venerable P. A. Payutto (Phra Bhramagunabhorn) of Thailand (p.104) widens its definition “to mean all kinds of good *kamma* through the three doors [bodily, verbal, and mental]. Sermsak Nariwong (Pp.114-9), however, emphasizes the importance of careful consideration, “mindfulness and clear comprehension” before undertaking any action. “Our actions may be accountable to blame in this world” in four ways:

- law and order
- tradition
- moral principles and
- dhamma.

Some actions may not be blameworthy in the eyes of the law but can be censured from the viewpoint of a tradition. Yet, while the example of cutting off a thief’s hands may be acceptable to some cultural tradition, it is clearly wrong for the viewpoint of the dhamma because it involves harm. A Burmese scholar, U Kyaw Htut, however, interprets blameless actions as “mainly associated with welfare and social activities, like building roads and bridges, giving free tuition to the poor and other social work during one’s spare

time". U Kyaw Htut associates *anakula kammanta* with ethics in terms of "proper means of livelihood" that demands "blameless action, which is uncomplicated with any wrong doing or demerit" (p. 38) and *anavajjani kammani* with welfare work or social service." T. Y. Lee agrees with this interpretation. (Pp. 64-5)

The difficulty in understanding the two seemingly similar blessings (*anakula ca kammanta* and *anavajjani kammani*) prompts Dr. Soni to remark:

The expressions "unconflicting types of work" [*anakula*] and "blameless actions" [*anavajjani*] are accepted as synonymous by some authors. They might be so at first glance but they differ in their emphasis. Thus, while the unconflicting types of work lay emphasis on the nature of the activities with which one is occupied, the expression "blameless actions" stresses the making of *kamma* which will not lead to obstacles and hindrances in the future. One could say that here the intention in the mind is stressed. The Pali commentary bears this out when under this blessing it suggests a number of actions which are blameless, such as keeping the eight precepts on the *uposatha* days, social services, planting gardens and groves (for public use), making bridges (again for the benefit of all). (P. 35)

While one may be puzzled by different interpretations by scholars mentioned here, we also benefit a lot from their

effort and wisdom because they help us understand more on this particular point of blameless action.

Now reading stanzas number four and five closely and carefully, it is clear that the Buddha does not want us to look after either our immediate family or the society at large using immoral earning. In other words, being generous alone is not enough to secure a blessing; one needs also to behave well and earn righteously. In Theravada Buddhist terms, *dana* and *sila* help each other to bring blessings to our lives. This point becomes clearer if we bear this point in mind and continue reading the next stanza.

Strengthening moral power in oneself

A group of four blessings (Nos. 18, 19, 20, 21: *to abhor evil, to avoid evil, abstinence from intoxicants and mindfulness of wholesome practices*) found in the following four stanzas further stresses the importance of moral practice, *sila*, in creating *mangala* or blessing. To simplify, blessings number 18, 19 and 20 are about the Five Precepts. According to the Pali commentary, *to abhor evil* (*arati*) means to abstain from evil through thoughts, which is about guarding the mind, while *to avoid evil* means to stay away from wrong physical actions and wrong speech. Together, they cover abstinence from all ten unwholesome deeds, namely:

- covetousness,
- ill-will and
- wrong view (three mental actions);
- killing,
- stealing,
- sexual misconduct (three bodily actions);

- telling a lie,
- malicious speech,
- harsh speech, and
- gossip (four verbal actions).

Blessing number 20 is born of abstinence from taking intoxicants, which is about encouraging general awareness and preventing delusion of mind. With regards to the effects of alcohol and intoxication, Dr. Soni observes that:

“Thoroughly drunk, a person knows nothing but must suffer when he wakes. Partly drunk a person becomes capable of actions which he would be ashamed to do while sober. And carelessness from intoxication leads to the death or maiming of how many people these days?” (P. 37)

People usually begin taking alcohol in a small amount; but then many end up being dependent on alcohol; their mind would look to alcohol whenever they feel the pressure of life. According to <http://www.patient.-co.uk/health/Alcohol-and-Liver-Disease.htm>, drinking heavily, one has “an increased risk of developing:

- Serious liver problems (alcoholic liver disease).
- Some stomach disorders.
- Pancreatitis (severe inflammation of the pancreas).
- Mental health problems, including depression and anxiety.
- Sexual difficulties such as impotence.
- Muscle and heart muscle disease.
- High blood pressure.
- Damage to nervous tissue.

- Accidents - drinking alcohol is associated with a much increased risk of accidents. In particular, injury and death from fire and car crashes. About 1 in 7 road deaths are caused by drinking alcohol.
- Some cancers (mouth, gullet, liver, colon and breast).
- Obesity (alcohol has many calories).
- Damage to an unborn baby in pregnant women.
- Alcohol dependence (addiction).”

Drink and drugs are considered as one of the pathways to ruin (*apaya-mukha*) in the *Singalovada-sutta* because it causes:

- Dissipation of wealth;
- Brawls;
- Impairing of one’s health;
- Impairing one’s standing into disrepute;
- Rude and shameless exposure to ensue, and
- Intelligence to weaken.

Some people take to drink and drugs when they cannot handle their stress, anxiety and boredom. They see intoxication as a relief. In that kind of situation when one feels low, one needs to remind oneself of other outlets by making an effort to divert one’s attention to something positive and wholesome. This is why mindfulness, by steering the mind towards and doing wholesome practices (No. 21), can help people stay away from intoxication. This mindfulness in the dhamma is to protect all the earlier blessings that have been achieved so far just as the fifth of the Five Precepts protects all the previous four precepts. Many of the rehabilitation centres for alcohol and drugs addition today have meditation as part of their treatment,

confirming the important role of mindfulness in keeping away from drink and drugs.

Chapter IV

Blessings A Pleasant and Rational Personality

Stanzas number **eight** and **nine** deal with mind training at a deeper level aimed at developing a pleasant personality. The blessing numbers 22 – 30 (*reverence/ respect, humility, contentment, gratitude, listening to the dhamma at the right time, patience/ tolerance, being open to advice, to associate with monks and dhamma teachers, opportune discussion of dhamma*) are geared towards cultivating a peaceful and wise character. In other words, they are intended to tame the egoistic tendency in the human minds.

Respect

Respect is an important quality of the mind that has much positive influence on the families, working environment, organisation and society. We start developing this quality by paying respect to the most worthy and higher objects of admiration around us such as the Buddha, dhamma and sangha, parents, teachers and good people. In addition, it is culturally understood that respect is to be paid by the young to the elders, the junior to the senior. However, there is no specific mention in the original text of who should pay respect to whom. This implies that both the young and old should have mutual respect for each other and this is expressed in various ways in different cultures. For some, respect is expressed in offering a person a good seat, standing up in the Southeast and the West or sitting down in Southeast Asia to receive them, making way for them and, for religious teachers, placing one's hands together and bowing. Dr. Soni remarks that it is “a general high regard for everyone”. (35)

Humility

Humility (No. 23) is about those who are successful in life; it reminds successful people including leaders not to be “puffed up”, “presumptuous”, and “not to get conceited” but to remain humble. When one has this quality of humility one is amenable to and grateful for the advice and corrective suggestions offered to him. Humility is *nivata* in Pali, which literally means “to be without air”, i.e. to be calm. (U Kyaw Htut: 51) Although at times the two qualities (respect and humility) look similar, they are not and Sermsak Nariwong distinguishes them very well when he says: “reverence is the realization of the goodness or

virtue in other people, but humility is looking at deficiencies within oneself.” (145)

Contentment

Blessing number 24 is contentment, which is one of the features of a caring heart, *metta*. The *Metta-sutta* says that a content person:

- lives a simple life (*subhara*),
- does not overburden himself (*appakicco*),
- moves around with ease (*sallahuka-vutti*),
- is calm (*sant-indriyo*), mature (*nipako*),
- not greedy (*appagabbho*) and
- is not overly sensitive to family status and family pride (*kulesu ananugiddho*). These are of an advanced and refined personality.

His mind is calm because it is not agitated with greed and desire. Here contentment must not be misunderstood for laziness and lack of aspiration. Contentment, for example, does not mean that a lay person has to stop earning; but it means one needs to develop an ability to enjoy what one has got in hand and not to be agitated with what one has yet to possess.

Not many have this ability to enjoy what they have. One works hard to get a degree but once one has graduated the joy of obtaining the degree is short-lived. Similarly, people work hard to get a good job and a good standard of living, but once they have got them they start worrying about what they have not got and forget what they have already achieved. People can easily lose the joy of having whatever privileges they have; they are not able to sustain a sense of gratitude long enough to fill themselves with positive

emotions. In brief, it is the lack of the joy of *mudita* that turns the mind towards greed.

So, an effort has to be made for contentment to arise. We all can be happy because we have enough conditions to be so, if only contentment is present. Contentment also means an acceptance of conditions and situations as they arise, with calm and mindfulness, and not reacting emotionally.

Gratitude

The next blessing is **gratitude**, which is a positive outlook in life. Again, without contentment, it is hardly possible to have a feeling of gratitude. This is why both qualities are mentioned together here. Caring for parents is one good example of showing gratitude. Putting something back into the society and country through taxes and social work is also a form of being grateful to the society for what one has received. It is very rare, the Buddha observes in the *Anguttara-nikaya*, to find these two types of people in life; the first is one who shows kindness, and the other is one who is grateful. Dr. Soni therefore writes:

“Without this quality a person forgets parents, relatives, friends, teachers, and those who teach him Dhamma, he turns his back on them just when they could be helped by him or when they are in need of aid.”

It is said that one day during the time of the Buddha, a Brahmin by the name of Radha wanted to be ordained. But the Buddhist monastic discipline dictates he needed someone to look after him as a preceptor, and when he could not get one easily, that prompted the Buddha to ask

the monks who remembered the gratitude to this Brahmin. Venerable Sariputta, the most intelligent arahant after the Buddha, raised his hands and said that he did and it was this Brahmin who had offered him a spoonful of rice on his alms-round in the morning. So, Radha was ordained. It is only a brave, content, mindful and wise heart that knows gratitude.

Listening to and Learning the Dhamma

A person filled with the above qualities of respect, humility, contentment and gratitude is ready to listen and learn the dhamma. This is about exploring the philosophy of life and drawing resources from other people's wisdom. The Buddha says that two conditions are required for one to gain enlightenment: (a) applying sufficient and systematic attention and (b) listening to others. Reading a dhamma book or listening to dhamma CDs are also included here. Opportune times to listen and study the dhamma are, for example, the full *uposatha* days or Buddhist new and full moon-days; when disease or suffering makes one thoughtful enough to absorb the dhamma; when the mind is sufficiently concentrated as when faced with impending death. One may not be ready to listen and learn the dhamma when one is too tired physically and mentally or is too troubled by worries or under the influence of drink and drugs.

One needs to make effort to listen and learn from others in order to develop wisdom. At a top university like Oxford, professors are often busy attending lectures given by other scholars; it is part of their continued education. Here, the topics of dhamma cover a wide range of subjects. One should choose a topic relevant to one's pursuit, for example, a meditator should listen and study topics related

to meditation stages, while a politician should enquire about Buddhist social, political and economic teachings. An anxious person should find out about how to deal with anxiety and emotions and a scholar may be interested in Buddhist philosophy. Listening and studying the dhamma also opens doors for other qualities to develop.

Patience

Patience (no. 27) is one of the highest qualities required for a successful life. At the beginning of his mission, the Buddha taught his disciples that the key to all religious practices and their accomplishment is patience. This indicates that at the highest level, patience is equivalent to full enlightenment. This teaching is known as *Ovada-patimokkha*, a training rule given to the monks. Patience includes tolerance of discomfort, the ability to endure difficulties, acceptance of opinions and people who are different from ours, forgiving and not being short-temper. Patience is a good parameter to measure one's ability in perceiving, using, understanding and managing emotions. Patience is considered one of the essential qualities of a temporal leader as well as the aspirant for enlightenment. Dr. Soni puts it poetically when he defines patience as:

“A serene attitude towards stresses in oneself and outside, which enables a person to accept with equanimity the flow of events. In fact with even a little of this virtue the mind becomes cool, clean and calm, like a refreshing pool of crystal clear water, quite unlike the minds of most people which can rightly be compared to a pot of boiling soup or a cup of water with swirls of colour in it.”

Patience as the opposite of being short-tempered and intolerance has considerable positive impacts on one's surroundings and minds. Socially, it creates harmony and helps maintain friendship. Psychologically, one is calm, less confused, less stressed out and makes less mistakes in whatever one does.

Being Receptive to Advice

Being receptive to advice (*sovacassata*) is also an important blessing. In some cultures it is understood as obedience, which signifies that the instruction comes from a superior or senior. I believe this quality of being open to advice is a blessing for anyone, junior or senior, who practises it. The Pali commentary defines this quality not for a certain age group but for all ages, and says that *being open to advice* means a person can easily be addressed, spoken to, advised, or corrected. U Kyaw Htut says that this "*mangala* is important not only to politicians and businessmen, it is equally important to all classes of people: students, teachers, *bhikkhus* etc." (P. 77)

This quality is necessarily a natural development from the preceding values of patience, contentment, humility and respect and is also considered to be one of the expressions of metta. In the *Metta-sutta*, being open to advice from others is grouped together with other worthy features, for example, being honest, "straightforward, easy to instruct, gentle, and not conceited, content and easy to support, with few duties", simple living, "with peaceful faculties, masterful, modest".¹ Without this open-mind and open

¹ Thanissaro's translation of the *Metta-sutta*.

heart, it is hard to conduct a fruitful teaching or discussion. A person blessed with this attribute is described by Dr. Soni as one who has “broadmindedness of outlook, instant acceptance of good advice, and habitual courtesy in manner and speech”. (P. 43) He is the opposite of a stubborn person.

Presence of a *samana*

Seeing and being in the company of a *samana* (s) is a blessing. Here although *samana* symbolically denotes religious practitioners who are usually monks and nuns, it in essence means any person who is of few desires, meditative, serene and patient, who controls anger and harms none, who endures abuse, does not cling to sensual pleasures, renounces violence towards all living beings, and who utters gentle, instructive and truthful words. One can benefit from and be inspired by their wisdom and serenity. Meeting such a person can lead to an enlightening conversion and wisdom. The late Thai forest meditation master, Venerable Ajahn Chah, is said to have pointed out that even a very developed person like Prince Siddhattha who would become Buddha had to be prompted by the sight of a meditative *samana* before he could decide to seriously search for a way out of suffering. Ajahn Chah asked his monk-disciples in England to go out for alms-round regularly even if no one may offer them food. Prince Siddhattha himself did not have a chance to have a conversation or any teaching from the monk he saw before he decided to leave his princely life. But even the mere sight of a *samana* was enough to inspire and spark him into a full swing of search for enlightenment.

We also know how Sariputta, who would become one of the two chief disciples of the Buddha, was inspired by Venerable Assaji, one of the Group of Five, who was walking serenely for alms. Requested, Venerable Assaji spoke only a single verse, and that was enough for a very intelligent man, Sariputta, to realise the truth. As Venerable Pesala remarks: “seeing Venerable Assaji was enough to inspire confidence, but questioning him was necessary to arrive at understanding.”

Dhamma discussion

Discussion of dhamma at an opportune time is an advanced blessing, which could be properly undertaken only after one has developed open hearts and minds, patience, respect and humility. Seeing and being in the company of samanas increases the possibility of dhamma-oriented discussion more, for example, in Asia where the overwhelming majority of dhamma teachers are monks and nuns. Discussion of dhamma is one of the many ways to encourage enquiring mind and wisdom.

The discussion of dhamma follows the listening and study of dhamma and other preceding qualities such as being respectful, humble, liberal and patient.

In many Buddhist countries, considerably there are more people listening to dhamma talks than those discussing dhamma. Until recently it was not culturally encouraged to have questions and answers at the end of a dhamma talk. Even now, Q and A is not widely practiced. At times, the dhamma teachers themselves do not encourage discussion or questioning. Worse, some show a sign of agitation when being asked a question. Raising a question after a dhamma talk is often misunderstood as being disrespectful in Asia. Tha-pyay-kan Sayadaw, author of the famous *New*

Exposition of the Paritta in Burmese, also laments the fact that culturally it seems the discussion of dhamma is reserved for the older people and younger people are usually left out in Myanmar. (P. 211)

Generally, people in the West conduct more dhamma discussion and therefore benefit more from this particular blessing. This may have been partly due to the approach in education; in the West, students are encouraged to investigate, question and come up with new ideas that may be different from their teacher's. And, different opinions are tolerated or indeed respectfully accommodated in school and university while in the East students are mainly expected to provide a correct and standardized answer, and often an opinion different from that of the teacher is not accommodated.

This is why the Buddha points out in this *Mangala-sutta* how important to have instilled the values of patience, respect and humility in both students and teachers as a preparation for a fruitful discussion of any sort. This blessing of tolerant, respectful and engaging atmosphere is hard to create, but once established it is conducive to wisdom in particular and extremely useful to bringing harmony to the family, society and country because people can still talk to each other amicably even when they strongly hold to different opinions.

The Buddha encouraged discussion and this is evident in many *suttas* (*sutras*) which record debates on points of religious and social significance, for example, the *Ambattha-sutta*, *Kutadanta-sutta* and *Sonadanta-sutta* of the *Digha-nikaya*, the *Kalama-sutta* of the *Anguttara-nikaya*, the *Vasettha-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikaya*. The Buddha as an enlightened teacher also tolerated

disagreement; this is recorded, for example, in the *Mulapariyaya-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikaya* where the monks told the Buddha that they were not delighted with his lecture. The Buddha was also a patient and open-minded teacher; he modified some of the monastic rules (*vinaya*) seven times, after listening to complaints and consultations with his monk- and nun-disciples.

Moreover, an illustration of how we can maximize the benefits of this blessing is the classic example of dhamma discussions between Arahant Nagasena and the Indo-Greek King Milinda (Menander I of Bactria) who reigned in the 2nd century BC). The record of their dialogues is known as *Milindapanha*, “*The Questions of Milinda*”, after King Milinda who put intelligent questions to the equally intelligent and patient sage, Nagasena. Their discussions benefited not only the king and his entourage but also generations of truth seekers for more than two thousand years.

Up to this stage, there have been **thirty kinds of blessing**, the practices which are aimed at building sound foundations in life (nos. 1-6), offering good education (7-10), cementing social structures (11- 17) instilling morality (18-21) and establishing a pleasant and open-minded personality (22- 30). All of them are designed to help one to live in the best and highest possible way that life can offer in this world. These points of blessing consider various aspects of a worldly life that is peaceful and enjoyable on the one hand, and, on the other, that can handle all the hassles which daily life can throw at us. In brief, they teach a person how to live a blessed life here and now and through self-reliance. They are therefore considered by some as *lokiya-mangala* or worldly blessings.

Chapter V

Blessings beyond Worldly Experiences: Reflecting on the Mangala-sutta from Satipatthana Meditative Viewpoints

This final chapter has four parts. First, there will be a brief discussion of some part of stanza number **nine** which is aimed at directing one's mind from a worldly life towards a much more contemplative life, with the end of suffering as its goal. Next, there will be reflection on the whole blessings, emphasizing how they complement each other, starting from blessing number **one** to **thirty-three**. Thirdly, an attempt will be made, again briefly due to the constraint of space and time, to understand the *Mangala-sutta* in the context of the *Satipatthana* meditation practice. Finally, a few words will be said on the blessings which are found in this world but are clearly not of the world.

Stanza No. Nine: From a worldly to a more contemplative life

Self-restraint

Self-restraint (*tapa*) is all kinds of restraint of sense faculties. The Pali term *tapa* can mean all kinds of practices aimed at burning up and eradicating anything unwholesome. For example, in some context, patience (*khanti*) is called *tapa*, indeed the best *tapa*; in others, the study of the Buddhist scriptures, the ascetic practices, or even anything that harmonizes the community are *tapa* (*samagganam tapo sukho*). Moreover, the *Sallekha-sutta* mentions more than forty ways of how to remove unwholesome effects from our actions, speech, emotions and thoughts. They can be seen as *tapa*.

Restraining sense faculties can be practised by anyone, a householder or a renunciate. A householder can start from strict following of the Five Precepts in daily life, to the observation of the Eight Precepts on the full-moon days, to joining a meditation retreat. All those practices encourage restraint from indulging in sensual stimuli, and seeking instead to address *contemplatively and directly* problems of daily life such as happiness being short-lived, reacting often through frustration and agitation and being unable to let go of the bitter incidents of the past. One of the means, the Eight Precepts, are:

Not to do (<i>varitta-sila</i>)	To do (<i>caritta-sila</i>)
causing harm & violence	cultivate compassionate action, speech & thought
stealing	cultivate generosity & sharing

sexual activity	channel energy towards purifying the mind
telling lies, harsh speech, gossip, slandering	use truthful, pleasant & harmonious speech
Intoxicants & drugs	practise mindfulness
eating after mid-day	moderation of food consumption
entertainments, decorative & cosmetic accessories	deal with restlessness & fear directly through mindfulness, use simple clothes
using luxurious dwelling, beds and seats	simple dwelling, beds and seats

The main focus of self-restraint here is a serious observation of the moral codes leading to the purification of conduct (*sila-visuddhi*). Although some aspects of morality (*sila*) have been covered by some previous blessings, i.e. to refrain from evil (blessing nos. 18- 20), this *self-restraint* is more than refraining from what is immoral. Indeed, it is about living a simpler life, shunning worldly riches and not reliance on sensual gratification for happiness. For a renunciate such as monk or nun, it is about the strict following of the monastic codes of conduct (*vinaya*), which means using some austere practices of moral rules to tackle greed (*abhijjha*) and anger (*domanassa*) at a deeper level and to purify the conducts at a much higher level than has been discussed in the preceding 30 aspects of blessing.

In brief, *self-restraint* here focuses on the practice at a more vigorous level of the three ethical components of the Noble Eightfold Path:

- Right speech (avoiding harmful and useless speech; using instead harmonious and truthful one)
- Right action (avoiding harmful & violent action; using instead compassionate one)
- Right livelihood (avoiding harmful & violent one; engaging instead in blameless one).

Holy life

Holy life is usually understood narrowly as celibacy but it should be understood in a wider context here as to philosophically include the practices that avoid two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. In practice, this means, strengthening self-restraint (*sila*) with a more vigorous meditative practice (*samadhi*) and intellectual transformation training (*pannya*); in brief, it is about bringing together all the components of the Noble Eightfold Path, also known as the Middle Way. The three meditative factors of the Noble Eightfold Path are:

- Right effort (to diagnose weakness and apply the remedy; to find out strength and consolidate it)
- Right mindfulness (integrative awareness of body, sensation and mind together with their nature) and
- Right concentration (ability of the mind to apply itself on one object, withstanding all distractions).

Two parts that form intellectual transformative training are:

- Right view/ attitude (based on seeing life as being subject to change and with no lasting essence) and
- Right thinking (applying the right view on daily experiences in order to enable the mind to let go).

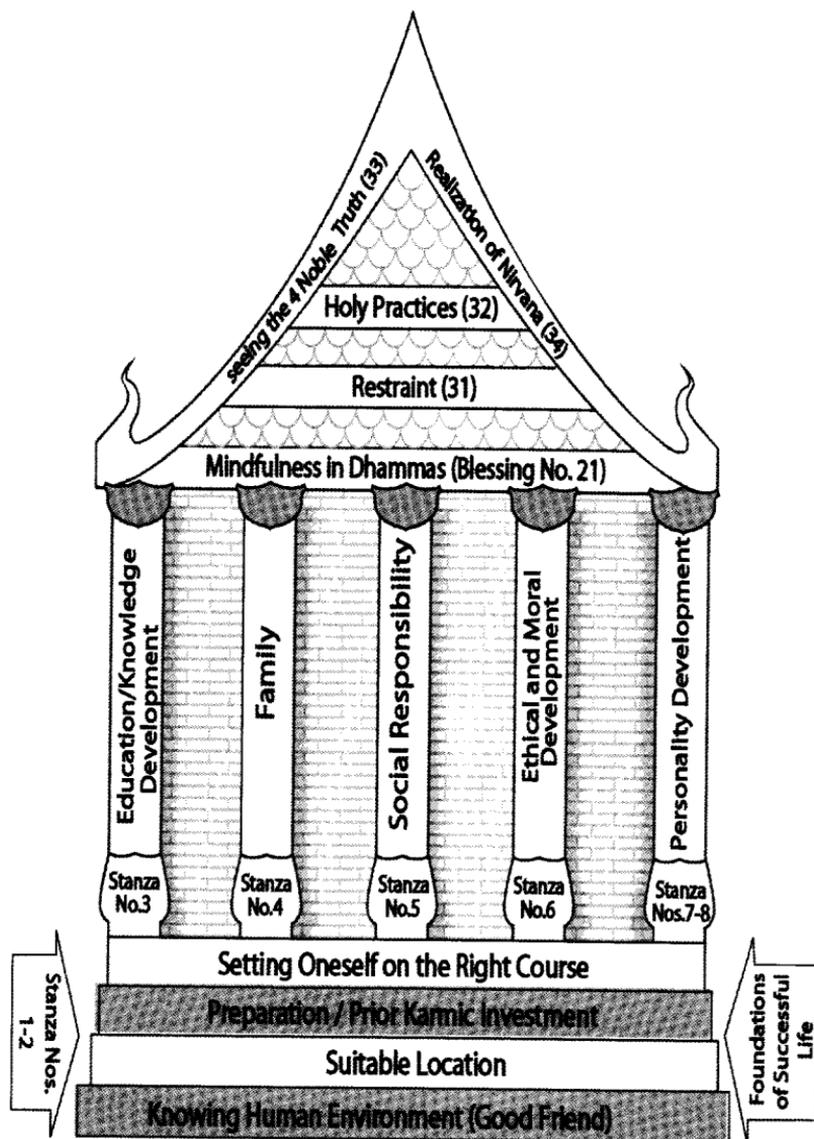
So, symbolically holy life may denote being a celibate following the rules of a religious order; however, in

essence it means following the whole Noble Eightfold Path, also known as the Middle Way, to purify the mind (*citta-visuddhi*). These two blessings (31-32) are intended to help one subdue the flames of greed and anger internally and externally, eradicating the roots of distress and suffering and setting one on the direct path to nirvana.

Many Blessings Working Together

We have seen how the earlier blessings are not grace from so-called almighty beings, but rather the practices that anyone can do for themselves to form their own path of a systematic development. We can compare acquiring those different aspects of blessing with building a carefree, clean and secure house. A blessed house that one builds for oneself has four foundations, five major pillars and three strong beams and two wings of the roof. The idea in giving a simile of a house here is to convey the message that all the thirty-eight blessings are complementary to each other and that they work together.

The Structure of Solid, Carefree, Clean and Safe house



There are four levels, built upward on top of each other, of strong foundations of the house, a summary of the blessing nos. 1- 6 in the first two stanzas, the first three of which are collectively considered as learning about human environment. Then, there are five pillars, a summarization of six further stanzas, indicating the importance of:

1. knowledge development (education),
2. family,
3. social responsibility to the extended family and the wider society,
4. ethical and moral development, and
5. personal development.

They are the five crucial issues that this *sutta* addresses for a possible happiest life on earth. To do well in all the five means one is more blessed than those who do well only in some of them. There are also three levels of beam: *mindfulness in the dhamma* (blessing no. 21) to stabilize all the pillars, *self-restraint* (no. 31) and *holy practices* (no. 32) to raise the person to a higher level of blessing. Two wings of the roof are the peak of all the blessing practices, which are the seeing of the Four Noble Truths (no. 33) and the realization of *nirvana* (no.34).

Built in this manner, the house becomes a solid (blessing no. 35), carefree (no. 36), clean (no. 37) and secure (no. 38) for the practitioner to live in.

One can see that stanza number **nine** sets one on a higher path, requiring more vigorous effort and considerably a higher level of self-restraint than previously discussed in stanza number **six** which is why it leads some to label *self-restraint* as renunciation.

Many Complementary Blessings

Let us talk in plain terms on how the different factors from the thirty-eight blessings work together. For example, good friends including associates and mentors are vital for education at all levels, for business, social and moral environment. A child can develop inspiration from being in a good neighbourhood and school. On the contrary, he can also grow into a person without aspiration if he happens to live in an environment where there is no inspiring role model.

Here, I wish to relate my humble life story, because a good environment and inspiration have played a big part in my development; without them, I would have definitely ended up as a semi-illiterate like my cousins. In my village of some seventy households in the small town of Laikha in central Shan state no one has ever learnt how to speak a European language. There was no school at that time; all students had to walk to town, about three miles away, to a high school. The village monastery, Wat Ho Loi, did not have good education programmes at that time. So, when I became a novice my parents sent me to a monastery in town which was built by the Chaofa (Zawbwa/ Lord of the Sky/ Ruling Prince) and supported by him before he was deposed by the military in 1962. In this monastery, Wat Sirimangala, the abbot and the devotees had ambition.

At 12, I was already learning in one of the leading *pariyatti* (teaching) monasteries because I had been sent there by my abbot. When I was 13, one day during my visits to my original monastery, Wat Sirimangala, I saw a book written by the Indian scholar monk, Rahul Sankrityayan (April 9, 1893 – April 14, 1963), on the table of the abbot. I did not know the author at that time and could not understand

everything about the title of the book, let alone the philosophical contents inside. But it was clear to me that the book was written by a foreign scholar of some importance and it was about the Buddha's dharma because I saw that as part of the title of the book. With that impression, I quietly and almost unconsciously developed within me a strong ambition to spread the Buddha's dharma internationally.

Only now I can say more about Rahul Sankrityayan who was self-educated, a prolific writer of 146 books in five languages, and a traveller. It is said that he brought back books from Tibet to India using twelve mules. He was a multi-linguist, well versed in several languages such as Hindi, Sanskrit, Pali, Bhojpuri, Urdu, Persian, Arabic, Tamil Kannada, Tibetan, Sinhalese, French and Russian. Although without any formal qualification, his views were influential and consequently he was appointed a professor of Indology in 1937-38 & 1947-48 at University of Leningrad, Russia. He is now revered as *mahapandit* and has a section in his honour in Patna museum, Bihar State.

My cousins, two boys, became novices at our village monastery, Wat Ho Loi, and were not fortunate enough to be inspired by their environment. They became truants from classes and ended up with no ambition, no hope and consequently no much blessing in life. Our fathers were brothers; we were born and lived in the same village; our houses are only ten minutes walk away and they were a few years old than me. They are now dead leaving their children to the same cycle of lack of ambition in life.

Because of the inspiration from Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayan _ even though I could not pronounce his name and I did not know his life until much later_ I was

always keen to learn English. But English was not part of the monastic curriculum in South-east Asia. So, when I was 17 and was studying at a leading monastery called Sasana Mandaing Pali University in Hamsavati (Pegu, now Bago), after the annual government held examinations during the summer we were given one month leave to visit our parents. Instead of going back to see my parents, I spent the one month vacation time studying English. I started learning A, B, C at 17. I did the same for the next two years during the summer vacation. None of my monk-teachers or parents knew of what I was doing. I did not inform them because I was afraid they would stop me studying English. The English language was considered in those days a distraction to the monks and novices. Some conservative abbots expelled monks and novices from their monasteries for studying English, which they considered a secular subject.

My parents were not able to send me to an international school. Even if they could afford there was no such school over there at that time. My father could read only Tai-yai; he could neither speak nor read Burmese. My mother spoke only Tai-yai and was illiterate. They had no idea of how different schools were. For a living, my father made indigenous medicines something he inherited from his forefathers. It was a modest living; like the teaching profession those days, his job was respectful but not earning enough for the family. My mother used to sell fried tofu and tofu salad in the market to earn extra income for the family.

Despite their meagre income, they have afforded me the best human environments both at home and monastery. Precisely, it was in the monastery and in the form of inspiration that I got from Rahul Sankrityayan that led me

to some leading monastic institutions in the Union of Myanmar, and thereafter to Thailand and Sri Lanka where I received three Masters' degrees in Buddhism and Pali from two universities; the same drive took me to apply to London, Cambridge and Oxford University, finally choosing to study and obtaining a doctorate degree in Buddhist philosophy from University of Oxford. There are many inspiring stories in the world far more colourful and fascinating than my own. We will find in all those true life stories that the factors in the *Mangala-sutta* work together to uplift individuals and society.

The blessing of good associates has brought me three other blessings to give me decent four foundations of growth in life. I have benefited from good education I could ever hope for, learnt from good role models from different nations and cultures and have been fortunate to be able to strengthen those blessings with the direct practice of the Noble Eightfold Path under various teachers.

Good friends and environment are also important for meditation practice. Before the 1940s, practising meditation would be difficult for lay people. There was no conducive environment for the practice. There were no meditation centres and courses for laity like today. Lay people just did not talk about meditation. It seems only a few monks were engaged in meditation. So, for lay people there was hardly a chance to be inspired. But nowadays there are so many meditation centres, not just in Thailand, Sri Lanka and Myanmar but also in the West. It is easier to be inspired and get help to practice meditation. Here, for example, the two blessings, *good friends (pandita)* and *holy practices (brahmacariya)*, work together in many places.

And, it is not difficult to find out that most of the regular meditators are people with decent education. (It is said that in today's world one of the criteria of being a developed society is to have 25% of its workforce as university graduate. So, be it in the temporal or religious sphere, knowledge development is important everywhere.) This is to say that the four blessings on education (blessing nos. 7-10) and the holy practices are complementary to each other. And, with a supportive family and a decent means of income (blessing nos. 11-13), one is able to afford more time and meditation as well. A supportive social environment (blessing nos. 14-16) is also necessary. Because without the support from the society at large (blessings nos.14-17), it is not possible to maintain and expand meditation centres and their programmes that we witness today.

Moral practices (blessing nos. 18-21) are directly complementary to meditation practices; otherwise, without pure conducts, one cannot face one's own minds directly and one will be haunted by guilt, anxiety and greed. Furthermore, the pleasant personality factors (blessing nos. 22-30) are very helpful for meditation progress and those qualities are indeed advanced by mindfulness meditation and metta meditation. Those personality development factors are about working on specific weaknesses that we have as human being.

The same principle applies in other areas of life and work, be it business, commerce, politics, academics, arts, civil service or other forms of pursuit in life. From the beginning of time, people have been migrating in order to find a place more blessed than where they are.

The Mangala-sutta from the Satipatthana meditative viewpoints

A Satipatthana meditator may reflect on his meditation experiences through the thirty-eight blessings. For a start, we have already discussed how conducive environment (nos. 1-6), sound education (7-10) and supportive social background are an enormous help to the meditation practice. Lack of those blessings, one may face more difficulties in getting started the meditation practice. I remember a friend telling me why I should not go and practise meditation in a meditation centre because I have already studied the necessary Pali scriptures myself; he might have considered my going to study under a meditation teacher as a blow to the pride of scholar-monks (*ganthadhura*). With that problem overcome, I was then discouraged by fellow meditators studying under the same teacher not to go and study under other teachers.

In some of the meditation centres, dhamma books, except those by their teacher, are banned perhaps to prevent people from being unnecessarily confused before they can handle different opinions. But to bar your students from exploring the available dhamma treasure in CDs and books in the long run seems unkind. Again, with the second problem behind me, during one of the retreats, I was listening to one of the rotating preachers (*dhamma-kathika*) talking about past merit and gender without relating his discussion to our meditation practice. Those experiences convince me how important for a meditator to have good and broad-minded friends (including teachers).

During the meditation retreat, lay people usually observe the Eight Precepts, so the blessings related to moral development (nos. 18-21) are secured. The culture of a

meditation retreat encourages the practice of respect and humility; at the same time one also has more opportunity to listen and discuss the dhamma during the retreat. As a beginner, one usually endures more physical discomfort such as pain, pins and needles. One is encouraged by the teacher to be mindful of those discomforts; and in the process of observing pains, one discovers how impatient one can be towards any discomfort. As impatience is continuously and mindfully observed, patience (*khanti*) as a blessing arises through one's own effort. The more hours one accomplishes, the more endurance one develops for physical discomfort.

In the same process, one also discovers how agitation and anger arise as a reaction towards anything one dislikes; those reactions make the mind wander and restless; one often feels like opening the eyes and giving it up. Just imagine someone often swallowing saliva next to you in a quiet sitting session, you will feel disturbed. You will be more disturbed if the person next to you often sips his tea or water when you are contemplating calmly on your breath, not to mention the ring of his iPhone! However, the group support we get from a retreat helps us get through many physically and mentally uncomfortable sessions. This is the main reason we want to join a retreat. Proper explanations by the teacher about our experiences during either the individual interview or dhamma talk also help us to understand the process of those reactions. Consequently, we develop more patience, find it easier to sit longer observing both pains and thoughts.

A patient mind (*khanti*) is receptive (*sovacassata*), which further encourages one to approach more teachers and practitioners for guidance. That is when one comes to engage in dhamma in one's conversation, leading to

growing inspiration in one's own heart. Without inspiration of some sort, people may not take up any practice of restraint (*tapa*).

Here, the blessing *holy practice (brahmacariya)* is more relevant. It is about first the discovery of how the two extremes dominate our behaviour of emotional reaction; and then the avoidance of those two extremes using *direct* observing of the mind as taught in the *Satipatthana-sutta*.

During the practice, we can clearly observe how the mind would automatically react through either the tendency of self-indulging or the repulsive nature. While trying to develop concentration by focussing on the primary object (e.g. rising and falling of abdomen or breathing) if we experience pain, the mind automatically feels frustrated, even disappointed. This is because there is a repulsive tendency towards pain or anything we dislike; it is automatic. It is simply a repulsive habit of the mind. This is how the mind tends to torture itself, by adding emotional suffering to the physical discomfort. Some go as far as giving up the sitting because the disappointment becomes overwhelming. Some may come to think they cannot meditate because of the continuous presence of pain; this is a perception that comes from the mind that has a habit of self-torture, one of the two extreme behaviours of the mind.

On the other hand, one often gets carried away by thoughts of any kind, about family, job, relationship, even about who says what to whom during the retreat. One can just get immersed in one's own head, being dragged away by a certain series of thought. Once realised, a considerable amount of time is gone. This is how the mind habitually indulges in its own reactions. This is another extreme behaviour of the mind.

Discovering these two extremes and the development of the Noble Eightfold Path cannot be separated. Without one, the other is not possible. This is precisely the point the Buddha made at the beginning of the *Dhammacakka-pavattana-sutta*.

The Mindfulness of the Satipatthana-sutta

Now with more sessions of sitting and walking, and with patience improving, one can start watching emotional reactions, usually *like* and *dislike*, deeper but at the same time keeping some distance from them. Here one discovers more the habits of the mind in reacting to its environments, basically falling within the two patterns of extreme. This discovery is made possible by three qualities of the Eightfold Path: awareness (*satima*), effort (*atapi*) and some degree of understanding (*sampajano*). That is why in the *Satipatthana-sutta*, there is one phrase that is repeated many times: *atapi sampajano satima*.

Atapi in the *Satipatthana-sutta* is about the right effort; this right effort has two aspects: quantity and quality. In terms of quantity, it can be seen in one's ability to sit longer, putting in more hours. In terms of quality, the right effort is seen in one's ability to diagnose one's weakness and strength in meditation. This means one comes to be aware of the postures changing, slumping or being upright; one also comes to detect when the mind slips away, when it is emotionally disturbed and when it is calm. This right effort factor does not come by itself but with right mindfulness (*satima*) and some development of understanding (*sampajano*).

Satima/ right mindfulness is, at this stage of the practice, the ability of the meditator to consciously move his

attention back and forth between primary and secondary objects. In that attention movement control, the meditator develops some power to leave behind at least temporarily an object; this attention movement control may be seen as the seed of let go. At the same time he is also reining in the mental habit that tends to automatically suppress anything painful and agitating.

Sampajano/ understanding here means the understanding of how the mind relates to its objects being observed, such as breathing, pain, thoughts, emotions and perception. Mainly, it is the understanding of how the mind relates and reacts to the object of contemplation. As discussed earlier, the mind reacts through like and dislike, through indulgence and repulsion.

Combined, these three factors offer us the kind of mindfulness */sati* envisaged by the Buddha in the *Satipatthana-sutta*. This quality mindfulness is different from simple awareness where one is aware of, say, the presence of pain. This mindfulness strengthened by the right effort and some degree of understanding helps us explore and discover the problems within the process of our conscious-mind. With each discovery of the behaviour of the mind, one puts in more effort in applying mindfulness to remedy that particular behaviour. For example, one starts observing frustration and impatience, or even restlessness whenever there is an increased physical discomfort present. Frustration, impatience and restless, like other negative emotions, are our weakness (*akusala*). To be able to see the presence of those negative emotions in one's conscious mind in itself greatly helps the sitting to get easier; this is how we can sit longer and longer with each session past. One also begins to notice the different components of a wandering mind. Even if one

discovers it rather late, the wandering mind, the imagery associated with a particular thought will be found, and this ability to catch the wandering mind will be strengthened as the hours build up.

Non-judgemental Mindfulness

As we discover more of the behaviours such as the two extreme patterns of our mind, we need to apply one particular discipline in observation, that is non-judgemental mindfulness. Because as we discover ourselves in those reactions, we will be disappointed and hate to see ourselves in those negative lights. Or, we may also get caught in our self-affirmative thoughts. In order to deal with this problem, the Buddha in the *citta-nupassana* section of the *Satipatthana-sutta* instructs meditators that angry mind and non-angry mind be observed in the same way, that lustful thought and non-lustful thoughts are considered the same at this point. This non-judgemental mindfulness is popular with cognitive psychology today.

In some traditional *vipassana* practices, this non-judgemental mindfulness seems not to have been made clear, if not ignored. This is understandable because this non-judgemental nature of mindfulness as demonstrated in the contemplation of the behaviours of the mind in the *Satipatthana-sutta* can be regarded as contradictory to Buddhist meditation based on perception (*sannya*). Some well-established and popular Buddhist meditations are based on seeing the experience (or the whole world) as impermanence (*anicca-sannya*), suffering (*dukkha-sannya*), non-self (*anatta-sannya*). Clearer for the beginners is the instruction to see the body as disgusting (*asubha-sannya*).

In this kind of perception (*sannya*) based meditation, the meditator switches the mind from a lustful thought to a loathsome thought. If one keeps switching one's thought from an unwholesome one to a wholesome thought repeatedly, one is able to internalise detachment. This is how the Buddha recounts his own experiences in removing distracting thoughts as found in the *Vitakka-santthana-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikaya*. This is also the instruction, for example, what Venerable Ananda gave to Venerable Vangisa to dispel the lustful thought of the latter while on an alms-round in the morning. From the very beginning, the approach of this type of meditation is to use some degree of concentration and then make some effort to direct the mind to a *sannya*-based contemplation. From the start, this meditation approach involves some judgement that this body is loathsome (*asubha-sannya*) and is not mine (*anatta-sannya*).

If one employs this *sannya*-based meditation too early in the *Satipatthana vipassana* meditation, one is likely to miss the point in the importance of non-judgemental mindfulness. Instead, one may rely on the perception based approach in dealing with undesirable thoughts. This can work perfectly, if one is in a suitable environment for this approach, meaning in a monastic and solitary environment.

However, the approach in the *citta-nupassana* section of the *Satipatthana-sutta* is not to make that kind of judgement before one is able to see the two extreme behaviours of the mind and before one is sufficiently mindful to see the arising and disappearance of thoughts. It is a different approach, one that is based on non-judgemental mindfulness. (Buddhism is in this aspect rich in that it teaches various ways in mind training.) Non-judgemental mindfulness, once firmly established, helps

one to see clearly the two extremes in our emotional behaviour and put us on the middle path.

This non-judgemental mindfulness helps one to weaken and eradicate the automatic behaviour of the mind. An automatic reaction in the mind often operates through attachment. If one's mind is attached to an accident, usually that happens automatically, with the mind spinning around the unfortunate incident, churning out loads of agitated and fearful thoughts without control. Non-judgemental mindfulness is helpful in overcoming that kind of trauma, in detaching the mind from an unfortunate incident and in letting go of emotional clinging to the past incident. It suppresses no thought or emotion, nor does it encourage the mind to indulge in them. Viewed in this respect, the technique of noting or labelling or registering every thought and emotion as they arise and then let them go as taught by some vipassana meditation teachers can be very meaningful.

The two bases of extreme emotional behaviours as emphasised in the *Satipatthana-sutta* are in Pali: *abhijjha* and *domanassa*. *Abhijjha* literally means covetousness, greediness, acquisitiveness, jealousy and envy; these are all about the mind inclining towards indulgence. *Domanassa* literally means sadness, grief, irritation, agitation, anger and grudge; it is about all repulsive emotion. That is why another passage, *vineyya loke abhijjha domanassam*, is very important in the Satipatthana meditation. It may be translated as “having tamed the mind of covetousness and discontent with regards to the world”, which means it is necessary to weaken to a considerable extent the five hindrances (sensual desire, anger or ill-will, sloth-torpor or boredom, restlessness-worry, and doubt) which are represented by *abhijjha* and *domanassa* here.

With *abhijjha* and *domanassa* subdued, the meditator now has a sufficiently trained heart and mind to *metta-bhavana* to increase compassion. The use of the word “*brahma*” (+*cariya*) here should remind us of the importance of the four qualities of heart: loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion when experiencing problem (*karuna*), joy when things are going well (*mudita*) and a balanced emotion between suffering and happiness (*upekkha*).

I personally advocate developing systematically the practice of *metta* not long after one has started *Satipatthana* meditation. I have explained in *Mindfulness Meditation Made Easy*, this is necessary in appreciating problems of life and turning them into wisdom. And, enlightened mind is often described as an enlightened heart which happens through the growth of compassion. Both the *Satipatthana* and *metta* meditations emphasise seeing problems of life as they are and then transforming them into something positive.

It may be said here that in the *Mangala-sutta*, all the blessing factors are all represented in two blessings: restraint (*tapa*) and holy practice (*brahmacariya*). It should be noticed here that I have attempted to explain these two blessings in the light of the *Satipatthana* meditation practice, and I am sure they can be viewed from other viewpoints, too.

No matter which way one views it, it is no doubt that these two blessings represent a state where one takes the mind development much more seriously. For a *Satipatthana* meditation practitioner, it is the stage where one’s mindfulness has three dimensions:

- right effort to diagnose weakness and strength,

- growing understanding and
- non-judgemental awareness.

These three aspects of sati help the practitioner to discipline the mind so as not to get caught in the two patterns of automatic reactions. This is the time when the mind can be considered ready to look at and investigate something *directly*, e.g. body, sensation, mind and their nature (*dhamma*).

At this stage, one comes to see the dominance of human desire and material possession of all kinds as not contributing to lasting peace of mind. Instead, sitting quietly and watching the breath, not trying to acquire any possession, may become a rewarding experience. One no longer seeks to rely on them for happiness. Instead, one comes to realize that the tendency to fulfil desire with materials and sense stimuli as the reason for suffering. With this, one starts seeing how the mind is troubled by desire for fame, recognition, possession and disappointments whenever there is a perception of desire unfulfilled. At the same time, one begins to firmly believe in the possibility of bringing an end to the repetition of those troubles. This is the blessing (no. 33) of seeing the Four Truths, where all aspects of the practice come together.

Blessings beyond worldly experiences

The last **six** blessings (nos. 33-38) are beyond worldly experiences, consisting of the actual process of realization (no. 33) the attainment (34) and its fruits (35-38). The result of following of the Noble Eightfold Path is the seeing of the Four Noble Truths (no. 33) that can be summarised as:

- Accepting intellectually, psychologically and intuitively that suffering really exists;
- Removing ignorance and clinging that produce and sustain suffering
- Putting an end to this cycle of suffering and
- Successfully bringing together the eight qualities of the Noble Eightfold Path that serve as the way to reach the end of suffering.

Dr. Soni remarks:

“The Four Noble Truths are the briefest factual description of experience during life. They constitute the unique and vital discovery made by the Buddha which was announced by him in his very first discourse.”

Some factors of the Noble Eightfold Path have been partially accumulated through the previous blessings from number **one** to **thirty**. And they are brought together in the number **31** and **32**, culminating in the peaking together of the whole eight constituents at number 33 in seeing the truths.

In brief, seeing the four truths means to see suffering as it is through our own experience, and not identifying it as me or mine.

Seeing those universal truths signifies the realization of *nirvana* (no. 34), which is a definitive statement of the result. The next **four** blessings are the descriptions of states of mind of a person who has seen nirvana here and now: as someone who has seen suffering as it is, he is no longer shaken by worldly conditions anymore; an unshakable

mind has been firmly established, no matter what life will throw at him.

Buddhist texts sum up life's experiences in eight and call them the worldly conditions (*loka-dhamma*), namely: gain, loss, status, disgrace, censure, praise, pleasure, & pain. These eight factors are part and parcel of life and no one, even an arahant, escapes from them. However, only an untrained mind spins and wavers around them because there is no reflection that these conditions are subject to change and potentially stressful. For the person who has seen the Four Truths, his mind is traumatised by these experiences because he is mindful that they are subject to change and have potential to cause stress.

Imagine you are at work. You see someone speaking or behaving in a manner that irritates you. Your mind will become shaken by his behaviour and also by your own reaction. Even during the meditation retreat, your mind can be shaken by someone who breathes so loud or who gets up often or who shuffles around too often making noises. Sometime your mind is shaken by seeing someone following a different meditation method from your own. The mind can be shaken so easily. Just to watch the news of murder on the television affects your mind; it brings fear or anger. Or when you are caught up in a heavy traffic, investigate your mind if it is shaken by the experience at that moment. You will certainly appreciate what this blessing means. The mind is shaken not only by negative experiences, but also by positive ones and comfort. Wealth, fame, desire and status are what usually shake human heart. We find this out clearly in the metta meditation when suffering shakes our heart violently that it ruins the development of compassion, or *karuna*; instead of compassion, suffering creates anger or despair. Similarly,

sometime joy can shake our heart to the core that it ruins our chance to develop *mudita*, mindful joy. So, to possess an unshakeable heart is truly a great blessing.

Not Only Arahant

Here although many learned authors, for instance the Venerable Phra Dhammavisuddhikavi, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Dhammacariya U Kyaw Htut, Sermsak Nariwong and Dr. R. L. Soni, consider the descriptions of blessings in nos. 35-38 to indicate the state of arahant, I agree with Thapayay-kan Sayadaw who says that even non-arahants, if well trained in meditation, can benefit from these blessings. To be precise, the description of nirvana as “an unshakeable mind” (blessing no. 35) in the *Mangala-sutta* indicates at least the person who enjoys this blessing has achieved the *sotapanna* stage as we can see in the following stanza from the *Ratana-sutta*.

"As a post deep-planted in the earth stands unshaken by the winds from the four quarters, so, too, I declare is the righteous man who comprehends with wisdom the Noble Truths. This precious jewel is the Sangha. By this asseveration of the truth may there be happiness."

Indeed, the *Lokavipatti-sutta* in the *Anguttara-nikaya* also seems to suggest that persons of all *ariya* levels are not consumed with the eight worldly conditions, and that only ordinary persons are. This means even a *sotapanna* can considerably withstand the worldly conditions.

Moreover, even people who have done sufficient mind training using, for example, reflection of death, of impermanence, or the *Satipatthana* meditation may still benefit from this blessing even they may yet to achieve *sotapanna*; they are unshakeable by certain whims of fortune in life. There are some who use their strong belief in the law of *kamma* to withstand the winds of the worldly conditions.

As far as the *ariya* persons are concerned, we can see in the life of Lady Visakha who became *sotapanna* at the age of seven but could still be overcome by grief when her granddaughter died. Some meditating monks, including Venerable Ananda who was *sotapanna*, cried when the Buddha passed away. *Sotapanna* still suffers from some negative emotions, though to a much lesser degree compared with an ordinary person; but a *sotapanna* is certainly unshakeable in his belief in the Buddha and the true potentials of His message in ending life's miseries. He is truly and firmly on the path, having removed doubt, wrong view and dogmatic view.

The description of nirvana in the blessing no. 36 as “no sorrow” (*a-sokam*) can also be applicable, not only to an *arahant*, but also to an *ariya* person of non-returner known as *anagami* because an *anagami* has eradicated attachment (*lobha*) and destructive emotion (*dosa*). As discussed, whoever is well trained in mind development, *bhavana*, can also benefit to a certain extent from this blessing even if he is yet to become *sotapanna*.

The blessing no. 37 is to achieve “stainless or spotless heart” (*vi-rajam*). Depending on what we take to mean the stain or spot here, it can be from *sotapanna* to *arahant*. In the *Dhammacakka-pavattana-sutta*, Venerable Kodannya's

sotapatti achievement is spoken of as having stainless or spotless dhamma eye. So, it is perfectly sensible that this “spotless mind” may refer to the experience of a *sotapanna*. Different stages of the four *ariya* achievement are about removing various stains, called fetter, from one’s heart. The ten fetters (*samyojana*) are:

- (a) belief in the permanence of personality (*sakkayaditthi*); doubt in the Buddha and his teaching (*vicikiccha*); clinging to rituals and superstitions (*silabbataparamasa*);
- (b) craving for sensual enjoyment (*kama-raga*); ill-will (*vyapada/ patigha*); craving for existence in fine-material worlds (*rupa-raga*)
- (c) craving for existence in worlds without material form (*arupa-raga*); conceit (*mana*); restlessness (*uddhacca*) and ignorance (*avijja*).

Three kinds of fetter in (a) are removed by a stream-enterer or *sotapanna*. Three other in (b) which are popularly known as *lobha* (attachment) and *dosa* (anger), are weakened by once-returner or *sakadagami* and totally eradicated by non-returner or *anagami*. In fact, the *sakadagami* also weakens delusion. The stains in (c) are totally overcome only by an arahant.

Therefore, this blessing of possessing a stainless heart definitely refers to the experience of an *ariya* person, with arahant at the highest level having cleansed all the stains, usually summarised as greed, hatred and delusion.

The last blessing, no. 38, is a completely *secure* mind, no matter what is going on around us. This is the state of total fearlessness. An arahant is emotionally perfectly secure

here and now because in his hearts and minds all the stains which are the causes of shaken emotions have been uprooted. An arahant is also secure from the torment of repeated rebirths, because he has put an end to all forms of desire, as in described in the *Ratana-sutta*:

“Their past *kamma* is spent, their new *kamma* no more arises, their mind is unattached to future becoming. Their germ of rebirth-consciousness has died, they have no more desire for re-living. Those wise men fade out of existence as the flame of this lamp which has just faded away. This precious jewel is the Sangha. By this asseveration of the truth may there be happiness.”

(Translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

Endowed with these 38 blessings, one can not be defeated in any aspect of life, but is victorious and happy everywhere. Just as the lotus flower, once grown above the water, it is not stained by the muddy water; it needs not fear the stain of the mud any more. In fact, if at all, the lotus has all the reasons to be grateful to the muddy water for its support; instead of running away, it is living in harmony with it but at the same time also remains unattached, unaffected and therefore free.

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- Chinese New Year Blessing
- Thingkyan/ Songran Lunar New Year, Water festival
- Vesak Day cum OBVS anniversary Celebration
- Vassa Robe Offering Ceremony
- Seven Lunar Month: Transferring Merits
- End of Buddhist Lent & Abhidhamma Day
- Kathina Robe Offering Ceremony

Regular Activities of OBVS

- Daily Morning chanting and meditation 6:15am to 7:00am & Evening chanting & meditation 7:30pm to 9:00pm.
- Every Sunday from 9:30am to 11:30am, devotees chant the 30 Paramitas and Dhammacakkappavattana sutta, meditate and listen to Dhamma talks by our Resident Monks.
- Every 2nd Sunday of the month from 9:30am to 5pm, we have our monthly retreat led by our Resident Monks.

Apart from the activities at our Vihara, our Chief Monk and resident monks also give Dhamma talks outside on the invitation and arrangement of other temples, Buddhist centres and devotees' homes for blessings, teaching the dhamma, house warming, marriage blessing and funeral service.

We also conduct Dhamma classes for school children during school holiday and other Dhamma courses like Pali class, chanting class, Abhidhamma class, Sutta studies class and so on.

Besides Dhamma classes, we also provide language courses like Mandarin conversation class, English conversation class, Thai, Burmese, Shan written and spoken language classes.

Apart from the language classes, we also have PLC (Programming Logic Control) training course, Auto CAD class, fruit carving and floral arrangement classes for our youth who are interested in these areas. All the secular courses are taught by our volunteer teachers free of charge.

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