



Dhammapada Reflections

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Ajahn Munindo

Volume Three

Dedication

We would like to acknowledge the support of many people in the preparation of this book, especially that of the Kataññutā group in Malaysia, Singapore and Australia, for bringing it into production.

DHAMMAPADA REFLECTIONS

Volume 3

*52 verses from the Dhammapada
with comments by*

Ajahn Munindo



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Dhammapada Reflections
by Ajahn Munindo

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Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jinati
'The gift of Dhamma surpasses all gifts'

Cover photo offered by Gary Morrison

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Preface

(Adapted from Volume One)

It has long been the tradition in Buddhist countries for the laity to visit their local monastery each new-moon and full-moon to hear a Dhamma talk. Indeed, the Buddha himself encouraged his Sangha to maintain this fortnightly observance. Although we now live in a world where the phases of the moon have less significance, for many it still helps to be reminded of the ancient tradition of which we are a part.

In September 2007 we started to send out verses from the Dhammapada selected from *A Dhammapada for Contemplation*, 2006. Each 'moon day' one verse was offered, supported by a short reflection on the verse. This programme is now quite well known, passed on from one person to the next by word of mouth and Cc-ed emails. I hear from people in different parts of the world who appreciate receiving a timely reminder of the ancient way as they go about their busy lives. Others look forward each new and full-moon evening to opening their emails when they get

home from work. They are used privately, copied extensively, translated, and passed around. I hear they also form the basis for discussion at some weekly meditation group meetings.

It has been my intention that by sharing my personal reflections in this way, others might feel encouraged to engage their own contemplative ability. There is perhaps a tendency for Buddhist practitioners in the West to try to find peace and understanding by stopping all thinking. Yet the Buddha tells us that it is by 'wise reflection', that we come to see the true nature of our minds, not through just stopping thought.

I am indebted to many who have helped in the preparation of this material. For the Dhammapada verses themselves I consulted several authoritative versions. In particular I have used the works by Ven. Narada Thera (B.M.S. 1978), Ven. Ananda Maitreya Thera (Lotsawa 1988), Daw Mya Tin and the editors of the Burmese Pitaka Association (1987), and Ajahn Thanissaro. For the recorded stories associated with the verses I turned to www.tipitaka.net.

When I had heard from enough people that a book version of these reflections would be useful it was to my good friend Ron Lumsden that I turned. His considerable editing skill has helped craft my work, making it

ready for a more wide-spread audience.

May the blessings that arise from the compilation of this small book be shared with all who have been involved in its production and sponsorship. May all who seek the way find it and experience the freedom at its end. May all beings seek the way.

Bhikkhu Munindo
Aruna Ratanagiri Buddhist Monastery
Northumberland, UK
Rainy Season Retreat (Vassa) 2009

Preface to Volume Three

These Dhammapada verses and comments follow on from the first and second volumes in this series. As before, they are slightly re-edited versions of what was originally sent out to a global network of participants in this programme. If you would like to receive the emails directly each fortnight, please sign up at:

<https://ratanagiri.org.uk/teachings/dhammapada-reflections>

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Dhammapada Reflections

Appreciative awareness leads to life;
heedless avoidance is the path to death.
Those who are truly aware are fully alive,
while those who are heedless
are as if already dead.

v. 21

We all know the Buddha praised the cultivation of awareness. But how do we know the right thing to be aware of in any given moment? The objects are so varied: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations and mental impressions. One exercise in awareness could be simply attending to the changing, unstable nature of all things, until we start to see them as unreliable, not really worth clinging to. This is to be aware of the characteristic of the 'contents' of experience. What happens if we direct awareness towards the 'context' of experience? Is the characteristic of the context in which all objects of attention manifest the same?

Knowing the Way for oneself,
walk it thoroughly.
Do not allow the needs of others,
however demanding,
to bring about distraction.

v. 166

At first glance this verse could sound as if we are being taught not to care about others, but the Buddha is really pointing to where the right emphasis in our practice lies. If there is an oxygen shortage in an aeroplane, the captain tells the passengers to put on their own masks first, before attempting to help others. This is not to stop parents helping their children, but so that they can help them. Under stress we can lose perspective and act in ways that make things worse. The Buddha saw how easily distracted and confused unenlightened people could become, and when he had announced he was dying, he said that those who were serious about honouring him would not concern themselves with bringing him flowers. Instead they would intensify their focus on practising what he had taught.

If you walk the path,
you will arrive at the end of suffering.
Having beheld this myself,
I proclaim the Way which removes all thorns.

v. 275

Life hurts. The most natural thing is to seek a way of being in this world that is free from hurt. Those who have walked this way before us speak about the indescribable sense of relief on reaching the land of freedom, but they also point out that to reach it requires skilful effort. The Buddha delivered this verse to a group of monks as they were chatting about a trip they had been on together. He directed the discussion away from talk concerning the roads and rivers they had crossed, towards consideration of their inner terrain. The Teacher advises us to use our limited time and energy in a way that takes us in the direction we most want to go.

Just as a fletcher shapes an arrow,
so the wise develop the mind;
so excitable, uncertain
and difficult to control.

v. 33

Bringing body and mind in line with that which is true calls for a special kind of skill. Just when we thought we had our spiritual practice in order, we trip and fall again. But it doesn't matter if we stumble from time to time. Learning to walk is like that, falling over is part of it. The skill worth developing is the agility which finds us readily picking ourselves up and beginning again; without looking back.

Those who cease
to set up like against dislike,
who are cooled,
who are not swayed
by worldly conditions –
these I call great beings.

v. 418

Liking and disliking can happen so quickly that we may feel we have no control over them. Somebody says something pleasant and we like them. Another person says something hurtful and we dislike them. It might be true that we can't stop liking and disliking arising, but if we slow down a little we might notice that in fact we do have a choice; whether or not to follow the liking or disliking, whether or not to make a 'me' out of them. When awareness is well established, liking and disliking can be seen as movement taking place in a larger reality. What is that reality?

Life is not easy for those
who have a sense of shame,
who are modest, pure-minded and detached,
morally upright and reflective.

v. 245

If we find ourselves thinking, 'This is just too much, I can't let go of this one', we need to be extra careful. It is easy to let go of minor attachments, but the really serious ones are a different story. The Buddha knew about that different story, the one we tend to believe when faced with deep attachments. But the truth is still the truth, no matter how hard it feels; all suffering is rooted in attachment, which is why the Buddha gave us teachings like this verse. It really is hard to remain true when the forces of delusion pull at us. Whether it is the outer influences of sense objects or the inner currents of conditioning which tell us we are weak and unable, we resolutely seek the power to override those forces by turning to the Refuges. This is not just replacing a negative story with a positive one, but calling on reality to be our refuge.

To avoid bringing harm to living beings
who, like us, seek contentment,
is to bring happiness to ourselves.

v. 132

Sometimes what we do leads to happiness. At other times what we don't do leads to happiness. Here the Buddha is saying that we should be aware of how the effort not to harm living beings brings happiness, not just for those who therefore live free from fear and pain, but also for ourselves. In a world where our worth is often measured in terms of our productivity, we can become caught in feeling that we always have to do something to make things better. At times, though, it is restraint that matters most.

All pollution is cleared
from the minds of those who are vigilant,
training themselves day and night,
and whose lives are fully intent upon liberation.

v. 226

If we are confident about the path and direction in which we are travelling, we won't spend time in aimless wandering. Hence the teachings encourage us to be vigilant. Energy and devotion to spiritual practice are not enough, however. Our lives need to be directed towards the right goal: experiencing for ourselves the state of perfect freedom from suffering. As we travel along the path, we can check to see whether our progress and direction are correct by observing the pollutions of mind. Greed, ill will, laziness, anxiety, hesitation: are they diminishing or are they increasing? We get to know the reality of the pollutions as and when they appear. We will learn about their disappearance, here and now, in the same way.

By endeavour, vigilance,
restraint and self-control,
let the wise make islands of themselves
which no flood can overwhelm.

v. 25

It may seem at times as if the Buddha contradicts himself. He teaches us to focus on developing loving-kindness towards all beings, but here he appears to be saying we should isolate ourselves. But all the Buddha's teachings are 'pointings'; they are not fixed positions. He was often asked to state where he stood in relation to a particular philosophical view. In all cases he tried to avoid giving the questioner any view to cling to. He didn't stand on anything; he accorded with Dhamma as it manifested. The path he taught is *Dhammavicaya*, investigation of reality. He said that he could only point the way; it is up to us to travel the way he showed.

Hasten to cultivate wisdom.
Make an island for yourself.
Freed from stain and defilement
you will enter noble being.

v. 236

We arrive at the state of noble being when we are at one with who we truly are. Our work is to recognize when we become false, pretending to be something or somebody we are not. Stains and defilements appear when we believe in the stories the mind tells us. If we feel resentment, we simply need to see the feeling of resentment clearly. If we feel fear, we simply need to see that feeling clearly. We don't need to pretend. We 'make an island' for ourselves by establishing awareness as the foundation in our life. This clear-seeing awareness can tell the difference between the real and the false, leading to freedom.

Like the tongue that can appreciate
the flavour of the soup
is one who can clearly discern the truth
after only a brief association with the wise.

v. 65

The number of retreats we go on is not as important as our ability to discern truth. The amount of time we spend sitting in meditation does not matter as much as our ability to see clearly what is in front of us. If our awareness is here-and-now, whole body-mind, and judgement-free, we can learn from all aspects of our life. If we have the good fortune to encounter wisdom in any form, we will recognize it. It won't have to appear Buddhist, up to date or even overtly wise. The heart will simply know it and be gladdened.

While in the midst
of those who are troubled,
to dwell free from troubling
is happiness indeed.

v. 198

When those around us are struggling, we might feel that somehow it is not quite right to be happy. The Buddha tells us the opposite. An external display of excessive delight would be out of place, but maintaining inner joy is perfectly suitable. In fact, to do so might be the very best thing we could offer to a troubled situation.

Strength of patience
is the might of noble beings;
they can be shackled,
endure verbal abuse and beatings
without resorting to anger.

v. 399

The force of self-righteousness within us needs taming. The more clever we are, the more careful we need to be. The more eloquent our speech, the more restraint is required. It is only when we know we can say 'no' to ourselves, when we know we don't always have to be the winner, that we can appreciate the transforming power of patient endurance.

These three ways
lead to radiant abiding:
asserting the truth,
not yielding to anger
and giving, even if you have only a little to share.

v. 224

We are the creators of the world. Our actions of body, speech and mind give form to the space we inhabit. Investing in inner awareness liberates us from dependence on the material world. The outer conditions of our life come and go: sometimes they are agreeable and rewarding, at other times wearisome and disappointing. But we can always make the effort to speak truth. We can always wait before succumbing to anger. And no matter how much or how little we own, we can always give. Thus we already have the power to create a beautiful abiding.

Those who live impeccably,
who are discerning, intelligent and virtuous –
they are continually praised by the wise.
Who would cast blame on those
who in their being are like gold?
Even the gods praise them.

v. 229-230

Who do we compare ourselves with? The mental habit of comparing ourselves with others is mostly an expression of inner confusion, leading to more unhappiness. For the radiance of our true being to shine freely, all compulsive comparing must cease, but while we are still suffering from this habit it doesn't help if we merely hold images of those more popular, wealthy or beautiful in our mind. It is better to compare ourselves with those who live impeccably, those who are more awake. Some of the Buddha's greatest disciples were neither popular nor beautiful, but were greatly admired by all who could see clearly.

Bemoaning your own lot or envying the gains of others
obstructs peace of mind.

But being contented even with modest gains,
pure in livelihood and energetic,
you will be held in high esteem.

v. 365-366

This simple truth easily escapes us. Sadly, we are too quick to admire and emulate those who are not particularly wise. Here a very wise Teacher is holding up a mirror and asking, 'Do you see what you are doing? Can you understand why you are unhappy?' He is not criticizing or condemning us, but neither is he letting us get away with our habits. Out of compassion, he urges us to see the consequences of our unawareness. At times it can appear that there is always something more we need to do, to gain, to get rid of. Even the spiritual life can seem like a tedious treadmill. Always believing in the way things seem, however, is not the way to peace. Contentment could take the place of self-pity if we stop heedlessly comparing ourselves with others.

Do not rest contented because you keep
all the rules and regulations,
or because you achieve great learning.
Do not feel satisfied because you attain meditative absorption,
or because you can dwell in the bliss of solitude.
Only when you arrive at the complete eradication
of all ignorance and conceit should you be content.

v. 271-272

Reading or hearing such profound teaching might give rise to a sense of urgency in practice – or it might cause us to give up because we feel we can't do it. How we engage with ideals determines whether we are strengthened or weakened by them; the ideals themselves are not responsible. It matters that our ideals should accord with Truth, but it also matters that we shouldn't mistake an image of the goal for the goal itself. The Buddha wanted us to aim high; as high as can be and then further, but he didn't want us to grasp the ideal and ignore our lowliness. Like a compass, the image of the goal offers direction – but of course, we don't keep our eyes constantly on the compass. So long as we are heading in the right direction, we practise with that which is directly in front of us.

A master is one who has let go
of all craving and clinging to the world;
who has seen the truth beyond forms,
yet is possessed of a profound knowledge of words.
Such a great being can be said to have finished the task.

v. 352

Letting go is not something we do, it is something which happens when we see how what we do causes suffering. So long as we are caught in trying to let go, the 'me' which is trying creates imbalance. But not trying isn't correct either. What can we do to fulfil the great task of finding freedom? What does it mean to make right effort? One aspect of right effort is examining the kind of effort we are already making. Is what we are doing a form of self-seeking, or does it come from a deeper, quieter place, a simple interest in what is true? We know we want to be free from suffering, but does our way of wanting that freedom actually help? Even wanting to be free can create obstructions if we cling to it. Our aspiration to see 'the truth beyond forms' can support right effort if we slow down, remember kindness and examine how we are receiving our present experience.

As an elephant
resolutely drags itself from a swamp,
uplift yourself with the inspiration
of cultivated attention.

v. 327

The energy of inspiration can be generated by wise reflection. With the right kind of effort insurmountable situations can be managed, the unendurable can be endured. Inspiration has the power to transform our lives and our world. When wise reflection shows us that heedfulness helps and heedlessness hinders; our hearts respond by inclining towards the helpful. Balanced awareness rightly reveals the extent of the task we have ahead of us, with our inner world obstructed by ignorance and our outer world fraught with injustice. But the important question is how we meet this task. What is needed is not more force, but careful consideration of cause and effect. If clear seeing and kindness were to motivate us, the swamp of heedless habits would appear less daunting. Cultivated attention shows us what works, and confidence naturally follows.

Those who arrive at the state of perfect freedom
through right understanding
are unperturbed in body, speech or mind.
They remain unshaken by life's vicissitudes.

v. 96

The very best way to accommodate uncertainty is through right understanding, or right view. To expect to be always at ease with uncertainty would be naive, but we shouldn't assume that we must be defined by it. Life, change and all the rest of it might appear to be too much, but life itself is never too much; it is always 'just so'. If it was really too much, the Buddha could never have realized freedom while still alive. The view we hold is what makes the difference. If we take ourselves too seriously the situation can seem intolerable; we become tense, limiting possibilities for insight and sensitivity. Instead we could try relaxing and imagining an unconditioned reality in which all the changing conditions simply appear to arise and cease. Wise letting go leads to an expanded awareness and a fresh perspective on what we were doing which made it seem we had a problem.

It is not easy to be born as a human being
and to live this mortal life.
It is not easy to have the opportunity to hear Dhamma
and rare for a Buddha to arise.

v. 182

In terms of here and now, we are born as human beings whenever we have mindfulness and integrity. Because of our tendency to compromise Dhamma principles, this task becomes difficult; following preferences is much easier. However, merely to follow liking and disliking is not living as we could be living. Instead we could reflect on cause and effect, on what happened last time we allowed ourselves to become lost in experience. We are fortunate these days to have ready access to Dhamma, but the Dhamma is hard to hear because we have created obstructions by having followed our preferences for so long. When the Buddha was alive, some of his disciples became enlightened at once by simply listening as he taught the Dhamma. Why can't we listen in the same way, get the message and drop the burden? If we did that, the 'Buddha' would appear here and now.

Neither mother, father
nor any other relative
can give you the blessings generated
by your own well-directed heart.

v. 43

If the heart is well-directed, we feel there is something we can fall back on when things get difficult. If we experience despair, disappointment, disillusionment, the heart doesn't have to sink into hopelessness. Nor does it have to seek security in hope. The refuge we can fall back on is not any thing or state at all; it is a way. Having looked into the consequences of grasping for long enough, we now seek confidence in letting go of fixed positions. We still have opinions and preferences, but we are not so committed to finding security in them. Learning to let go is the way to generate blessings.

The Awakened Ones can but point the way;
we must make the effort ourselves.
Those who reflect wisely and enter the path
are freed from the fetters of Mara.

v. 276

‘What effort should I make? Should I do something about this situation or simply watch my mind?’ Such moments of not-knowing are precious. Uncertainty does not have to be seen as failing. Indeed, we might miss something important if we are in a hurry to push past it. The fact is that we don’t know what to do and there is not necessarily any fault in that. If, however, we’re completely caught in the momentum of wanting to escape suffering, we may miss learning from the truth of the situation as it is. With the confidence that comes from our commitment to precepts, we can afford to trust in being patient and aware of ‘not knowing’ and the uncomfortable feelings that come with it. We can feel the force of the momentum of wanting to get away from it, to ‘solve it’, but stubbornly refuse to be pulled along. We can experiment with waiting until the feeling of being driven subsides, and then quietly listen to what intuition suggests we could do.

Disciples of the Buddha
are fully awake,
dwelling both day and night
in contemplation of Reality.

v. 297

What the Buddha and all his realized disciples awakened to, was the truth that was right in front of them. Like many other millions of seekers, the Buddha-to-be had been looking for the answers to his deep questions in techniques and belief systems. The rigours of renunciation had even driven him near to death; yet none of it had worked. What did work however was renouncing all effort to avoid suffering, either by way of indulgence in pleasure or indulgence in pain, and taking the experience of suffering itself as his teacher. The Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha are his way of helping us not waste time. He wanted his disciples to awaken to the truth that exists here and now; to discover for themselves the joy and clarity which comes with Right Understanding.

When those who are wise dwell in contemplation
of the transient nature of the body-mind
and of all conditioned existence,
they experience joy and delight,
seeing through to the inherently secure.

v. 374

All the Buddha's teachings point to that which is unchanging, undying, inherently satisfactory. To wake up from the dream we live in, we dwell in contemplation on the changing, dying, unsatisfactory nature of conditioned existence. In our dream world we believe that attaching to things as if they were ultimate will make us happy. With his ready access to the unconditioned reality, the Buddha knew that clinging to any aspect of conditioned reality was a direct route to disappointment. He didn't teach this so we would create a philosophy about how unreliable and regrettable everything is. He lived in this world as we do, but didn't suffer and go on about how sad it all is. Life can seem sad and regrettable so long as we are identified as the body-mind. The Buddha's identity was undefinable because he didn't cling to anything, and his happiness was unshakeable because it didn't depend on anything.

Not insulting, not harming,
cultivating restraint,
with respect for the training,
modesty in eating, contentment
with one's dwelling place
and devotion to mindful intent;
this is the Teaching of the Buddha.

v. 185

Modesty and contentment are not part of consumer culture, but they are part of Buddhist culture. It is true that we need enthusiasm and energy, commitment and concentration, if we wish to reach the goal of liberation. But too much of these 'hard virtues' and we create unnecessary obstructions for ourselves. When we are mindful, it is possible that we will know if we are out of balance and adjust accordingly. The 'soft virtues' of contentment, modesty, humility are less attractive to our spiritual egos, but they might be just what is needed for dropping the burden.

... if you cannot find a good companion
of integrity and wisdom,
then, like a king departing a conquered land
or a lone elephant wandering the forest,
walk alone.

v. 329

Integrity is the foundation of our practice. Without it nothing develops. We might have eloquent speech, and perhaps our articles have been published in popular journals or online, but if integrity is lacking, practice hasn't begun. Travelling the spiritual path alone is not a sign of failure; it may mean quite the opposite. If those around us are willing to compromise on impeccability, it is better for us to be alone.

In one whose mind is unsteady,
whose heart is not prepared with true teachings,
whose faith is not matured,
the fullness of wisdom is not yet manifest.

v. 38

This Dhammapada verse may describe many of us: brought up with minimal spiritual education, minds locked in thinking mode, and incapable of giving ourselves whole-heartedly to anything. Yet we trust that real wisdom exists and that we have a chance of realizing it. It is this 'initial' type of faith that got us started and brought us thus far. Now we must build on it. Once we have tasted the benefits of practice, faith is verified and manifests quite differently. It becomes a reliable source of energy. In the beginning we were motivated by an idea or an intuition. Now we are invited to trust in an awareness informed by experience. This feels like spending money earned by our own efforts rather than handed out by someone else.

Though subtle, elusive and hard to see,
the protected and guarded mind
leads to ease of being.
One who is alert should tend and watch over this mind.

v. 36

When we watch over this heart-mind we cultivate inner light. When light in our outer world is dim we are inclined to trip over things, or perhaps mistake a piece of rope for a snake and run away in a completely unnecessary panic. Similarly, a lack of inner illumination can cause us to react in ill-judged ways, destroying our heart's natural sense of ease. It is because we don't see states of mind clearly that we react and make things worse. For example, perhaps we still feel hurt by something which happened years ago, and have dwelt on bitterness ever since because we didn't see the truth of our reaction. Forgiveness is not a synthetic virtue with which to paste over our bruises. Although the memory of what happened might remain, we always have the choice of whether or not to invest that memory with resentment. This practice is subtle and hard to see, but it is worth the effort.

Whoever is intent on goodness
should know this:
a lack of self-restraint is disastrous.
Do not allow greed and misconduct
to prolong your misery.

v. 248

The Buddha knows that life is not always easy. He knows that even the practice of observing the five precepts can be difficult. The story associated with this verse involves a group of five lay disciples who are each observing one or two of the five Buddhist precepts. They each insist that theirs is the most difficult to cultivate and therefore by implication the most worthy. Arguing among themselves they approach the Buddha, each wanting him to praise his own practice and support their view that the precepts being kept are the most important. Instead the Teacher admonishes them, saying that none of the precepts is easy to keep, nor are any of them unimportant, and that everyone should train themselves in all five.

One should not be considered worthy of respect
because of birth or background or any outer sign.

It is purity and the realization of truth
that determine one's worth.

v. 393

Liberated beings are never fooled by the way things appear to be. They know the difference between outer 'form' which the eye sees, and 'actuality' which the heart knows. They naturally respect and take delight in the inherent beauty of the 'real'. Our awareness, however, is limited because of fixed views, and we must take care not to casually follow our mind's conditioning. So long as we are unaware of truth, we are susceptible to being impressed by outer forms. Transient beauty, intense emotions, wealth; all these and more intimidate us into unhelpful desires, into wanting that which brings no lasting benefit. Whenever we offer respect towards the truth which is beyond intimidation, our affinity with that truth increases.

It is always a pleasure
not to have to encounter fools.
It is always good to see noble beings,
and a delight to live with them.

v. 206

The Buddha gave this short teaching referring to conditions in the outer world, and it is not difficult to agree. We can also contemplate the spirit of this message with reference to our inner world; our mind states. How does it feel when we generate foolish thoughts? What happens when we cease to indulge in them? What is the effect of witnessing our heart's wholesome aspirations? Is it possible to dwell for extended periods in noble intentions?

From endearment springs grief.
From endearment springs fear of loss.
Yet if one is free from endearment
there is no grief,
so how could there be fear?

v. 212

One way of reading this text is that we are wrong to hold things dear: family, friends, memories. That initial interpretation blames the feelings themselves for our suffering. But the Buddha is not just talking about the feelings; he is pointing to how we might be free. Is it possible to feel endearment and be free at the same time? When he heard that his two chief disciples, Venerables Sariputta and Moggallana, had died, the Buddha commented that it was as if the sun and the moon had gone from the sky. That doesn't sound like someone who didn't feel anything. Knowing the truth of feelings means that we no longer find our sense of identity in them, but letting go of them does not mean they disappear. In what are all these feelings arising and ceasing? That was the Buddha's abiding; hence he could feel fully and freely, without suffering.

A single word of truth
which calms the mind
is better to hear than a thousand
irrelevant words.

v. 100

Listening to many hours of Dhamma talks might be helpful, but the Buddha says that even one word of Dhamma can be enough. What matters is whether that word truly touches our hearts. Does it ring true? Truth is what heals us, not mere words. Living in a world that is distracted by materialism, we often assume that more is better. Yet one small passport can get us comfortably through immigration and is worth more than a truckload of books. They are both paper – what is the difference? We already know we need to attend to quality, not just quantity. This Dhammapada verse encourages us to take our understanding deeper.

Refrain from doing evil,
cultivate that which is good;
purify the heart.
This is the Way of the Awakened Ones.

v. 183

The first stage of cultivating the way is refraining from following all that is evil. It is about learning to say 'no' to ourselves when we need to. As a result, we discover later that we can say 'yes' without losing ourselves. If we don't recognize our unwholesome impulses for what they are, we might think the bad stuff is only in other people. The second stage of cultivating the way is developing that which is good. Even if it is only a small moment of goodness, don't dismiss it. The third stage is purifying our effort from the taint of 'me'. Even when we have completely finished redecorating a room, the smell of paint fumes remains. Though our practice might be growing stronger, the sense of self-importance could be growing stronger too.

Tasting the flavour of solitude
and the nectar of peace,
those who drink the joy
that is the essence of reality
abide free from fear of evil.

v. 205

Physicians advise us to nourish the body by healthy eating and taking regular exercise. The Buddha advises us to nourish the heart with Truth. If we allow ourselves to become too busy, we forget how refreshing it can be to spend time alone, to take time for ourselves, and a sense of discontent gradually increases until we believe we are inherently lacking. This perception might please the consumer culture, but it doesn't give us inner strength. Spiritual practice sometimes involves daring to take less and trusting in our heart's natural undefiled state.

While in the midst
of those who hate,
to dwell free from hating
is happiness indeed.

v. 197

Usually we equate happiness with getting what we want. Might there be other forms of happiness? For all of us there are times when we don't get what we want, or we get what we definitely do not want. In this verse the Buddha is pointing to a quality of happiness which arises irrespective of whether or not we get what we want, a happiness which arises with wisdom. Wisdom knows that some conditions can be changed and some cannot. We can't, for instance, stop others from feeling hatred, but we can make the effort not to be pulled into their anger. And despite what some may say, this is not quietism. It is taking responsibility for what is ours and maintaining equanimity towards that which is not.

One who refrains from causing harm
by way of body, speech or mind
can be called a great being.

v. 391

Greatness could be defined in terms of the power we have or the possessions we own, but in the mind of the Buddha it is better determined by how people conduct themselves. This is a very practical way of assessing how trustworthy people may be. Are they restrained in how they act and in what they say? Are they kind? We can't tell what is happening inwardly, but we can observe the influence they have on the world around them.

As a stormy wind can uproot a frail tree,
so one who holds heedlessly to pleasure,
indulges in food and is indolent
can be uprooted by Mara.

v. 7

How can we know the right amount of things? Our senses and society often tell us that we need more. The global economy is based on conditioning us to believe we lack things. If our refuge is in an expanded awareness, freed from the compulsive habit of taking sides, we are in a position to contemplate the conditioning process. It is essential to recognize that we don't have to be enslaved by our environment. The work of inner reflection can lead to a confidence independent of popular belief or cultural bias. We are allowed to experiment with not eating so much or having an opinion on everything. It's fine to be quiet and cultivate contentment. Contentment doesn't have to mean abdication. What matters is that when a storm strikes, does it blow us over? From where do we draw our strength?

Like the bamboo which destroys itself as it bears fruit,
so fools harm themselves by holding to wrong views
and deriding those worthy ones
who live in harmony with the Way.

v. 164

It is easy to criticize weakness in others. It is hard to recognize and remedy faults within ourselves. At one level it can even feel good to elevate ourselves as we put others down, but such feelings cannot be trusted. One-upmanship is unlikely to contribute to harmony. Of course, there are times when criticism is called for, but for it to be constructive we must have wholesome intention. To know our intention accurately probably means that we should slow down a little, wait and listen inwardly before we speak.

More than a thief,
more than an enemy,
a misdirected heart
brings one to harm.

v. 42

A misdirected heart leads us to harm when it obstructs access to the natural state of contentment. When awareness fails and we attach, the act of clinging feeds into confused thinking and divisive action. True, self-existing well-being arises effortlessly for those who are at one with what is; with Dhamma. A liberated being doesn't have to try to be contented or not be discontented. Having seen the suffering caused by clinging, all inclination to attach to fixed positions has gone. The unobstructed heart leads only to understanding and ease.

When we see clearly
our own lack of virtue
we are filled with grief;
here and hereafter we grieve.

v. 15

If we were to stub our toe and not feel pain we would be in trouble. Pain is a message saying, 'Pay attention.' Similarly, if we were to act or speak cruelly without feeling remorse in our heart, we would be in trouble. How could we learn? Despite appearances, remorse is not something going wrong. It is there to protect us, a sort of immune system. We can listen to it, accept it, invite the pain in our hearts to teach us how not to follow heedlessness in future. Becoming lost in remorse will lead to guilt; we've missed the point. We don't learn by taking delight in hating ourselves or others for making a mistake.

To harm living beings who, like us, seek contentment,
is to bring harm to ourselves.

v. 131

Self-interest can be used in our pursuit of right action. When faced with danger we easily feel threatened, our hearts become inflamed and wise discernment is obscured. However, instead of losing ourselves in defensive reaction, right training can help us remember that we are all in this together. We all share the wish to be free from suffering. Probably an aggressor has forgotten this fact, hence his intention to harm us; but if we seek to harm him in return, only increased mutual suffering ensues. Regular recollection on the universality of suffering can protect us from falling into this vortex. Spending a short period of time each day considering how we are all seeking contentment can give rise to feelings of empathy and compassion. This is not an argument of which we will be convinced by reflection alone, but if we immerse ourselves in this contemplation we could find the benefit for ourselves.

As one who is entrusted
with precious cargo
would remain vigilant and protective,
avoid evil as if it were poison.

v. 123

We do have precious cargo, human consciousness. And we love life, hence the effort we make to protect it. The Buddha is saying we should watch over this good fortune which we have inherited by avoiding all evil actions. Great benefit can be discovered in this life if we are careful and cultivate wisdom. Similarly, great suffering can arise if we are heedless. Evil is a strong word and we might prefer not to use it, but we are naive not to contemplate it. When the heart is possessed by greed or hatred, evil actions may follow. Once they are performed there will be painful consequences. Nobody else can save us from heedlessness, not even the Buddha. Through kindness and wise reflection we contribute to the protection of all beings.

Those who speak truth
and give gentle encouragement,
contending with no-one,
these do I call great beings.

v. 408

There are times when we need to be assertive, as our body's immune system is assertive when dealing with disease. But let's not make assertiveness our only way of being. It can appear strong and impressive; it gets results; but it has limitations. There are times when gentleness is what is called for. Gentle speech which is true and encouraging also produces results.

Distorted views
which give rise to seeing right as wrong
and wrong as right
cause beings to disintegrate.

v. 318

We sometimes need reminding that the causes of suffering, our own and that of the world, are complex. Often it is not what is happening in the outer world that leads to our struggles, but how we view things. Assuming the validity of views and opinions just because they are commonly held is not wise; convenient, perhaps, but that is not a good reason to invest in them. It is simplistic to collude with collective thinking without looking into the consequences. Having preferences is natural, but clinging to them and finding identity by holding to them leads to prejudice and disintegration, inwardly and outwardly.

You will not succeed in your pursuit of happiness
if it is at the expense of others' well-being.
The snare of ill-will can still entangle you.

v. 291

Happiness is like food, it nourishes us. For happiness to be wholesome and genuinely sustaining, however, our efforts must come with empathy. Striving to be happy but lacking awareness of how we affect others is short-sighted. We may think we are generating causes for well-being, but in our hearts be harbouring jealousy or enmity.

Passed down by the wise is the knowledge that
though what is externally impressive loses its splendour,
and though our bodies will decay,
the truth itself outlasts all degeneration.

v. 151

Not only our bodies but all material objects are subject to the law of impermanence, as are social structures, institutions, relationships and organizations. Everything around us and within us is in a state of perpetual flux. For the sake of their balanced development it is necessary to protect children somewhat from this fact. For instance, we don't repeatedly remind them that their parents are mortal. But as we grow up, sooner or later we must admit that this is really how it is. Indeed, we need not just to admit this truth, but to embrace it, if we wish to accord wisely with changing conditions. The Buddha identified the law of impermanence as something beyond degeneration; something stable and secure, a Truth to which we can turn to find a frame of reference.

Through having empathy for others,
one sees that all beings are afraid
of harm and death.
Knowing this, one does not kill
or cause to be killed.

v. 129

Empathy is the essence of harmony. Throughout our lives we depend to varying degrees on others. If we forget that we all long for happiness and fear harm we risk being dominated by self-centred concerns, but we can learn to recognize that which we all share. Empathy supports insight into selflessness. Through empathy we see that others too, like us, hope not to be disappointed, and fear losing the things they hold dear. Even the wish to cause harm to another is a form of suffering we share with others. All those whose sense of identity comes from attaching to their body-mind are obliged to endure disharmony and the distorted thoughts and feelings which arise as a consequence. Letting go of attachment to this body-mind and recognizing our identity in understanding means disharmony simply won't arise.

Just like birds that leave no tracks in the air,
there are those whose minds do not cling
to temptations that are offered to them.
Their focus is the signless state of liberation,
which to others is indiscernible.

v. 92

Can we do what we do so completely, so fully, that we leave no tracks behind? Probably not. Our habits of clinging mean we tend to do things partially. Our speech can be manipulative, leaving uncertainty behind. Our actions can be self-seeking, leaving feelings of incompleteness behind. And our thoughts can be all over the place, leaving us confused. This subtle image of birds flying through the sky, with no tracks left behind, inspires us to live without clinging. In making this effort we align ourselves with those great beings who have done what needs to be done, leaving nothing but Truth behind.

Disciples of the Buddha
are fully awake,
dwelling both day and night
in contemplation of the Awakened One.

v. 296

We can admire our Teacher, the Buddha, without abandoning who and what we are right now. There are those who, when invited to dwell in contemplation of the spiritual master, betray themselves in their attempts to imitate another. The Buddha didn't want us to ignore who we feel ourselves to be and pretend to be somebody else; rather, he encouraged an open-hearted, clear-minded receptivity of 'this' person, here and now, including all our limitations and obsessions. Taking on a new set of conditioned habits in an attempt to be free from suffering is abdication, not liberation. In practice we include all of ourselves in a vast field of awareness, free of discrimination and bias, and in so doing we offer all of ourselves in service to Dhamma.

Remove the bonds of affection
as one might pluck an autumn flower.
Walk the Way that leads to liberation
explained by the Awakened One.

v. 285

We will not free ourselves from attachments by holding to opinions about how 'life' should be. 'Life' here refers to everything: self, others, material possessions. Even religious opinions lead to suffering if we cling to them in the wrong way. Freedom comes from recognizing how we hold onto things as we are holding onto them. Why do we resist the reality of change? Change is constant, yet we don't see it. Walking the Awakened One's Way to liberation means examining our relationship to all experience, agreeable and disagreeable. Every single moment of our life is an opportunity to learn how to let go, let be and understand.

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