

LIBERATION

RELEVANCE OF SUTTA-VINAYA

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Ven. Dhammavuddho Thero
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, there is a proliferation of books on Buddhism. Studying these books would inevitably result in imbibing some of the views and interpretations of the various writers on what the Buddha actually taught, which could result in some wrong views. On the other hand, there are some meditation teachers who advise their students not to study at all but to only meditate. In effect, what they are suggesting is for their students to listen to them only. Avoiding the two extremes, we should practise the middle way taught by the Buddha — investigate his discourses¹ and practise as best we can the Noble Eightfold Path, as he advised. The importance of the Buddha's discourses for the practice of the Dhamma, whether by lay people or by monks, can hardly be exaggerated.

The Buddha warned of the future when people would refuse to listen to his discourses (Suttas). Samyutta Nikaya Sutta 20.7 reads: "... in the future, those Suttas uttered by the Tathagata, deep, profound in meaning, transcending the world, concerning emptiness: to these when uttered they will not listen, will not give a ready ear, will not want to understand, to recite, to master them. But those discourses made by poets, mere poetry, a conglomeration of words and phrases, alien (outside the Buddha's teachings), *the utterances of disciples: to these when uttered they will listen, will give a ready ear, will want to understand, to recite, to master them.* Thus it is, monks, that the Suttas uttered by the Tathagata, deep, profound in meaning, transcending the world, concerning emptiness, will disappear. *Therefore, monks, train yourselves thus: To these very Suttas will we listen, give a ready ear, understand, recite and master them.*"

Instead of the Suttas themselves, many prefer to study other books or listen to others' teachings, which may be inconsistent with the Suttas. The resulting damage is two-fold:

- (i) The Suttas will disappear, and
- (ii) People will gain wrong understanding of the Dhamma.

¹ The Buddha's emphasis on much knowledge of the discourses can be found in, for example, Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 53 and Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 4.22.

NIKAYA

The Suttas are contained in the Sutta Pitaka (Treasury of Discourses), within which are five collections (nikayas). Of these, the first four are:

- (i) Digha Nikaya consists of three books of long discourses (34 Suttas);
- (ii) Majjhima Nikaya comprises three books containing middle length discourses (152 Suttas);
- (iii) Samyutta Nikaya contains about 2000 short discourses in five books; and
- (iv) Anguttara Nikaya contains about 2000 short discourses in five books.

Khuddaka Nikaya, the fifth, is the “minor” or “small” collection. Although termed “small”, it is in fact the largest as more and more books have been added to it over the years. It has grown to fifteen books in the Thai and Sri Lankan versions. In 1956, the Sangha Council in Burma added another three books, which are not the Buddha’s own words. These three additions are Milinda Panha, Petakopadesa and Nettipakarana. This is how the Khuddaka Nikaya grew from a minor collection to become a major collection! In the future, say in 500 or 1,000 years’ time, this would definitely create even more confusion. Out of the eighteen books now, probably only six are reliable in that they do not contradict the four Nikayas. These six reliable books are the Dhammapada, Sutta Nipata, Theragatha, Therigatha, Itivuttaka and Udana.

As Buddhists, we should be familiar with the Suttas and if possible obtain our own copies. It is a sad fact that whereas we rarely find Muslims without the Quran or Christians without the Bible, yet we find many Buddhists without the Nikayas.

DHAMMA-VINAYA IS OUR TEACHER

Nowadays, the Buddha’s teachings are often referred to as Tipitaka or Tripitaka (Three Treasuries), although they were called “Dhamma-Vinaya” by the Buddha in the discourses. In Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 4.180, *the Buddha specifically refers to Dhamma as the Suttas (discourses)*. Vinaya is the disciplinary code of monks and nuns. In the Nikayas, it is also implied that the Suttas are “Saddhamma” which means “true Dhamma”.

The true Dhamma is embodied in the earliest discourses of the Buddha found in the Digha, Majjhima, Samyutta and Anguttara Nikayas, and the six books of Khuddaka Nikaya mentioned above. These Nikayas are generally accepted by all schools of Buddhism to be the original teachings of the Buddha, unlike other books which are controversial because they contain some contradictions with the Nikayas. *The earliest discourses in the Nikayas are very consistent and contain the flavour of liberation from suffering.*

In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta (Digha Nikaya Sutta 16), which details the demise of the Buddha, *the Buddha advised the monks: “Whatever Dhamma-Vinaya I have pointed out and formulated for you, that will be your Teacher when I am gone.”* This is a very important statement the significance of which has been overlooked by many Buddhists. Because many Buddhists have not heard this advice or grasped its significance, they search far and wide for a teacher; a teacher they can be proud of and brag about his attainments, etc.. Some even travel halfway round the world or more in such a search.

These people create personality cults based on the perceived goodness of the teacher rather than on the Dhamma-Vinaya itself. In some cases, after many years, their master passes away leaving them high and dry. Despite the passage of time, the followers have not made much progress and have failed to taste the essence of the Dhamma. They would feel empty. As such, we must always remember that the Dhamma-Vinaya is our foremost Teacher.

Again, in Digha Nikaya Sutta 16, the Buddha said: *"Monks, be a lamp unto yourselves, be a refuge unto yourselves, with no other refuge. Take the Dhamma as your lamp, take the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge."* In other words, we should depend solely on ourselves and on the Buddha's words.

The Buddha's Words Take Precedence

Let us consider what happened after the Buddha's passing away. About 100 years after the Buddha passed into Nibbana, conflict arose among the monks. The Second Sangha Council was consequently called to resolve these differences. Ten points were disputed, one of which concerned whether we should always follow the advice of our Teacher. *In this case, it was decided that if a monk's teachings or instructions were in accordance with the Buddha's teachings (i.e. the earliest Suttas and Vinaya), then his words should be followed. However, if his instructions contradicted the Buddha's teachings, they should be ignored.*

Thus the Second Sangha Council's ruling on this matter was very clear and definite: the Buddha's words take precedence over any monk's words. Buddhists should therefore become familiar with the Suttas so that they can judge whether the instructions of monks or some other teachers are in accordance with the Buddha's teachings. This is why Buddhists should always remember the Dhamma-Vinaya is their foremost Teacher; more specifically for laypeople, the earliest discourses in the Nikayas.

Refuge only in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha

In the Suttas, the Buddha referred to a monk as a kalyanamitta (good friend). A monk is a good friend who introduces you to the Buddha's teachings and encourages you in the spiritual path. It is you, however, who have to take the three refuges (i.e. dependence) in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. But nowadays, some people have added a fourth refuge (i.e. refuge in a monk or a teacher) which contradicts the Buddha's teachings. This is made very clear in the Suttas.

For instance, in Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 84, there was an Arahant who taught very impressively and a king asked to take refuge in him. The Arahant replied that refuge could not be taken in him but only in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. The king then asked where the Buddha was. The Arahant explained that the Buddha had passed into Nibbana, but even so people should still take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. This shows we should always acknowledge the Buddha as our foremost Teacher, now embodied in his teachings (Dhamma-Vinaya). The Dhamma refers to his discourses (suttas). The Sangha is the community of monastics, ideally those who are Noble (Ariya)².

² Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 142.

World-renowned Teacher can have Wrong Views

It is very difficult to distinguish between an Ariya and a non-Ariya, and we cannot rely on hearsay alone. Recommendations that such and such is a very famous monk who has many high attainments, etc., are very unreliable.

As the Buddha stated in the Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 5.88, it is possible that a world-renowned monk of very senior status, with a huge following of lay and monastic disciples, and who is highly learned in the scriptures, can have wrong views. The Buddha gave us this warning for the future (i.e. nowadays) as he saw and knew that even such monks could not be relied upon. Therefore, the Suttas (and Vinaya for monastics) should be relied on and made our foremost teacher. Other teachers can be spiritual friends only.

In Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 4.180, the Buddha taught the great authorities. He advised that when any monk says that such and such are the teachings of the Buddha, we should, without scorning or welcoming his words compare those words with the Suttas and Vinaya. If they are not in accordance with the Suttas and Vinaya, we should reject them.

Again, this illustrates how a strong grasp of the Sutta-Vinaya is a reliable guide to what the Buddha actually taught. This knowledge enables us to distinguish between a teacher who teaches the true Dhamma and another who has wrong views.

Significance of Saddhamma

In Samyutta Nikaya Sutta 16.13, the Buddha warned that the true Dhamma would remain unadulterated for 500 years after his passing into Nibbana. Thereafter, it will become very difficult to distinguish the true teachings from the false. Why? Because although many of these later books contain a lot of Dhamma, some adhamma (i.e. what is contrary to the Dhamma) are added here and there. These alterations scattered throughout these texts are only noticeable if one is sharp and very well versed in the earliest suttas. Otherwise, one would find it very difficult to distinguish the later books from the earlier ones.

Analogy to Gold Trading

In this same Sutta, the Buddha likened this situation to gold trading. He said that at that time people still wanted to buy gold because only pure gold was being sold in the market. But one day, people would make counterfeit gold of such quality that it would be indistinguishable from real gold. Under these circumstances, people will become wary. They will be reluctant to buy gold because they are afraid what they buy may be counterfeit gold. In the same way, the Buddha said in the future the Dhamma would become polluted. When that happens, it will be very difficult to distinguish the true Dhamma from the false, and people will lose interest in the Dhamma. Therefore, we must take the trouble to find out what is the true Dhamma, and not become confused.

Importance of Right View

Why is it very important to ensure that we study only the true Dhamma? We know that the only path out of Samsara (round of rebirths) as taught by the Buddha is the Ariyan Eightfold Path. Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 117 states that the Ariyan Eightfold Path starts with Right View. Without Right View one has not entered upon the Path. According to this Sutta, Right

View will lead to Right Thought, and that will lead to Right Speech. Right Speech will lead to Right Action. Right Action, in turn, will lead to Right Livelihood, which leads to Right Effort. Finally, Right Effort will be the basis for Right Recollection which leads to Right Concentration. In this way, based on Right View, the factors of the Ariyan Eightfold Path are cultivated and developed one by one.

Samyutta Nikaya Sutta 45.1.8 also states that a person with Right View understands the Four Ariyan Truths. If a person fully understands the Ariyan Truths he will become an Arahant or a Pacceka Buddha, or even a Sammasambuddha. Even a comparatively shallow understanding of the Ariyan Truths will enable one to become an Ariya, a noble one. Right View is the condition for stream entry. Anguttara Nikaya Suttas 9.20, 10.63, and Samyutta Nikaya Sutta 13.1 confirm that the Sotapanna is endowed with Right View. Clearly, the first thing one must acquire in the practice of the Ariyan Eightfold Path is Right View. Right View is extremely important.

BENEFITS OF LISTENING TO DHAMMA

The Buddha called his disciples savakas (listeners or hearers), stressing the importance of listening to the Suttas. The Suttas and Vinaya show clearly that all people who attained the first stage of Ariyahood did so by listening to the Buddha's discourses. Today, we are very fortunate to have the Buddha's discourses, exactly as he spoke them, contained in the Nikayas. Reading the Suttas can be like sitting next to the Buddha and listening to him. It is wise not to waste this rare opportunity to investigate deeply into the earliest Suttas.

In Digha Nikaya Sutta 14, the Buddha stated that six Buddhas³ appeared over 91 world-cycles. That is to say, on average, a Buddha appeared once in over ten world-cycles. The Buddha gave a simile to illustrate the unimaginably long time span of a world cycle (Samyutta Nikaya 15.1.5). Rare, indeed, is a Sammasambuddha. We are blessed to live in the age of the Dhamma! This is as good as living during the Buddha's time. In fact, had we lived then, we might not have been able to familiarise ourselves with as many Suttas as we can now, when the discourses (about 5,000) are available in book form.

Sotapatti (Stream Entry) Attained by Listening to Dhamma

In Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 5.202, the five advantages of hearing the Dhamma are enumerated. One of them is the attainment of Right View. Since attaining Right View is synonymous with attaining Ariyahood, it is clear that hearing Dhamma can make one an Ariyan disciple.

Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 43 states that two conditions are needed for the arising of Right View:

- (i) Listening to the Dhamma, and
- (ii) Thorough consideration (yoniso manasikara)⁴.

³ Later books talk about 28 Buddhas. This is a good example to illustrate how things can be changed in later books. Similarly, one may not realise other more serious discrepancies, unless one is familiar with the Buddha's words in the Nikayas.

⁴ Yoniso Manasikara means being able to consider or attend to (manasikara) a problem up to its source (yoni), i.e. thoroughly, so the two words mean thorough consideration/attention.

This is the second confirmation that stream entry (First Path ariya)⁵ can be attained by listening to the Dhamma.

In Samyutta Nikaya Sutta 46.4.8, the Buddha gave another confirmation. He said that when one listens to the Dhamma with thorough attention, the five hindrances (nivarana) do not exist and the seven factors of enlightenment (bojjhanga) are complete. These are the conditions to become an Ariya. Therefore, if we listen to the Dhamma with thorough attention we can become Ariyas.

Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 10.75 tells about the person who is saved by Dhamma: "... for he has listened (savanena), he has done much learning (bahusacca), he has penetrated view, he wins partial release ... the ear for Dhamma (dhammasota) saves this person."

The word Sotapatti consists of sota meaning "stream" or "ear", and apatti meaning "entering into". Normally, Sotapatti is translated as "stream-entry" but it can also mean "ear-entry" — in the sense of the ear being penetrated by the Dhamma. A close study of the Suttas suggests that the latter translation is also valid because the Buddha's disciples were called savakas or listeners (of the Dhamma), and he generally referred to them as "Ariyan disciples" in the Suttas (e.g. Anguttara Nikaya Suttas 4.58 and 5.41).

Samyutta Nikaya Sutta 55.6.5 explains the four factors necessary to attain Sotapatti (Sotapattiyangani):

- (i) Associating with true persons, i.e. persons who understand the true Dhamma,
- (ii) Listening to the true Dhamma,
- (iii) Thorough consideration, and
- (iv) Practising Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, i.e. living your life according to the Dhamma — for instance, keeping the precepts etc..

Furthermore, we find in the Suttas and Vinaya that all the people who attained stream entry (First Path) did so by listening to the Dhamma. Such people were said to have attained the Vision of the Dhamma (dhammacakkhu), by which the Suttas explain as realizing that "All that is subject to arising/birth, is subject to cessation/death". Such a person is also said to have "understood the (basic) Dhamma, crossed beyond doubt, and become independent of others in the Buddha's teaching".

Sotapanna and Sakadagamin Do Not Need Perfect Concentration

In Anguttara Nikaya Suttas 3.85 and 9.12, the Buddha said that Sotapanna and Sakadagamin (first and second fruition Ariyas) have perfect morality. The third fruition Anagamin has perfect morality and perfect concentration. The fourth fruition Arahant has perfect morality, perfect concentration and perfect wisdom.

These two Suttas indicate that the attainment of the Anagamin and the Arahant stages must have perfect concentration, which is always defined as the four jhanas or one-pointedness of mind by the Buddha in the Suttas (e.g. Samyutta Nikaya Suttas 45.1.8 and 45.3.8). This is again confirmed by Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 64 which says outright that it is impossible to

⁵ According to S.N.25.1, a person attains the First Path Ariya (stream entry) stage from understanding the Dhamma, and before his death will attain the First Fruition (Sotapanna) stage.

become an Anagami or Arahant without jhana. It is interesting to note that the Sotapanna and Sakadagamin do not typically have perfect concentration, (i.e. jhana is not a prerequisite). The difference between these two attainments is that the Sakadagamin has reduced more lust, hatred and delusion compared with the Sotapanna.

The reduction of lust, hatred and delusion requires a certain amount of Samadhi (Concentration) because these defilements are connected to the five hindrances (attainment of Perfect Samadhi results in the abandonment of the hindrances). Two of these hindrances are sensual desire (similar to lust), and ill will (related to hatred). This further corroborates the point that stream entry can be attained by listening to the Dhamma with thorough consideration/attention.

And we do find in the Suttas and Vinaya that many who came to listen to the Buddha teach for the first time attained stream entry. Also, Samyutta Nikaya Sutta 55.1.2 states that the characteristics of the Sotapanna are unshakable confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, as well as Perfect Morality. There is no mention of meditation.

Sotapanna Stage Relatively Not Difficult to Attain

Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 3.9.85 states that despite having perfect morality, Ariyas can still have minor transgressions of the precepts. For instance, Samyutta Nikaya Sutta 55.3.4 mentions the demise of a Sakyan named Sarakani, after which the Buddha proclaimed that Sarakani had attained the Sotapanna stage at his death. This annoyed a number of the people as Sarakani was known to have failed in his training and had taken to drink.

The people were angry because the Buddha called Sarakani a Sotapanna even though the latter had taken to drink⁶. This seemed to indicate that they knew Sarakani was quite a heavy drinker. People found it hard to believe that he was a Sotapanna. When the Buddha was informed that many people disbelieved Sarakani attained Sotapanna, the Buddha said: "... Why, Mahanama, if these great Sal trees here could know what is spoken well and what is spoken ill, I would proclaim even these great trees to be Sotapannas ... bound for enlightenment. Much more then do I proclaim Sarakani the Sakyan to be one"

This incident goes to show that the state of Sotapanna need not be as difficult to attain as many people think. The problem might be that they do not make enough effort to study the discourses, which is our best guide or teacher (as advised by the Buddha) for Right View.

Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 14 tells how a cousin of the Buddha, Mahanama, came to see the Buddha and said that he had learnt the Dhamma for a long time and knew that greed, hatred and delusion were defilements. Yet, he said that sometimes he could not control his mind when it was invaded by these defilements. He asked the Buddha whether this was because there were some states that he had not abandoned internally.

The Buddha replied that even if an Ariyan disciple had seen with wisdom that greed, hatred and delusion were wrong, he might still be attracted by sensual pleasures unless he had attained piti (delight) and sukha (happiness). Piti and sukha are factors of the Jhana state.

⁶ Perhaps it should be mentioned here that Perfect Virtue in the Ariyan Eightfold Path encompasses Perfect Speech, Perfect Action and Perfect Livelihood.

Jhana may be translated as a “state of mental brightness” when the mind becomes bright because of satipatthana (intense recollection)⁷ and concentration.

Unless we have attained one-pointedness of mind and experienced the bliss which is higher than sensual pleasure, we cannot help but be attracted to sensual pleasures. The commentaries state that Mahanama was already a Sakadagamin at that time. Thus, this Sutta shows that there can be Ariyans who have not attained jhana and who can be influenced by greed, hatred and delusion. Again, this proves, in this context, that the Sotapanna stage need not be as high as some people think.

There is evidence in the Suttas and Vinaya that very ordinary people attained stream entry upon listening to the Dhamma for the first time. For example, in the Vinaya books (Cullavagga, Chapter 7), we find that the 31 men despatched to murder the Buddha all attained stream entry when the Buddha preached to them. On another occasion, 120,000 inhabitants of Rajagaha attained stream entry when they heard the Buddha’s discourse (Mahavagga, Chapter 1).

NO LIBERATION WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE OF DHAMMA AND JHANA

The Buddha struggled with the utmost effort to attain liberation. For six years he tried all ways practised by various teachers but without success. According to Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 36, he sought for an alternative way to liberation *and recalled his attainment of jhana when he was young under the rose-apple tree. Then following on that memory, came the realization “That is the path to enlightenment.”* He thought, “Why am I afraid of that pleasure (born of jhana) that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?”

Thereafter, he attained the four jhanas. With the concentrated mind which was “purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfections,” he directed it to the knowledge of his manifold past lives. Only when he attained the psychic powers and recalled his past lives “with their aspects and particulars,” that the Dhamma he learnt from Kassapa Buddha⁸ were recalled. Subsequently, he directed his mind to knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings. Thereafter, he contemplated on the Four Ariyan Truths and attained liberation.

On the other hand, his disciples required only several days to attain liberation because of the Dhamma knowledge taught to them by the Buddha — Venerable Sariputta took fourteen days, Maha Kassapa eight days, and Maha Moggallana only seven days. External sect ascetics without knowledge of the Dhamma, however, do not attain liberation even though they attain jhana. But when some of them who had already attained jhana heard the Dhamma, they immediately attained liberation.

⁷ About eight suttas (e.g. Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 5.2.14) define sati as “to remember and call to mind what was said and done long ago”, i.e. recollection or memory. Patthana means intense or extreme state. Thus, satipatthana means an intense or extreme state of sati.

⁸ In Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 81 and 123, the Buddha said that in his previous life he became a monk disciple of Kassapa Buddha — following which he was reborn in the Tusita Heaven. Thereafter, he took rebirth as a human being and attained enlightenment.

However, when we hear the same Dhamma (sutta) now, we fail to attain liberation mainly due to not possessing jhana. This shows that both knowledge of the Dhamma and attainment of jhana are necessary for the full liberation (Arahanthood), in addition to the other factors of the Ariyan Eightfold Path.

FIVE OCCASIONS TO ATTAIN LIBERATION

Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 5.3.26 is very interesting. It describes the five occasions when a monk attains liberation. These are:

- 1) **Listening to the Dhamma:** It brings joy, especially if one has an affinity for the Dhamma. This will naturally calm the mind and make it peaceful and tranquil. A tranquil mind easily becomes concentrated. With a concentrated mind, insight will arise.
- 2) **Teaching the Dhamma:** To teach the Dhamma, one needs to understand and reflect on the Dhamma. From here, joy also arises which will lead successively to tranquility, concentration and insight.
- 3) **Repeating Dhamma:** Although not common nowadays, it was quite common during the Buddha's time when books did not exist. At that time, the Dhamma was preserved and passed on to the next generation by people who memorised them through regular recitation. If monks are going to pass on the Dhamma, they have to be very familiar with the Dhamma. Thus, monks spent a lot of time reciting the Dhamma.

In fact, in those days, it was the monks' duty to repeat and recite the Dhamma. This constant repetition will make you very familiar with it. The first time you read, listen to or recite the Sutta, you will have a certain level of understanding. With greater repetition, your understanding becomes deeper and deeper. The similar sequence of joy, tranquility, concentration and insight follows.

- 4) **Reflecting on the Dhamma:** This involves contemplating, thinking and pondering on the Dhamma in its various aspects, validity and relevance to our lives. In this way, insight will arise through the same sequence of events.
- 5) **During Meditation:** According to the Suttas, this involves reflecting on the concentration sign (samadhi nimitta), which is rightly grasped and penetrated. The same sequence of joy, tranquility, concentration and insight follows.

It is crucial to note that out of these five occasions, only one is during formal meditation and the other four are out of formal meditation: listening, teaching, repeating and reflecting on the Saddhamma. One should, by now, see the importance of knowing the Saddhamma found in the earliest Suttas.

It is also obvious from this Sutta that of the four objects of Sati (recollection) that should be contemplated — namely body, feelings, mind, and Dhamma — Dhamma is the most important. Thus we see in the Vinaya books (Mahavagga, Chapter 1) that the first one thousand and sixty Arahant disciples of the Buddha all attained enlightenment from hearing the Buddha's discourse only. But of course these candidates must have been specially chosen

by the Buddha because of their having attained jhana this lifetime or in their previous human lifetime, since jhana is the necessary condition for Arahant hood as stated in Suttas A.N. 9.36, M.N. 52, 64, etc..

In these five occasions, the depth of insight depends on our perfection of the Noble Eightfold Path. For instance, deep insights are possible with Perfect Concentration (jhana) supported by the other seven factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. In this case, high attainments like Anagamin or Arahant can be expected. Concentration short of jhanas yields shallower insights. The result may be Sotapanna or Sakadagamin. This is clear from Anguttara Nikaya Suttas 3.85 and 9.12 mentioned earlier.

Chapter 1 of the Mahavagga (Vinaya Pitaka) also makes this quite clear. After the Buddha converted a thousand matted hair ascetics to become his disciples, the Buddha preached to them the Fire Discourse (Aditta Sutta) whereupon all one thousand of them became Arahants. Thereafter, the Buddha brought them to Rajagaha where King Bimbisara led twelve nahutas of laypeople to visit the Buddha. According to the Pali dictionary, a nahuta is “a vast number, a myriad”, and according to the Commentary is 10,000. The Buddha gave them a graduated discourse on the Dhamma, basically on the Four Noble Truths, and all twelve nahutas (120,000!) of them attained the Vision of the Dhamma — first Path ariya attainment. Some of them may have practised meditation, but it is highly improbable that everyone of this large number of people would have done so.

IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING TO DHAMMA

Earlier it was mentioned that one of the two conditions needed for the arising of Right View is listening to the Dhamma. This same Sutta (Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 43) states that after Right View is attained, five other important conditions are needed to support Right View for the final liberation, Arahant hood. They are:

- (i) Morality (sila),
- (ii) Listening to the Dhamma (dhammasavana),
- (iii) Discussion of the Dhamma (dhammasakaccha),
- (iv) Tranquilization of mind (samatha), and
- (v) Contemplation (vipassana)⁹.

Samatha and vipassana are the two necessary ingredients of the Buddha’s way of meditation. Besides meditation, one has to do the other three things. It is obvious that by meditation alone, one cannot become an Arahant. On top of Right View, meditation has to be supported by moral conduct, listening to the Dhamma, and discussing the Dhamma. Indeed, a sound knowledge of the Suttas and practice of all the other components of the Ariyan Eightfold Path are of paramount importance.

The above Sutta, together with the earlier mentioned Samyutta Nikaya Sutta 45.1.8 prove the necessity of listening to the Dhamma from the first step (i.e. to attain Right View), until the very last step (i.e. to attain Arahant hood).

⁹ As explained in Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 2.3.10, the practice of vipassana leads to insight. Therefore, vipassana cannot be insight, but contemplation.

In Samyutta Nikaya Sutta 38.16, it is said that even after persons renounce and become monks, it is difficult to practise in accordance with the Dhamma. But Digha Nikaya Sutta 16 says that if monks were to live the holy life perfectly according to Dhamma-Vinaya, the world would not lack for Arahants. Now to practise the Dhamma perfectly, one has to be perfectly knowledgeable about the Buddha's instructions in the Suttas.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, some lay people practise meditation without studying the Suttas and become presumptuous of their attainments. Their pride increases while their attachments do not decrease. If they are practising according to the Dhamma their defilements and unwholesome qualities, including pride, should certainly not increase.

As stated in Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 8.2.19, “... *in this Dhamma-Vinaya there is a gradual training, a gradual practice, a gradual progress, with no abruptness (na ayatakena), such as a penetration of knowledge (annapativedha).*” Adherence to the Buddha's instructions in the Suttas and Vinaya¹⁰ is very important to ensure that we practise the correct (and therefore shortest) Path. Once we see that there is a very clear and definite Path out of the distressful round of rebirths as shown to us by the Buddha, we will turn away from the worldly path and follow the Ariyan Path according to the Buddha's discourses.

Anguttara Nikaya Sutta 7.67 gives the parable of the carpenter's adze-handle. In this parable the Buddha said that a carpenter, while inspecting the handle of his adze, sees thereon the marks of his fingers and thumb. However, he knows not how much of the adze-handle was worn away that day, the previous day, or at any time. Yet, he knows when the wearing away has reached its limit. Similarly, in the practice of the holy life a monk does not know how much defilements have been worn away that day, the previous day or at any time, yet knows just when the wearing away reaches its limit. This parable implies that a monk cannot accurately say what spiritual level he is at. He can only be sure once he has attained Arahant hood.

According to Samyutta Nikaya Sutta 56.4.9, once a person has attained understanding of the Four Ariyan Truths (i.e. attained Right View) he would no more gaze at the face of a monk and think “Surely this Reverend is one who knowing knows and seeing sees!” In other words, the perennial search in ignorance for a Teacher figure has ended. He realizes that the Teacher is here before him — the Suttas (and Vinaya for monastics)! But, if he needed a good friend (kalyanamitta) to assist him, he would now know how to look for a suitable one.

¹⁰ Vinaya normally refers to the disciplinary code for monks and nuns only. For laypersons, keeping the five precepts everyday, eight precepts once a week, and right livelihood would be relevant.

BRIEF SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO APPROACH THE NIKAYAS

It is recommended that one starts off by investigating the Anguttara Nikaya, followed by the Samyutta Nikaya. These are the two most important Nikayas because they contain the most Suttas and, therefore, the most information. Thereafter, study the Digha Nikaya and, lastly, the Majjhima Nikaya (being probably the most difficult to understand). It is not essential to learn Pali and study the original Pali texts, although that is the best. Existing translations, although not perfect, are good enough for one to get a solid understanding. However, if one can check the Pali dictionary for some of the translations which are doubtful, that will be good.

In studying the Nikayas for the first time, one would find some Suttas difficult to understand. However, one should plod on and as one studies more Suttas, one begins to understand those earlier problematical Suttas. This is similar to assembling a jigsaw puzzle. In the beginning one cannot see the overall picture. Only when more pieces are assembled can the picture begin to form. The Nikayas should be studied again and again to get a good understanding.

Although other books (e.g. the Commentaries and Sub-commentaries) may be helpful, they are not recommended (except for scholars) because they consume too much time. Besides, they have been found to contain some opinions which are not consistent with the earliest Suttas. Having studied the Nikayas, it is better to utilize your time for meditation, and put the Dhamma into practice etc.. However, some people may not be able to make a thorough study of the Nikayas, yet they can acquire the wholesome and potentially liberating habit of regularly reading from the Nikayas and reflecting on what they have read.

Remember, not to study is one extreme and studying too much is another. Avoiding the extremes, we should (as the Buddha advised) investigate the Buddha's words found in the earliest Suttas, and put forth earnest effort according to those words in the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path.

REFLECTIONS FROM THE BUDDHA'S WORDS

“There are, Nigrodha, unwholesome things that have not been abandoned, tainted, conducive to rebirth, fearful, productive of painful results in the future, associated with birth, ageing and dying. It is for the abandonment of these things that I teach the Dhamma. If you practise accordingly, these tainted things will be abandoned, and the things that make for purification will develop and grow, and you will all attain to and dwell, in this very life, by your own insight and realisation, in the fulness of perfected wisdom.”

Buddha, *Digha Nikaya Sutta 25*

“Monks, train yourselves thus: To these very Suttas will we listen, give a ready ear, understand, recite and master them.”

Buddha, *Samyutta Nikaya Sutta 20.7*

“Monks, be a lamp unto yourselves, be a refuge unto yourselves, with no other refuge. Take the Dhamma as your lamp, take the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge.”

Buddha, *Digha Nikaya Sutta 26*

“For many a long day, monks, have you experienced the death of mother, of son, of daughter, have you experienced the ruin of relatives, of wealth, the calamity of disease. Greater is the flood of tears shed by you crying and weeping over one and all of these, as you fare on, run on this many a long day, united with the disliked, separated from the liked, than are the waters in the four oceans.

Why is that? Incalculable is the beginning, monks, of this faring on, the faring on of beings covered by ignorance, fettered by craving. Thus far enough is there, monks, for you to be repelled by all the things of this world, enough to lose all passion for them, enough to be liberated therefrom.”

Buddha, *Samyutta Nikaya Sutta 15.3*

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