

## The Dhammapada

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### Verses 1-20

*It is said that the Dhammapada is the most popular of all Buddhist texts. Actually, that privilege probably attaches to the Dhammapada Commentary, a set of stories that illustrate the ethical teachings of the Dhammapada itself. While the Dhammapada is usually recited in Pali, the Commentary is translated into the vernacular languages understood by the laity in the traditional Theravada Buddhist heartlands.<sup>2</sup> The Bowerchalke/East Dorset Buddhist Group discussion concentrated on the first twenty verses of the Dhammapada itself, with occasional forays into the Commentary.*

*Translations between languages have to make compromises between faithful rendering of the source language and comprehensibility in the target language. Of the two translations quoted here, Thanissaro's is generally (but not always) more faithful to the Pali, with the result that his version is sometimes a little stilted in English. Mascaro tends to choose more redolent English words, which convey the meaning of the original Pali verses with less accuracy.*

**trans. Bhikkhu Thanissaro**

**I: Pairs**

1 Phenomena are preceded by the heart  
ruled by the heart  
made by the heart

If you speak or act  
with a corrupted heart,  
then suffering follows you –  
as the wheel of a cart,  
the track of the ox  
that pulls it.

**trans. Juan Mascaro**

**I: Contrary Ways**

What we are today comes from our thoughts of  
yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life  
of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind.

If a man speaks or acts with an impure mind,  
suffering follows him as the wheel of the cart  
follows the beast that draws the cart.

**Discussion** *The terms 'phenomena' or 'mind' refer to all mental events, including sensory information, feelings and emotions. The Buddha seems not to have considered any precise location for the mind, other than the embodied individual as a whole. But both Aristotle in the West and Buddhaghosa (5<sup>th</sup> century AD) in the East thought that the seat of the mind was in the heart. Using 'heart' as translation for mind (mano) conveys the significance of feeling and emotion amongst mental events. Indeed, 'heart' is often used as a synonym for 'mind' in the Zen tradition. Of course, it is now known that the mind is either identical to, or correlates with, neuro-chemical activity in the brain as it relates to the world.*

*With a rather creative addition, Mascaro points to the before and after temporal sequence that makes cause and effect possible, but both translations indicate that the world and suffering within the world are mind-made: they accessed as phenomena. This correctly represents the early Buddhist quasi-idealist view of the world.*



*Mascaro misses the clear implication in the Pali verse, noted by all other translators, which is that we all must die.*

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| 7 | <p>One who stays focused on the beautiful, is unrestrained with the senses knowing no moderation in food, apathetic, unenergetic:<br/>Mara overcomes him<br/>As the wind, a weak tree.</p> | <p>He who lives only for pleasures, and whose soul is not in harmony, who considers not the food he eats, is idle and has not the power of virtue – such a man is moved by MARA, is moved by selfish temptations, even as a weak tree is shaken by the wind.</p> |
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*Mascaro's 'pleasures' is probably closer than Thanissaro's 'the beautiful', but Thanissaro's 'unrestrained in the senses' is more accurate than Mascaro's '...soul in harmony'. In the West, a 'soul' is a notion that some part of mind has continuity over extended time and even survives after death. The Pali Canon, (the Tripitaka) disputes the Upanishadic concept of a soul (attā), instead arguing that the mind is nothing more than a bundle of different sorts of momentary mental events (four of the five khandhas), which are just varieties of the efficiency of cause and effect. If it turns out that any mental event continues after death, it is an effect in the next life of a mental cause in this life. This idea of causation, as a linear progression constrained within different kinds of phenomena, does make logical sense, but falls into a class of metaphysical statements that are difficult to justify because of lack of evidence.*

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| 8 | <p>One who stays focused on the foul, is restrained with regard to the senses, knowing moderation in food, full of conviction &amp; energy:<br/>Mara does not overcome him<br/>As the wind, a mountain of rock.</p> | <p>But he who lives not for pleasures, and whose soul is in self-harmony, who eats or fasts with moderation, and has faith and the power of virtue- this man is not moved by temptations, as a great rock is not shaken by the wind.</p> |
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*Rather than 'stays focussed on the foul', Ānanjadoti's translation has 'living contemplating the unpleasant'. The translation could just as well be 'the not-beautiful or 'not-agreeable'. The point seems to be that a person should not be unduly disgusted by the reality that embodied beings are made up of various tissues, which are liable to decay and dissolution. Contemplating 'the loathsomeness of corpses' is a traditional monastic meditative practice, which was further emphasised in the later Tantric tradition, but it risks becoming a form of perversion unless the purpose is limited to fostering equanimity of mind with regard to the brute facts of existence.*

*'Restraint with regard to the senses' could equate to 'harmony', but note that while Mascaro inserts the concept of a soul into his translation without justification, again without justification he omits the repeat of 'Mara' as a personification of evil and death.*

*Note the use of a rhetorical method called 'lamps': the use of two metaphors in one to show an unrestrained person being overcome like a 'weak tree', whereas a restrained person is not overcome, like a 'mountain'.*

- 9 He who,                   depraved,  
                                  devoid  
                                  of truthfulness  
                                  & self-control,  
puts on the ochre robe,  
doesn't deserve the ochre robe.
- 10 He who is free  
                                  of depravity  
                                  endowed  
                                  with truthfulness  
                                  & self-control,  
                                  well-established  
                                  in the precepts,  
truly deserves the ochre robe.

If a man puts on the pure yellow robe with a soul which is impure, without self-harmony and truth, he is not worthy of the holy robe.

But he who is pure from sin and whose soul is strong in virtue, who has self-harmony and truth, he is worthy of the holy robe.

*During recitation for the laity in the Theravada Buddhist heartlands, each verse or pair of verses in the Pali Dhammapada is accompanied by an edifying story (a homily) in the vernacular language, dramatically illustrating the moral message of the verse(s). In this case the Buddha tells of two occasions when his evil cousin, Devadatta, wore monk's robes inappropriately: once when he had a robe made of cloth worth a hundred thousand [cash], and in another lifetime, when, as a hunter, he hid under yellow cloth in order to lure a herd of elephants to be slaughtered.*

- 11 Those who regard  
non-essence as essence  
and see essence as non-,  
don't get to the essence,  
                                  ranging about in wrong resolves.
- 12 Those who know  
essence as essence,  
and non-essence as non-,  
get to the essence,  
                                  ranging about in right resolves.

Those who think that the unreal is, and think the Real is not, they shall never reach the Truth, lost in the path of right thought.

But those who know the Real is, and know the unreal is not, they shall indeed reach the Truth, safe on the path of right thought.

*'Essence' and 'Real' are terms fraught with the possibility of misinterpretation. The Pali word sāra means 'essential' 'excellent', 'strong', 'main point' or 'real meaning', all of which are better than 'essence', which veers perilously close to the notion of a soul-like self (attā), which Buddhism disputes.<sup>3</sup> These terms sit within the wide extension of meanings of the term Dhamma, which refers both to the way things are in the world, and to the Buddha's explanation of that way things are. It is usually presumed that there is no disconnect between reality and the Buddha's explanation of reality: that there is a one-to-one fit between Dhamma and world. The contemporary view of language casts doubt on such a possibility. Language can indicate and describe, but cannot characterise with absolute accuracy of detail, especially with respect to the hidden feelings of sentient animals such as humans.*

*'Right resolve' (vow, aspiration or intention) is a probably a more accurate translation of sammāsāncappa... than 'right thought' or 'right view'.*

- 13 As rain seeps into  
an ill-thatched hut,  
so passion,  
the undeveloped mind. Even as rain breaks through an ill-thatched  
house, passions will break through an ill-guarded  
mind.
- 14 As rain doesn't seep into  
a well-thatched hut,  
so passion does not,  
the well-developed mind. But even as rain breaks not through a well-  
thatched house, passions break not through a  
well-guarded mind.

*Passion (rago) here means a mind suffused or 'dyed' with desire or attachment. This is the unsatisfactory state of affairs of anyone who has not cultivated the traditional meditative practices of tranquillity and insight.*

- 15 Here he grieves  
he grieves hereafter.  
In both worlds  
the wrong-doer grieves.  
He grieves, he's afflicted  
seeing the corruption  
of his deeds. He suffers in this world, and he suffers in the next  
world: the man who does evil suffers in both  
worlds. He suffers, he suffers and mourns when  
he sees the wrong he has done.

*The story that accompanies this verse is about Cunda the pork-butcher, who, having never done anything worthy of merit, was so plunged into suffering in the last week of his life that he scrambled, grunted and squealed like a pig, and was reborn in the worst of the Buddhist hells. The moral lesson is that evil leads to suffering in this world and the next, a message that is emphatically reinforced in verses 16 and 17. Amidst this moral dualism, the possibility is nowhere entertained, that some fortunate people might fulfil a long and happy life, satisfying their desires all the while, with never a thought of the unforeseen and unseen ethical consequences of their actions. Such is quite a common state of affairs in western consumerist societies blessed with strong health services. But to be aware of, yet ignore the ethical consequences of one's actions, involves a kind of compartmentalisation: a conscious or unconscious attempt to divide and blind one's own mind. Hannah Arendt describes a worst case scenario of gross mental compartmentalisation in her study of Adolf Eichmann's ability to commit ultimate evil at the same time as behaving like an upstanding member of society.<sup>4</sup> But perhaps we are all wilfully blind to all the consequences of our everyday actions.*

- 16 Here he rejoices  
he rejoices hereafter.  
In both worlds  
the merit-maker rejoices  
He rejoices, is jubilant  
seeing the purity  
of his deeds. He is happy in this world and he is happy in the  
next world: the man who does good is happy in  
both worlds. He is glad, he feels great gladness  
when he sees the good he has done.
- 17 Here he's tormented  
He's tormented hereafter.  
In both worlds  
the wrong-doer's tormented.  
He's tormented at the thought,  
'I've done wrong.' He sorrows in this world, and he sorrows in the  
next world: the man who does evil sorrows in  
both worlds. 'I have done evil' thus he laments,  
and more he laments on the path of sorrow.

Having gone to a bad destination,  
he's tormented  
all the more.

- 18 Here he delights  
He delights hereafter.  
In both worlds  
the merit-maker delights  
He delights at the thought,  
'I've made merit.'  
Having gone to a good destination,  
he delights  
all the more.

He rejoices in this world, and he rejoices in the next world: the man who does good rejoices in both worlds. 'I have done good', thus he rejoices and more he rejoices on the path of joy.

*Ānandajoti's translation replaces 'he' with 'she' in verse 18, on the ground that, in the Commentary, the Buddha spoke this verse to Sumanadevi, the younger sister of Anathapindika. On her deathbed, Sumanadevi is said to have addressed her own father as 'younger brother' because she had reached a greater attainment on the Buddhist path.*

<https://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Texts-and-Translations/Dhammapada/01-Pairs.htm>

*It is worth doing something just because it is the right thing to do, not because it is predicted to give rise to the consequence of a good rebirth. In ordinary everyday life the right thing to do is usually fairly obvious. For example, we rescue a bee because the bee will fare better outside, not because we expect a reward now or later.*

- 19 If he recites many teachings, but  
- Heedless man –  
doesn't do what they say,  
like a cowherd counting the cattle of  
others,  
he has no share in the contemplative life.

If a man speaks many holy words but he speaks and does not, this thoughtless man cannot enjoy the life of holiness: he is like a cowherd who counts the cows of his master.

- 20 If he recites next to nothing  
but follows the Dhamma  
in line with the Dhamma;  
abandoning passion,  
aversion, delusion;  
alert,  
his mind well-released,  
not clinging  
either here or hereafter:  
he has his share in the contemplative life.

Whereas if a man speaks but a few holy words and yet he lives the life of those words, free from passion and hate and illusion – with right vision and a mind free, craving for nothing both now and hereafter – the life of this man is a life of holiness.

*The lines in verse 20 about being '...alert...not clinging either here or hereafter...' remind us that we can only practice in the present moment, yet that can seem too narrow a focus. We have a personal history and destiny which offers a broader perspective but is also, relative to the universe, very small. Buddhism and Vedanta seem to point to transcendence of such limitations. The ideas of a timeless here and now, and of dwelling in presence rather than the present moment, are pointers towards transcendence. They carry a sense of the sacred or numinous, and are a reminder that Buddhism is, after all, a religion of both ordinary and extraordinary experience, as well as a religious*

*institution, which has accommodated to several different metaphysical belief-systems across different centuries and different civilisations.<sup>5</sup>*

*As a contrast to focus on the experiential, the transcendent and the extraordinary within the everyday moments of Buddhist practice, it is worth reflecting that Buddhism has not survived over the centuries just by continuity of practice, but with the help of its instructive written texts, of which the Dhammapada is a good example.*

*It is commonly asserted that it is more important to practice Buddhism than to study the teachings (the Dhamma), and verses 19 and 20 do seem to make that point. But notice that it is recitation without consequent action that is dismissed, not studying the Canon of Buddhist explanation as such. These days, there is a tendency to praise experiential practice to the detriment of study, despite the fact that study of the Dhamma is itself part of experience, and as such can be an object of Buddhist meditative practice. The real difference between text study and meditation is that study involves paying close attention with the fifth of the five khandas, conscious thought (viññāna), which is more usually avoided or just 'let go' during insight meditation. Perhaps the neglect of Dhamma-study as a practice happens because taking thought as the primary object of meditation has the peculiar effect of banishing awareness of the other four khandas that constitute what it is to be a psych-physical person in a world, thereby also banishing awareness of the passage of time. Temporary loss of sense of time can feel as if phenomenal experience itself has been neglected. Even so, to investigate the meaning of a text with critical clarity, without bias and in search of understanding, is an arduous practice in itself, albeit a rarity amongst the laity in the western world.*

*It would be bizarre and nihilistic if Buddhism altogether dispensed with the skill-in-means that is using language and texts to understand and communicate the way things are in the world, since speech and writing are unique to the human species.*

*Two Soto Zen monks, Hakamaya and Matsumoto, have pointed to the significant difference between a 'topical' and a 'critical' attitude towards any text. To take a text as a topic is to interpret it in its own terms, in search of the intended meaning of the original author. Rules for such a topical attitude towards interpretation are set out in the quasi-canonical Nettiprakaraṇa.<sup>6</sup> To approach a text critically is to adopt a questioning attitude towards all the statements in the text, together with their underlying assumptions, in search of meaningful, useful, true explanations of the way things really are in the world (yathā-bhūtaṃ). Topicality is exegesis: making clear what is presumed to be the author's intended meaning. Criticality is the practice of hermeneutics: discovering what a text means within the horizon of present understanding. Recitation is ritual practice: '...a means for intervening therapeutically in the unbalanced interrelationship between self-identity and social identity'.<sup>7</sup> All three approaches equitably cohabit within the Bowerchalke/East Dorset Buddhist Group text discussions.*

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion group also utilised translations by Buddharakkhita Bhikkhu:

<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.intro.budd.html>

Also, a Pali text/alongside English translation by Daw Mya Tin for the Burmese Translation Committee, which includes the associated homiletic tales:

<https://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/>

Also, the Ancient Buddhist texts.net translation by Ānandajoti Bhikkhu:

<https://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Texts-and-Translations/Dhammapada/01-Pairs.htm>

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Thanissaro's translation can be found at: [www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/damapada.pdf](http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/damapada.pdf)  
 Mascaro, Juan, 1973, *The Dhammapada*, (Penguin, Harmondsworth).

<sup>2</sup> McDaniel, Justin Thomas, 2005, 'The Art of Reading and Teaching Dhammapadas: Reform, Texts and Contexts in Thai Buddhist History', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 28 (2).

<sup>3</sup> To be clear: Buddhism denies that anything, including persons, contains a soul-like essence (*attā*) capable of continuity over time. Persons and other things are just made up of efficient causal relationships between other things, and so on – as Winnie the Pooh remarks: 'right to the bottom of the jar'. Thus, people and things are always in a state of change over time, even though they appear to have a fixed identity.

This not-soul (*anattā*) teaching distinguishes Buddhism from most other religions, such as the Christianity, Hinduism, and Animism. But denial of a soul-like essence does not amount to the denial of a self, in the sense of:

1. A self in the sense of a distinct personality or character, accumulating over time on the basis of one's genetic endowment, life experiences and social interactions. Such a self is a product of cause and effect.

2. An awareness of oneself as an individual, irrespective of the fortunes and misfortunes of one's genetic endowment, life experiences and social interactions. Encountering this self-as-mental-phenomena may prove enlightening, although the ancillary support of a friend, a religious tradition or a psychological professional may help in the interpretation of such an experience.

<sup>4</sup> Arendt, Hannah, 2006, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil*, (Penguin, Harmondsworth).

<sup>5</sup> In Theravada countries, especially Myanmar, Buddhism sits alongside Animism. In China it cohabits with Confucian ancestor-worship. In Japan, Bodhisattvas are equated with Shinto *kami*. In the West, Buddhism sits comfortably with atheism, humanism and agnosticism, and politely amongst faiths that do posit a soul.

<sup>6</sup> Kaccayana, ?, *The Guide (Nettipakayana)* trans. Ñāṇamoli, (Pali Text Society).

<sup>7</sup> Kennedy, A.W, 2004, 'Reflections on Buddhism in Leeds', *Contemporary Buddhism*, (London, Routledge), p.148.