

Teaching of the Buddhas

By Venerable Mankadawala Sudassana, Sri Lanka – 2011

A talk titled “*Sabbapapassa Akaranam*” given at Sambuddha Jayanthi celebration
(Translated and summarised by Radhika Abeysekera¹)

Refrain from the unskillful (Sabbapapassa akaranam)

Perform the skilful (Kusalassaupa sampada)

Purify the mind (Saticcapariyo dapanam)

This is the Teaching of all Buddhas (Etam Buddhānu sasanam).

Dhammapada

Why listen to the Buddha Dhamma?

Good friends, it is important that on this day, in the *Sambuddha Jayanthi* year of 2600, that you listen to this Dhamma talk with full confidence in the Buddha Dhamma and attention, so that you can understand and use this knowledge to realise your spiritual goals. Why is it important that you should listen so carefully to this Dhamma talk? It is important because the Buddha dispensed this Dhamma with immense compassion to all beings, because he saw how long this cycle of life, death and re becoming (*samsara*) is, and how much suffering beings have endured in this *samsaric* journey. It is also important because the Buddha realized the Law of Cause and Effect and Dependent Origination (*hetu pala Dhamma* and the *Paticca Samuppada*) which is the knowledge required to end this *samsaric* journey, on this same day 2600 years ago.

Our lives are like those of fish that live in a fish tank. For them the whole world is this fish tank. Yet, we know that the world is much larger than this fish tank. However, if we could talk to the fish and tell them how large the world really is, the fish will not believe us. We can tell them that the world is not just this tank, that it is very big and tell them about the various countries, buildings, roads and trees but the fish will not believe us, they will say that we are lying. Their world is the fish tank because that is all that they can experience.

Our life is also like that of the fish. We live in a fish tank that we call the world. What we believe is based on what we see and experience. We believe what our eyes can see, what our ears can hear, what our tongue can taste, what our body can touch, what our nose can smell and what our mind can comprehend. The Buddha said this *samsara* is long and steeped in suffering because he could see outside this tank we call the world. The reason the Buddha said that *samsara* is very long is because one cannot see the beginning of beings shrouded in ignorance, suffering with grief and pain whilst traversing this *samsaric* journey.

The Buddha used examples to show us the immense suffering and length of this *samsaric* journey of the past. The Buddha said that the tears that we have shed at the death of our mothers that have transformed

¹ Three talks on this topic were dispensed by Venerable Sudassana in Sri Lanka and Australia. They were combined and summarised to prepare this talk.)

their blood to milk and nursed us, our fathers who with effort and sweat have provided for us and our affectionate children and siblings who have died young are more than the waters of the great oceans. The Buddha said that we have taken animal birth and shed more blood in death than the waters of the great oceans. In fact we have taken animal birth more times than we have taken human birth.

The amounts of times we have suffered through birth without sight, birth without hands and feet, accidental death by falling, burning, and serious illness are all veiled from our view. We cannot see our past suffering in *samsara*. That is why, like the fish, we believe that *samsara* is limited to just what we have experienced in this life.

The Buddha said that except for those who have seen the Law of Cause and Effect, and Dependent Origination that few others will believe this truth. People cannot see *samsara* so they say that this is an exaggeration. The Buddha is not a person who will tell a lie even to place people on the right path. It is out of compassion that the Buddha dispensed the Dhamma to deliver us from suffering. He looked outside the tank and saw the suffering we had each experienced in *samsara*. We do not believe just as the fish because we cannot see. If like the fish, we limit our belief to our six senses, then we will never understand. We have to realize that we have all suffered long in *samsara*. And we also have to understand that the future that we will face and suffer in *samsara*, like the past, is also endless.

The Buddha said that this Dhamma is for his disciples that have wisdom. It is not for those shrouded in ignorance. We do not believe because we cannot, as yet, see for ourselves. But this does not mean that what the Buddha says is not true. The Buddha said that he could tell us when this land that we see as the world will end. He could tell us when the waters we see as the great oceans will dry up and cease to be. He could also tell us when this Himalayan Mountains will eventually be a flat land. But he could not tell us for how long we have traversed shrouded in ignorance, in this *samsaric* journey. This *samsaric* journey is that long and that strong is our ignorance.

How then will we able to end this *samsaric* journey? We can end this journey only during the period known as a Buddha era. This is when we have a Buddha who has realized this truth and has dispensed this knowledge with compassion for the benefit of all beings, and when we are born as human beings and practice his teachings. To practice, we first have to understand the teachings. To understand the teachings we first have to hear them.

We are now in such a Buddha era. We still have the Buddha Dhamma and due to past meritorious deeds we have human birth. Now all we need is the confidence (*sraddha*) and effort (*viriya*) to practice. Our *Bodhisatta* completed the ten perfections (*paramita*) over a period of four world cycles and one infinite period to be a Supreme Buddha. As you know, our *Bodhisatta*, as an ascetic named Sumedha, received the definite proclamation at the time of the Dipankara Buddha. At that time, if he so wished he could have attained the bliss of *Nibbana* in that life. The *Bodhisatta*, with deep compassion, suppressed and gave up his opportunity for liberation for the benefit of mankind and celestial beings. He then sacrificed his eyes, his limbs his life and ultimately his wife and children over countless births to complete the perfections. No other being in this world has sacrificed so much and undergone so much suffering for the benefit of humanity and celestial beings. Even with such compassion and great effort, it took our Buddha another six years during his final birth to realise the truth². His birth is a blessing to the world.

² Read “Practicing the Dhamma with a view to Nibbana” by Radhika Abeysekera to understand how long it takes and the great effort required for one to become a Buddha.

We are indeed fortunate to have this opportunity. As such, we must listen attentively. We will then understand what we need to do to cross this great ocean of *samsara*.

However, the Buddha does not want us to follow his teachings with blind faith and devotion. We must not follow his teachings just because the Buddha said we should. In the *Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta*, he asked his monks if they believed what he said because he said so. They said “no”, that they believed him because they can see the truth of his teachings. You do not have to practice the Dhamma because the Buddha said “thus” or the venerable monks said “thus”. You must understand for yourself the consequences of doing the unskillful and the consequences of refraining from the unskillful. Similarly you must understand for yourself the consequences of doing the skillful and not doing the skillful. You must also understand why you need to purify your mind and the consequences of not purifying the mind.

Refrain from the unskillful

Perform the skillful

Purify the mind

This is the Teaching of all Buddhas

Dhammapada

Good friends, I am sure that most of you have heard, and are familiar with this well-known teaching of our Buddha. This teaching effectively summarises the essence of the dispensation of all the Buddhas of the past and all the Buddhas of the future. Sometimes you may not realise that all that is essential for enlightenment is summarized into this short verse. In fact the essence of the 84,000 teachings (*Dhammaskanda*) of the Buddha is included in this verse. Today we are going to examine these words carefully to understand their significance. Why and how do these three simple phrases encompass the whole teachings of the Buddhas?

Why did the Buddha (the Compassionate One) encourage us to refrain from the unskillful and perform the skillful? Why did he ask us to purify the mind? What did he realize under the Bodhi tree 2600 years ago that led him to proclaim these powerful words? The Buddha realized the Law of Cause and Effect and Dependent Origination.

When the Buddha realized the Law of Cause and Effect, he saw the effects (or results) of our unskillful and skillful actions. He also realized that you required to “purify the mind” to end the production of the cause, because as long as we produced the cause the effect or result would follow. This truth is in the world despite the appearance or not of a Buddha. However, it requires a Buddha to realize this Truth, and then with compassion, proclaim it to the world.

Let us use some simple examples to illustrate the effects of unskillful and skillful actions. Let us say that we want to plant an apple tree in our garden. If we plant an apple seed in a place that has rich soil, sufficient sun and rain fall the seed will eventually grow into a tree, with many apples. In other words, when the conditions necessary for growing are present, the apple seed will grow into an apple tree, blossom and bear fruit. The apple seed is the cause (*hetu*). The tree full of apples is the effect (*pala*).

Refrain from the unskilful

Now let us assume that the seed we chose to plant at that time was a Crab apple seed³. Then the fruits that we eventually get will be sour and bitter because Crab apples are sour and bitter. The seed we planted - the cause - is like an unskilful action (*akusala kamma*) that we have performed. The sour/bitter apples - the effects - are the results (*vipaka*). When the conditions for fruition – rich soil, water and sunshine - are present, the tree will grow, blossom and bear fruit. The results, in keeping with the seed that you have planted, will be sour and bitter. We do not have to pray or plead for the results to take place. Neither can we change the result and make the apples sweet by praying and pleading. When the conditions for fruition are present, the results in keeping with the seed you have planted, will take place naturally.

In the second watch of the night on the day that the Buddha attained enlightenment he saw the operation of the Law of Cause and Effect (*hethu pala dhamma* or *kamma and vipaka*). He saw that intentional unskilful thoughts, speech and deeds led to unpleasant and painful results. He also saw that the intensity or gravity of the unskilful action resulted in the intensity or gravity of the result. In this example, the one robust seed could give rise to a good harvest with many apples or due to the poor and weak quality of the seed you may have a poor harvest with few apples. And finally he saw that it was the intention behind the action that set in motion the result. Seeing the painful and sorrowful effects of intentional unskilful thoughts, speech and actions the compassionate Buddha taught us the operation of the Law of Cause and Effect. He taught us to refrain from unskilful actions by thought, speech or deed. The five precepts, the eight precepts as found in the Noble Eightfold Path (*Ajiva Attamaka Sila*⁴) and ten unskilful deeds (*dasa akusal*) were dispensed by the compassionate Buddha to encourage us to refrain from unskilful actions. Just as the planting of a Crab apple seed results in sour/bitter apples when the conditions for growth are present, unskilful actions results in painful and unpleasant results when the conditions for fruition of the action are present.

When we talk about unhappy beings from the four realms of suffering such as demons (*asura*), hungry ghosts (*pretha*) and animals, one should know that these are effects of a cause. The cause is their unskilful actions. So long as the cause has occurred the effect will follow.

Perform the skilful

Now let us assume that the seed we chose to plant at that time was a Red Delicious apple seed⁵. Then the fruits that we eventually get will be sweet and juicy because Red Delicious apples are sweet and juicy. The seed we planted is like a skilful action (*kusala kamma*) that we have performed. The sweet and juicy apples are the results (*vipaka*). When the conditions for fruition – rich soil, water and sunshine – are present, the tree will bear fruit. The results, in keeping with the seed that you planted will now be sweet and juicy. We do not have to pray or plead for the results to take place. Neither can we change the

³ Venerable Sudassana used the Neem (Kohomba) seed, a very bitter fruit in his example. The Crab apple seed was used for the ease of understanding of a Western audience.

⁴ This is lifetime eight precepts different from the eight precepts we observe on *Uposatha* days.

⁵ Venerable Sudassana used a Mango seed, a very sweet juicy fruit in his example. A Red Delicious apple seed was used for the ease of understanding of a Western Audience.

result and make the apples sour or bitter by praying and pleading. When the conditions for fruition are present, the results in keeping with the seed you have planted, will take place naturally.

In the second watch, of the night on the day that the Buddha attained enlightenment, he saw the operation of cause and effect (*kamma and vipaka*). He saw that intentional skilful thoughts, speech and deeds led to pleasant and joyful results. He also saw that the intensity or gravity of the skilful action resulted in the intensity or gravity of the result. And finally he saw that it was the intention behind the action that set in motion the result. Seeing the joyful and pleasant effects of intentional skilful thoughts, speech and actions, the compassionate Buddha taught us the operation of the law of *kamma*. He taught us to repeatedly perform skilful actions by thought, speech or deed. The Sublime States (*loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity*) and ten skilful deeds (*dasa kusala*) were dispensed by the compassionate Buddha to encourage us to perform skilful actions repeatedly. Just as the planting of a Red Delicious apple seed results in sweet and juicy apples when the conditions for growth are present, skilful actions results in pleasant and joyful results when the conditions for fruition of the action are present.

The Buddha also saw that just as one apple seed can results in an apple tree with hundreds of fruits, that the results of one action can have a multitude of results over many births (*Aparapariya Vedaniya Kamma*). When a farmer plants his field with one rice seed he does not get a harvest of just one seed. No, he gets many rice seeds in that one plant. One intentional action can bear numerous fruits (multitude of results spread over many births). Rare is the occasion when one seed results in one fruit.

The Buddha saw that the Law of Cause and Effect also operated in a similar manner. I am sure you know the story of the Brahmin that killed a goat by cutting his head as a sacrifice to the gods. The effect of this action was reaped over many births. These are actions with strong unskilful intentions. Unskilful actions performed with strong greed (*loba*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) give rise to many undesirable results. The same applies to skilful actions performed with strong intention. These are skilful actions performed through strong non attachment (*aloba*), compassion or kindness (*adosa*) and wisdom (*amoha*). They too have a multitude of pleasant results over many births. The Law of Cause and Effect is a natural law that operates in the world. The Buddha seeing its operation taught it to us with compassion so that we can make wise decisions. So make sure you sew your seeds with wisdom, very carefully because once you sew your seeds the results will follow.

When we talk about happy beings from the fortunate realms such as angels (*devas*), Gods (*Brahmas*) and humans one should know that these are effects of a cause. The cause is their skilful actions. So long as the cause has occurred the effect will follow.

The Buddha also realized that the Law of Cause and Effect will operate despite your ignorance of its operation. It does not matter if you did not know that the seed you planted was a Crab apple seed. The result would be sour and bitter fruit. Similarly it does not matter that you do not know that killing or hunting is an unskilful deed. The results would be unpleasant and painful. Even if a young child who does not know what he is doing plants an apple seed, an apple tree with fruit will result when the conditions necessary for fruition are present. Similarly, even if you do not know what happens to the seed once it is planted (cause occurs) the fruit (effect) will follow when the conditions necessary for fruition are present.

In summary, with these two simple phrases (refrain from the unskilful and perform the skilful), the Buddha, who saw the operation of the Law of Cause and Effect and the futility of prayer encouraged us in virtue, the foundation of Dhamma practice.

One thing more needs to be said about these two phrases. It is true that intentional unskilful actions lead to unpleasant results and skilful intentional actions leads to pleasant results. But one must be aware that the pleasant results though favourable will not last for ever. Children bring us immense joy and happiness. But the death of a child results in unbearable grief and suffering. Children that bring us comfort, joy and happiness is the result of skilful deeds. But it is when grave sickness and death strikes that you realise that even this immense joy, eventually results in suffering. In the end, even the favourable results of skilful actions ultimately end in suffering as these too do not last for ever.

Most of us accumulate wealth and possessions, and seek sense pleasures thinking, “This will reduce suffering and lead to happiness”. However, the cause of suffering is not the lack of material wealth and comforts. If it were, then you could avoid suffering in this manner. If you are parched with thirst and hunger you need water and food. If you have a migraine headache you need medicine. You have to find the cause of the suffering and then choose the appropriate treatment. Will medicine help to quench your thirst and hunger? Will food and water cure your migraine headache? Can you quench your thirst by watching a beautiful movie? No, why then do you think that wealth, possessions and sense pleasures will reduce suffering? Your suffering is not due to a lack of sense pleasures. Your suffering is due to the ending of pleasant effects of skilful deeds such as death of a child or grave sickness.

How do you get freedom from suffering resulting from the ending of the pleasant effects of skilful deeds? How do you seek solace from suffering when faced with the death of a child, the burning of a house or the loss of your wealth? The pleasant and favourable results of the skilful deeds you have done will not reduce or prevent this suffering. The world only knows to perform unskilful and skilful deeds and the effects of these actions. The world is unaware how to find freedom from the suffering that arises, when the pleasant and favourable effects of our skilful deeds end. The solutions you have for suffering are varied. You have to take food if you are suffering from hunger, medicine if it is a sickness and may be a vacation or rest if it is fatigue. The Buddha gave one solution that will eliminate all suffering. The Buddha realised that the only way to completely eliminate suffering was to stop the production of seeds (causes). And so we have the third phrase - The need to purify the mind – to eliminate the generating of more and more seeds.

Purify the mind

The third phrase is the crux of the Buddha’s teaching. On a strong foundation of virtue, one begins the practice of purification of the mind. No one likes to reap the effects of unskilful actions. No one likes pain, or suffering or the unpleasant. The result of the unskilful is difficult to bear (*dukkha*). Understanding this we practice the Buddha’s teaching and *refrain from the unskilful*. Everyone likes to reap the effects of skilful actions. Everyone likes the joyful and the pleasant. Understanding this we *perform the skilful*.

But even the pleasant and joyful is impermanent and eventually leads to pain and lamentation. Even the lush apple tree with sweet juicy fruit can die of drought or a disease. Wealth, good health, comforts

children and possession all of which gives us joy and happiness do not last for ever. When the end comes it leads to pain and suffering or that which is difficult to endure (*dukkha*).

The Buddha saw that ultimately all seeds that are planted (both unskilful and skilful), lead to fruit that eventually end in suffering. If seeds occur, the fruition of the seed (the results) occurs. As such we have to stop the production of the seed to end suffering. The Buddha saw that the seeds (cause) occurred because of our defilements. When defilements are completely eradicated, then there is no more cause and effect (*hethu pala*). Such a person is said to be an Enlightened Being (*Arahanth*). The production of seeds can only be achieved by purification of the mind from two categories of defilements. The two categories of defilements are known as *Nivarana Dhamma* and *Anusaya Dhamma*. As such, in addition to refraining from the unskilful and performing the skilful, we purify our mind by eliminating the defilements. The compassionate Buddha taught Tranquility (*Samatha*) and Insight (*Vipassana*) meditation to eliminate the defilements.

Nivarana Dhamma - The first category are the defilements resulting from the five hindrances (*pancha nivarana*). These are: sensual desire, ill-will, sloth & torpor, restlessness & remorse and doubt. The method of subduing these five hindrances is available even outside the teachings of the Buddha. The meditation the Buddha taught to subdue the five hindrances is known as Tranquility (*Samatha*) or Concentration (*Samadhi*) meditation. This type of meditation leads to tranquility and one pointedness of the mind. The Buddha taught forty objects that can be used for Tranquility Meditation. Breathing Awareness Meditation (*Anapana Sati Bhavana*) is the most popular and is what the Buddha himself used. The practice of this meditation results in the realization of the mental absorptions (*Jhana*). However, these (*Jhana*) are temporary states of mind. To eradicate these defilements permanently one also needs to practice Insight Meditation (*Vipassana Bhavana*).

Anusaya Dhamma - The second category are the seven latent defilements. These are the latent tendencies to: sensual lust, aversion, wrong views, doubt, conceit, attachment to continued existence, and ignorance. These lie dormant in the mind and arise when the suitable conditions are present. The method of overcoming these seven is only available in the teachings of the Buddha. The meditation to eradicate these defilements is known as Insight Meditation. This meditation leads to right view and seeing things as they are. At present we see and believe the existence of things as a deer sees a mirage in the desert and believes it is water. It is only when we see and experience things for what they actually are (a fabrication of the mind), that we can overcome these defilements. When these defilements are completely eradicated, then one is said to be an Enlightened Being (*Arahanth*). Then there is no cause for an effect to take place.

If you do not practice Tranquility and Insight meditation, then you are not working towards eradicating the defilements. If you are not working towards eradicating the defilements, then you are not working towards purifying the mind. If you are not working towards purifying the mind, then you are not working towards ending the productions of seeds (cause). So long as seeds are produced the fruit (effects) will take place. So long as cause and effect (*hethu pala*) is in operation suffering (*dukkha*) will remain.

The true disciple of the Buddha follows all three instructions in this verse. A person who only follows the first two phrases is better than one who does nothing. But he is not a true disciple of the Buddha because he is not following all of his instruction. Following only a portion of the Buddha's teaching

does not make you a true disciple. You have to practice all of the teachings of the Buddhas to be a true disciple of the Buddha. The person who knows why he is practicing Tranquility and Insight meditation is better than a person who is practicing them without knowing why he is practicing. He is better because he knows why he is doing it, and he no longer needs to be encouraged or forced to practice.

On the full moon day in the month of May, 2600 years ago, our Buddha realised the Law of Dependent Originations and attained enlightenment. All over the world on this full moon day in May, Buddhists are celebrating the Sambuddha Jayanthi 2600. The way to respect, honour and celebrate this momentous occasion is not by making beautiful paper lanterns, parades with dancers and elephants, and illuminated pandols. It is by practicing the Buddha's teaching in the appropriate manner.

When monks and devotees heard that the Buddha was going to pass away shortly thereafter, they came from far and wide to pay their last respect to the Buddha. Those that had not attained *Arahanthship* were weeping. One monk by the name of Dhammarama was secluded in a corner meditating diligently. The weeping monks approached Dhammarama and asked him why he was not paying respect to the Buddha who would pass away shortly. The Monk Dhammarama remained silent. The monks informed the Buddha of the incident. Aware of the intention of the monk Dhammarama, the Buddha used this opportunity to teach his weeping devotees. Summoning Dhammarama, the Buddha asked him as to why he had not come to show his respect and affection to the Thathagatha. The monk Dhammarama replied, "On hearing that the Lord was to pass away in four months I felt that the greatest way I could respect and honour our Lord was by mediating diligently and realising the Truth before his passing". Upon hearing of Dhammarama's words, the Buddha praised the monk Dhammarama and said, "Excellent, excellent. It is not by flowers and scents that one shows honour and respect to the Thathagatha. He who wishes to honour, and respect the Thathagatha should practice diligently in accordance with the Dhamma as the monk Dhammarama".

Good friends, you will now understand that the essence of the Buddha's teaching is summarised in this important verse. The goal of the Buddha's teaching is freedom from suffering. To achieve this we must ensure that we *refrain from the unskillful*. We must also ensure that we *perform the skillful*. Then, understanding impermanence, we have to *purify the mind* to be free from all gross and latent defilements. In practicing the teachings found in this simple but important verse in the appropriate manner, one can eradicate the defilements, and achieve the Buddhist goal of freedom from suffering. What better way to respect, honour, and celebrate this momentous occasion of the 2600 Sambuddha Jayanthi, than to practice the Buddha's teachings as he exhorted?

Sadu sadu sadu
May all beings be well and happy.

Radhika Abeysekera
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