

Dhammapada 1-20: Yamaka-Vagga (Annotated)

Verses of Truth 1-20: Chapter of Pairs

Translated and Annotated by Suddhāso Bhikkhu

(1)

**Mind is the precedent of all phenomena,
Mind is their superior and their creator.
If one speaks or acts with a corrupt mind,
Then suffering follows from that, just as a track follows a wheel.¹**

(2)

**Mind is the precedent of all phenomena,
Mind is their superior and their creator.
If one speaks or acts with a pure mind,
Then happiness follows from that, just as one's shadow does not depart.**

This pair of verses begins the Dhammapada with a reminder of that which is most powerful: the mind. All of our experiences are filtered through our mind; this much most people can agree on. The Buddha, however, takes it one step farther, and states that not only do we experience everything through the mind, the mind actually creates all of our experiences. Thus if we wish to take control of our lives, we must take control of our own minds.

The Buddha continues by presenting a straightforward logical conclusion to this: if our mind is corrupted, tainted, or flawed, then our experiences will also be tainted - and thus will be painful, disturbing, and unsatisfying. However, if our mind is pure, clear, and flawless, then our experiences will also be flawless - and thus will be pleasant, peaceful, and satisfying.

(3)

**“They insulted me, they struck me, they defeated me, they robbed me!”
When one holds tightly to such thoughts, animosity never ends.**

(4)

**“They insulted me, they struck me, they defeated me, they robbed me!”
When one does not hold tightly to such thoughts, animosity ends.**

(5)

It is not by means of animosity that animosities ever cease.

¹ *Cakkam va vahato padam.* There is much debate over how to translate this simile. What can be agreed upon is the basic meaning of each word: *cakkam* (wheel), *va* (as), *vahato* (following), *padam* (track, path, foot). In an effort to remain true to the scriptures, the translation here uses only those words and elements found in the original text. Some other interpretations (for example, “as the wheel of a cart follows the foot of the ox that pulls it”) involve adding extra words and elements to the phrase, which is difficult to justify.

It is by the absence of animosity that they cease; this is an eternal truth.

If we wish to attain peace of mind, it is necessary to relinquish our resentment and let go of our grudges. The animosity referred to here is not just external animosity in the sense of hostility between two people; it also refers to the inner turmoil created by grudge-bearing. When we let go of our resentment towards the outside world and its denizens, then we also come to peace with ourselves.

(6)

**Others do not understand that we must be restrained.
The wise ones who understand this become peaceful.**

A short and simple statement about the importance of self-restraint. When we allow ourselves to be pulled around by the desires and obsessions that appear in our minds, we never attain peace: we are always caught in a state of discontent, of wanting. However, when we make an effort to restrain our impulses and remain content in the present moment, then happiness and tranquility arise naturally.

(7)

**When one devotes attention to attractive things,
Lacks sense-restraint, is immoderate in eating, lazy, and lethargic;
Then Māra subdues that person,
Like the wind subdues a weak tree.**

(8)

**When one does not devote attention to attractive things,
Keeps one's senses well restrained, is moderate in eating, faithful, and energetic;
Then Māra does not subdue that person,
Like the wind does not subdue a stone mountain.**

Māra is a tempter, one who tries to control us by presenting us with temptations of various kinds - things that provoke us to greed, hatred, and ignorance. This can be taken metaphorically to represent the tendencies towards temptation within our own mind, or literally, as meaning an actual external entity. Most likely the Buddha meant it both ways.

In this verse, then, we see the Buddha giving a few examples of ways we can keep ourselves from falling into self-destructive cycles. If we focus our attention on things we find appealing, then we will tend to become obsessed with them and fall prey to our desires; so instead we direct our attention elsewhere. If we eat just to entertain ourselves or distract ourselves, if we eat obsessing about flavor and texture, then once again we will fall prey to our desires; so instead, we eat just what we need to eat in order to survive, and regard it purely as fuel for the body. If we make no effort to eliminate harmful mindstates and prevent them from arising, then harmful states will run rampant through our mind; so instead, we develop confidence in the efficacy of Buddhist practice, and carefully protect the mind at all

times. In this way, we become immune to the torment that comes from being enslaved by our own desires.

(9)

**An impure person who wears a monastic robe,
Lacking self-restraint and honesty,
Is not worthy of the monastic robe.**

(10)

**One who is faultless, focused on morality,
Who has taken up self-restraint and honesty,
Is truly worthy of the monastic robe.**

It is not enough just to put on an outer pretense of spirituality. It is also necessary to embody the principles of the spiritual life thoroughly and completely. This is particularly true when one is in the role of spiritual leader, teacher, or role model, as others will look to one for inspiration; if one presents a poor example, then they may lose faith in the practice as a result.

(11)

**Those who think the unessential is essential,
And see the essential as unessential,
Do not attain that which is essential,
And wander in the domain of wrong intention.**

(12)

**Those who know the essential as essential,
And the unessential as unessential,
Attain that which is essential
And wander in the domain of right intention.**

Often in life we get caught up in pursuits that are irrelevant to our spiritual goals, and either cease making progress or even wind up backtracking. Thus it's important to always keep in mind the importance of developing wholesome mindstates and reducing unwholesome mindstates; and also to remember that anything which does not directly contribute to our practice is ultimately unimportant.

(13)

**Just as rain penetrates a poorly roofed house,
In the same way, lust invades an undeveloped mind.**

(14)

**Just as rain does not penetrate a well-roofed house,
In the same way, lust does not invade a well-developed mind.**

The importance of this verse is in the Four Noble Truths, the foundational principles of Buddhism: namely, discontent, dissatisfaction, and misery arise from desire. So when our minds are undeveloped, desire easily invades the mind, which produces unpleasant mental and emotional experiences. However, when our minds are well-developed, through practicing sense-restraint and concentration, then desire not invade our minds, and we remain calm, peaceful, and content.

(15)

**They feel sorrow here, they feel sorrow after death;
Those who have done bad deeds feel sorrow in both places.
They feel sorrow and anguish,
Having seen their own defiled actions.**

(16)

**They rejoice here, they rejoice after death;
Those who have done good deeds rejoice in both places.
They rejoice and are overjoyed,
Having seen their own pure actions.**

(17)

**They are tormented here, they are tormented after death;
Those who have done bad deeds are tormented in both places.
They are tormented [by the thought] "I have done bad deeds,"
And they are tormented even more when they arrive at a bad destination.**

(18)

**They delight here, they delight after death;
Those who have good deeds delight in both places.
They are delighted [by the thought] "I have done good deeds,"
And they delight even more when they arrive at a good destination.**

These verses indicate the functioning of karma: we tend to see the results of our choices both in our current life and also in future lives. Either way, it is wise to always make beneficial choices: choices based on motives of kindness, generosity, renunciation, and the effort to develop concentration and insight. These are the choices that lead to a happy life here and now, and if there are future lives, such choices will produce positive conditions there as well.

(19)

**Even if one speaks much of the scriptures,
One is negligent if one does not act accordingly.
Like a cowherd counting cows that belong to others,
Such a person does not partake of the benefits of contemplative life.**

(20)

Even if one speaks little of the scriptures,

**Yet acts in accordance with the Dhamma,
Abandoning lust, hatred, and delusion,
With correct understanding and a well-liberated mind,
Not clinging anywhere,
Such a person partakes of the benefits of the contemplative life.**

While an intellectual understanding of the teachings is important, it is not enough; one must also act in accordance with those teachings, and make a sincere effort to eliminate the underlying causes of dissatisfaction: desire, aversion, and delusion.