

# The Greatest Blessings

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	2
The Greatest Blessings.....	5

# Preface

For People who come to Thailand and want to study Buddhism it is difficult to know how and where to start. They hear different explanations of the teachings and they are confronted with different ways of practice. It is hard to find the wise person who can help one to study the Buddhas teachings and to point the way to the practice in accordance with the teachings.

Many people who come to know the Buddha's teachings want to apply themselves to mental development immediately in order to reach the goal of their lives. They want to develop meditation without first studying the Buddha's teachings and thus they do not know that mental development includes both samatha (tranquil meditation) and vipassanā (insight meditation) they do not know that the practice of samatha and vipassanā are different and that they lead to different results. If we do not study the Buddha's teachings before we start with mental development we cannot have right understanding about the practice and we do not know whether the practice we follow is the Buddha's way or not.

I have met people who did not really know what kind of meditation they were developing and to what goal it was leading. Their aim was peace of mind but instead of finding peace of mind they became very confused. The teachings are so subtle one needs to study them thoroughly and to consider them very carefully in order to understand what the Buddha taught about mental development.

The Buddha who became enlightened and clearly knew all that is real is our teacher. He left us his teachings in the "Tipitaka", the Buddhist scriptures. The Buddha's teachings themselves should be our guide in the practice. If we follow our own way or the method of someone else instead of the Buddha's way, we will not reach the goal.

In this Book I do not pretend to give a complete outline of the Buddha's teachings. My purpose is to draw the reader to the teachings themselves and to the practice in accordance with the teachings. I want to ask the reader to read this book with discrimination and to investigate himself the Buddhist scriptures. By our own practice we can prove whether the way we follow is right or wrong. If we intend to develop vipassanā the result should be more understanding of the realities which appear at the present moment through the five senses and the mind and less clinging to the concept of self. In the final analysis the reader will have to find out himself and to decide for himself about

the path he wants to follow in his life. I would like to ask the reader to consider whether this book is a guide for him to the teachings and to the practice.

One may have doubts about mental development in daily life. Many people say that they have no free time to apply themselves to it. They complain that in this hectic time there is not any moment of quietness, no possibility of having concentration of mind. They think that they should retire from worldly life in order to develop the mind. When we study what the Buddha taught about mental development we will see that there can be mental development in daily life. For samatha one needs a quiet place and free time. Vipassanā however, is a way of mental development which can be cultivated at any moment.

The Buddha who became enlightened and clearly knew all that is real is our teacher. He left us his teachings in the "Tipitaka", the Buddhist scriptures. The Buddha's teachings themselves should be our guide in the practice. If we follow our own way or the method of someone else instead of the Buddha's way, we will not reach the goal.

In this Book I do not pretend to give a complete outline of the Buddha's teachings. My purpose is to draw the reader to the teachings themselves and to the practice in accordance with the teachings. I want to ask the reader to read this book with discrimination and to investigate himself the Buddhist scriptures. By our own practice we can prove whether the way we follow is right or wrong. If we intend to develop vipassanā the result should be more understanding of the realities which appear at the present moment through the five senses and the mind and less clinging to the concept of self. In the final analysis the reader will have to find out himself and to decide for himself about the path he wants to follow in his life. I would like to ask the reader to consider whether this book is a guide for him to the teachings and to the practice.

One may have doubts about mental development in daily life Many people say that they have no free time to apply themselves to it they complain that in this hectic time there is not any moment of quietness no possibility of having concentration of mind. They think that they should retire from worldly life in order to develop the mind. When we study what the Buddha taught about mental development we will see that there can be mental development in daily life. For samatha one needs a quiet place and free time Vipassanā however is a way of mental development which can be cultivated at any moment as of our daily life. The Buddha taught vipassanā to monks and laypeople to be developed during their daily activities Monks who are occupied with the study of Pali with the teaching of dhamma with writing with the building of a temple

and laypeople who are occupied with their families and the earning of a living they all can be mindful of the realities appearing through eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body-sense and mind-door. Is there not seeing hearing, thinking, hardness, motion, happiness or unhappiness while one is performing one's task and can there not be mindfulness of those characteristics when they appear "Did the Buddha say that there are moments that we should not be mindful?"

This book was written in Thailand where I lived for some years I experienced that "to reside in a suitable location" is the greatest blessing (Mahā-Maṅgalasutta).

Thailand was the country where I met the "wise person", the "good friend in dhamma", who led me to the Buddha's teachings, who pointed out the way to develop the eightfold path. It is a great blessing to live in a country where the dhamma is taught and practiced. In Thailand one can meet many people who do not set a limit to their generosity, be they rich or poor. Generosity is an essential virtue when there is still stinginess the wrong view of self is hard to eradicate. How can we become detached from the concept of self if we still hold tight to our property? In Thailand one is inspired to greater generosity.

Many people in Thailand know the value of kusalā and they appreciate the kusalā citta of others. Doing wholesome deeds and appreciating the wholesome deeds of others are ways people can help each other to have more wholesomeness in life I have experienced this in Thailand.

The writing of this book would not have been possible without the assistance of Mrs Sujin Boriharnwanaket who gave me such valuable advice and who translated the text into the Thai language. The chapters written in the way of question and answer are real life the questions were posed by people who were confronted with many problems in the practice. I found by my own experience that the practice is very subtle, that the clinging to the notion of self and the desire for result can easily lead us astray make us follow the wrong path instead of the right path.

When I wrote this book I thought of many people who want to know the truth about themselves. I found Dhamma the greatest blessing in life and therefore I want to share with others what I learned from the teaching and the practice.

Hoping that this book can help them to find the path leading to real peace:  
May the Dhamma be the greatest blessing in our lives,

*Nina van Gorkom*

## **The Greatest Blessings**

In the 'Mahā-Maṅgala-Sutta' (The Greatest Blessings, Sutta-Nipāta II, 4, Khuddaka Nikāya) we read that a deva came to see the Buddha when he was staying at Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery in the Jeta Grove, and asked him what the greatest blessings were. In reply the Buddha spoke to him about the greatest blessings. All the blessings of a life full of Dhamma are to be found in this sutta. We read:

"Not to associate with the foolish, but to associate with the wise; and to honour those who are worthy of honour - this is the greatest blessing.

To reside in a suitable locality, to have done meritorious actions in the past and to set oneself in the right course- this is the greatest blessing.

To have much learning, to be skillful in handicrafts, well-trained in discipline, and to be of good speech- this is the greatest blessing.

To support mother and father, to cherish wife and children, and to be engaged in peaceful occupation- this is the greatest blessing.

To be generous in giving, to be righteous in conduct, to help one's relatives, and to be blameless in action- this is the greatest blessing.

To loathe evil and abstain from it, to refrain from intoxicants, and to be steadfast in virtue- this is the greatest blessing.

To be respectful, humble, contented and grateful; and to listen to the Dhamma on due occasions- this is the greatest blessing.

To be patient and obedient, to associate with monks and to have religious discussion on due occasions - this is the greatest blessing.

Self-restraint, a holy and pure life, the perception of the Noble Truths and the realisation of Nibbāna- this is the greatest blessing.

A mind unruffled by worldly conditions, from sorrow freed, from defilements cleansed, full of peace- this is the greatest blessing.

Those who thus abide, ever remain invincible, in happiness established. These are the greatest blessings."

'Not to associate with the foolish, but to associate with the wise; and to honour those who are worthy of honour' are the first blessings. The last blessings, which are the blessings of the arahat, cannot be attained if one does not have the first blessings. If one does not know the right conditions for

enlightenment, nibbāna cannot be realised. There are four conditions for enlightenment, the first of which is, association with the 'righteous person; the second, listening to Dhamma; the third, 'wise consideration' of Dhamma; and the fourth, practising Dhamma (Saṃyutta Nikāya, Mahā-vagga, Kindred Sayings on Stream-winner, Chapter I, par. 5). We cannot hear Dhamma, investigate the truth of it and practise it, unless we have met the right person who can point out to us the way to the Buddha's teachings.

Do we want to associate with foolish people or with wise people? Is it of no use to apply ourselves to mental development if we do not scrutinize ourselves first with regard to this question. We do not inclined to associate with people who have the same ideas and the same likes and dislikes as ourselves. Our inclinations are like elements; they arise by conditions. The same elements attract each other. We read in the 'Niddana-vagga' (Saṃyutta Nikāya, Kindred Saying on Elements, Chapter XIV, par 14):

"Through an element it is, monks, that beings flow together, meet together. Beings of low tastes flow together, meet together with them of low tastes. They of virtuous tastes flow together, meet together with them of virtuous tastes. So have they done in the past. So will they do in the future. So do they now in the present."

When we are together with someone for a long time we cannot help being influenced by him. If we have foolish friends, who do not know the value of kusalā, who act and speak in an unwholesome way, it is to our detriment. We may not notice that we are under their influence, but gradually we may find ourselves following their ways. If we have friends who know the value of kusalā, who are generous, perform good deeds and speak in a wholesome way, it encourages us to more wholesomeness. The Buddha often pointed out the dangers of evil friendship and the benefit of righteous friendship.

Fools do not know what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. They praise what should not be praised and do not give honour to those who should be honoured. For example, high esteem is given to the most beautiful woman in the country or the world, or to persons who have the greatest skill in the field of sports, or to the best actor or musician. Should we disapprove of people who have beauty, strength or skill? We cannot force ourselves not to admire them, but if we have right understanding of kusalā and akusalā, we will know whether it is wholesome or unwholesome to be attached to beauty, strength and skill. We will know whether these things lead to the welfare of ourselves and others or not.

How confused is our life when we have not heard about Dhamma. We do not know what is wholesome and what is unwholesome; we do not know about cause and effect in life. When we suffer we do not understand why it had to happen to us. In everyone's life there are experiences of gain and loss, honour and dishonour, praise and blame, happiness and misery. These are called in the teachings the eight 'worldly conditions' ( loka-dhamma).

We read in the 'Anguttara Nikāya' (Book of the Eights, Chapter I, par. 5):

"Monks, these eight worldly conditions obsess the world; the world resolves around these eight worldly conditions. What eight? Gain and loss, fame and obscurity, blame and praise, contentment and pain..."

How susceptible we are to those worldly conditions. We are so sensitive to the way other people treat us. We attach great importance to whether we receive blame or praise and whether we are honoured or not. If we do not receive the honour we think is due to us we feel slighted. We have feelings of bitterness towards those who treat us badly. If we do not make the career in life we were hoping for, or if work is assigned to us which we consider to be beneath our dignity, we feel frustrated. There are many things which make us feel irritated, depressed or angry. Is there ever a day when everything goes according to our wishes for the whole day, a day full of perfect happiness? When we do not have right understanding we are obsessed by the 'worldly conditions'; we are foolish people.

The Buddha pointed out the dangers of being enslaved to these worldly conditions. To what does this lead? It leads to an unhappy rebirth. Devadatta, who caused a schism in the order and separated from it with five hundred monks, was a fool; he was obsessed by the worldly conditions and corrupted by evil friendship. We read in the 'Anguttara Nikāya' (Book of the Eights, Chapter I, par. 7, Devadatta) that the Buddha spoke to the monks, while he was staying on Vulture's Peak, not long after the departure of Devadatta:

"...Monks, mastered by eight wrong states, Devadatta, with his mind out of control, became one doomed to suffer in hell, in perdition, dwelling there a kalpa irretrievable.

By what eight?

Mastered by gain... by loss... by fame... by obscurity... by honour... by lack of honour... by evil intention... by evil friendship, with his mind out of control, Devadatta became one doomed to suffer in hell, in perdition, dwelling there a kalpa, irretrievable..."

Fools like Devadatta who are obsessed by worldly conditions cannot teach Dhamma. They want others to follow them blindly. They do not lead people to the Buddha's teachings so that they can investigate the truth for themselves. If we associate with fools we cannot develop right understanding about our life. We will become more obsessed by the 'worldly conditions' and there will be no way for us to eradicate defilements.

The Buddha, 'Teacher of devas and men', taught out of compassion for the world, not in order to have 'gain, honour and praise' in return. He pointed out that it is the Dhamma that is important, not the person who teaches it. We read in the 'Samyutta Nikāya' (Khandha-vagga, Kindred Sayings on Elements, Middle Fifty, Chapter IV, par. 87, Vakkali) about Vakkali who was sick and who had been longing for a long time to set eyes on the Buddha. The Buddha came to see him and taught him Dhamma; he pointed out to Vakkali the impermanence of all conditioned things, so that he could cultivate the eightfold Path. Vakkali then said to the Buddha:

"For a long time, lord, I have been longing to set eyes on the Exalted One, but I had not strength enough in this body to come to see the Exalted One."

"Hush, Vakkali! What is there in seeing this vile body of mine? He who sees Dhamma, Vakkali, he sees me: he who sees me, Vakkali, he sees Dhamma. Verily, seeing Dhamma, Vakkali, one sees me: seeing me, one sees Dhamma.

"As to this what do you think, Vakkali? Is body permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, lord."

"Is feeling..., is perception..., is formation..., is consciousness permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, lord."

"Wherefore, Vakkali, he who thus sees... he knows "...for life in these conditions there is no hereafter"

The wise person does not want others to follow him blindly, but he helps them in such a way that they can realize the truth themselves, without being dependent on him; this is the most effective way one can help others. He leads them directly to the Buddha's teachings and encourages them to study the 'Tipitaka' (Vinaya, Suttanta and Abhidhamma). Then they can have 'wise consideration' of the teachings and verify Dhamma themselves. He points out the way by which they can realize for themselves the perception of impermanence. The aim of the Buddha's teachings is to see things as they are.



So long as we do not see things as they are we take for happiness what is not happiness, we take for permanent what is impermanent, we take for self what is not self.

We read in the 'Samyutta Nikāya' (Salayattana-vagga, Kindred Sayings on Sense, First Fifty, Chapter III, par. 26, Comprehension):

"Without fully knowing, without comprehending the all, monks, without detaching himself from, without abandoning the all, a man is incapable of extinguishing ill.

Without fully knowing, without comprehending, without detaching himself from, without abandoning what (all) is a man incapable of extinguishing ill?

It is by not fully knowing the eye...objects... eye-consciousness... eye-contact... that pleasant or unpleasant or indifferent feeling ... the ear... sound... the nose... odour... the tongue... savours... the body... touches... the mind... mind-objects... that a man is incapable of extinguishing ill. This is the all, monks, without fully knowing which ... a man is so incapable.

But by fully knowing, by comprehending, by detaching himself from, by abandoning the all, one is capable of extinguishing ill."

The Buddha pointed out time and again the impermanence of seeing, hearing and all the other realities which we experience through the six doors, in order to remind people to be aware of the seeing at this moment, of the hearing at this moment. If we are not mindful of the seeing-consciousness which appears at the present moment or of the other realities appearing now, we will not have a precise knowledge of their characteristics and thus we will not be able to see them as they are. The wise person does not teach a Dhamma which is different from the Buddha's teachings. He does not point out things which do not lead to the goal. He does not discourage people from study and he does not discourage them from being mindful. He encourages them to be mindful of the reality appearing at the present moment, no matter where they are and no matter what they are doing. It is essential to find out whether the person with whom we associate is the right friend in Dhamma or not. If he is not the right person he cannot point out to us the way to see things as they are. We will know that he is the right person if he helps us to know the characteristic of seeing which appears now, of hearing which appears now, and of the other realities which present themselves through the six doors. This is the way the Buddha taught as the one and only way to eradicate the concept of self, to see things as they are. When there is less attachment to the concept of self we know from our own experience that association with the wise is the greatest

blessing.

To honour those who are worthy of honour is the greatest blessing. The Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha are worthy of honour. The wise person who taught us the development of the eightfold Path is worthy of honour. How can we honour those who are worthy of honour in the most appropriate way? We feel deep gratitude to the Buddha and we want to give expression to our gratitude. We can honour him by following his last words: 'Transient are all the elements of being! Strive with earnestness!' (Mahā-Parinibbāna-sutta, Dīgha Nikāya). We should not be heedless. We are not heedless if we are mindful at this moment and there would be no way to eradicate defilements at all. The whole purpose of the teachings is the eradication of defilements through the development of wisdom. Therefore, each moment of mindfulness is the highest possible form of respect to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha.

'To reside in suitable location' is the greatest blessing. We cannot meet the good friend in Dhamma in just any place; wise people are rare in the world. It is a great blessing to live in a country where Dhamma is taught and practised, so that we have an opportunity to know the Buddha's teachings. There are many things that have to coincide in order that we meet the right person. It is not by mere chance that we meet him; it is conditioned by kamma.

When we meet a wise person we may not be ready to receive Dhamma. It may not be the right time for us to listen to Dhamma; we may not be capable yet of 'wise consideration' of the teachings. Accumulations of wholesome deeds are very helpful for making us ready for the receiving of Dhamma. 'To have done meritorious deeds in the past' is the greatest blessing. We read in the 'Thera-Therī-gatha' that the men and women in the Buddha's time who attained enlightenment had accumulated meritorious deeds for aeons and that they had listened to Dhamma preached by Buddhas of former times. We read about Subha (Commentary to the 'Therī-gatha,' Canto XII, 70, Subbha, Paramattha-Dipani Thera-Therī-gatha Atthakatha):

"Auch sie, die ihren Entschluß unter vorhergegangenen Buddhas getan und Gutes für lange Zeit ergiebig angehäuft und die Grundlage für die Befreiung zusammengetragen hatte, wurde in diesem Buddha-Zeitalter in Rājagaha geboren..."

When we see the many conditions necessary for wisdom to reach maturity we will be less inclined to think that it is self who develops the eightfold Path. When we read about the accumulated good 'of age-enduring efficacy' of men and women in the Buddha's time and when we consider how they had listened

time and again to Dhamma preached by former Buddhas, before they met the Buddha Gotama and attained enlightenment, we are reminded not to be heedless at the present time.

The 'Mahā-Maṅgala-sutta' tells us about the blessings of a life full of Dhamma. We read about loving-kindness in the relationship between parents and children, between husband and wife, between relatives. We read about self-restraint, a holy and pure life. When we read these words we may feel discouraged and think that we shall never be able to practise what the Buddha taught. We would like to have less lobha, dosa and moha; but can we force ourselves not to be attached to pleasant things, not to be disturbed by unpleasant things? We cannot force ourselves to be 'righteous in conduct', 'to abstain from evil', 'to be steadfast in virtue'. Will all these blessings of a life full of Dhamma ever be attainable?

As long as there is the concept of self there will be no end to lobha, dosa and moha. Our many defilements are the real cues of the 'dukkha' in our life, day after day. We should be clear in our mind as to what we really want in our life: do we want to accumulate more defilements or do we want to have less defilements? If we want to eradicate defilements we should develop the eightfold Path. When there is mindfulness of nāma and rūpa the notion of self will be gradually eradicated. With the development of the eightfold path a radical change comes into our life.

The Buddha taught Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna (the Applications of Mindfulness) to monks, nuns, laymen and women layfollowers. As regards the life of the monks, the Vinaya should not be separate from Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna. In the Buddha's time the Vinaya and Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna were not separated. We read in the 'Mahā-Maṅgala-sutta' that one of the greatest blessings is 'To be well-trained in the discipline' (Vinaya). The Commentary to this sutta (Paramatthajotika, to the Sutta-Nipāta) speaks about the discipline of the layman (abstinence from the ten immoral actions) and about the discipline of the monk. The monk who develops the eightfold Path will have a deeper understanding of the Vinaya and he will observe the rules more perfectly. Each detail of the Vinaya is full of meaning, because the rules support the welfare of the Sangha and help the monk to lead a pure life; the rules help him to be considerate in his speech and actions, to cause no trouble to others. The Vinaya teaches the monk to be watchful in body, speech and mind. When one develops mindfulness there is watchfulness as regards the six doors. When there is mindfulness of nāma and rūpa we are less infatuated by what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and perceive through the mind-door. We learn to know our subtle defilements and

the danger of even these defilements. The monk who develops mindfulness will have a deeper respect for the rules of the Vinaya which remind him to be watchful, seeing danger in even the slightest faults. Thus we see that Vinaya and Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna should not be separated.

The monk who develops the eightfold Path and attains enlightenment will not leave the order any more and return to the 'lower life'. We read in the 'Saṃyutta Nikāya' (Mahā-vagga, Book I, Chapter VI, par. 12) that the Buddha spoke by way of simile about the monk who will not return to the layman's life; he said that the river Ganges, tending towards the east, cannot be made to change its course and tend towards the west. We read:

"Just so, monks, if the rajah's royal ministers or his friends or boon companions or kinsmen or blood relatives were to come to a monk who is cultivating and making much of the ariyan eightfold way, and were to seek to entice him with wealth, saying: 'Come, good man! Why should these yellow robes torment you? Why parade about with shaven crown and bowl? Come! Return to the lower life and enjoy possessions and do deeds of merit.'- for that monk so cultivating and making much of the ariyan eightfold way, return to the lower life is impossible. Why so? Because, monks, that monk's heart has for many a long day been bent on detachment, inclined to detachment, turned towards detachment, so that there is no possibility for him to return to the lower life..."

The eightfold Path changes the lives of monks and laypeople. It changes the relationship between parents and children, husband and wife, relatives and friends. There is bound to be attachment and displeasure or anger in one's relationship with others, but when we develop mindfulness there are more conditions for alobha (generosity) instead of lobha, for adosa (kindness) instead of displeasure or anger. When other people treat us badly there is less the concept of a self who suffers or the concept of another person who treats us badly. There are only nāma and rūpa arising by conditions; there is not this or that person. We are less susceptible to gain and loss, honour and dishonour, blame and praise, happiness and misery. One day there is blame, the next day there is praise, but receiving blame or praise is only nāma and rūpa arising because of conditions and falling away immediately. It is unavoidable that there be both pleasant and unpleasant experiences in life; the more we see that they arise by conditions the less we will take them for self.

Those who are arahats have a mind 'unruffled by worldly conditions', they are 'from sorrow freed, from defilements cleansed, full of peace- this is greatest blessing.' The harass have become invulnerable; nothing can disturb them any

more. The sutta continues: 'Those who thus abide, ever remain invincible, in happiness established. These are the greatest blessings.'

We are not free from sorrow, but when wisdom realizes a characteristic of nāma or rūpa, there is at that moment no fear, anxiety or restlessness; there is peace. Is it not true that wisdom brings contentment, be it only for a moment. At times we may feel discouraged; we may think that the eightfold Path is not for us and that we are far from the realization of the truth. We should, however, remember that the Buddha became enlightened and taught the truth for our welfare and happiness. The Buddha did not teach anything which cannot be realized. When we develop the eightfold Path we come to know ourselves, our daily life. In this way we may experience the great blessings of the Dhamma which transforms our life.