

## *The Dhamma Without Price*

*March 1, 2021*

When the Buddha taught the five brethren, his very first disciples, and the most senior among them, Ven. Kondañña gained the Dhamma eye—became a stream enterer—the first thing Ven. Kondañña did was ask to become a member of the Sangha. Here he was, already a member of the noble Sangha, but he wanted to become a member of the conventional Sangha as well. The Buddha immediately said yes. He invited him to become a monk to practice to put an end to suffering.

So the Sangha was established almost immediately after the Dhamma was first proclaimed and was shown to be effective. This shows that the Buddha was very far-sighted: that for the Dhamma to stay in the world would require a social institution of a particular kind. It was over the years that he began to see how this institution was shaped—how his vision shaped it.

When he had about sixty disciples, all of them arahants, he sent them out to teach. He told them to do this with sympathy for the well-being of the many human beings and devas who would benefit from hearing this Dhamma. They were sent out as almsmen. In other words, they were going to live off people's gifts, which meant that they could teach the Dhamma as a gift. It wasn't an exchange. It's not, "You feed me, and I'll teach you the Dhamma." They taught the Dhamma to many people who hadn't fed them. But the fact that they lived off gifts meant they could give the Dhamma freely.

Their virtuous conduct made them, as the Buddha said, the unexcelled field of merit for the world. Anyone who wanted to give a gift to members of this institution would benefit greatly from that gift, just as with a good field: You plant good seeds and you get abundant crops. But there's no tit for tat there: "You give me x amount of food, and I'll teach you x amount of Dhamma." Both sides have to give freely.

This institution, against all odds, has survived now more than 2,600 years. It's not just against the odds. It's against people who want to privatize the Dhamma. But we've seen in the past what happens. When the Mahayana was established, one of its aspects that people don't like to talk about was the insistence in the early texts that the Dhamma the Mahayana teachers were giving was so valuable that you could never pay them enough.

In other words, it wasn't that the Dhamma was so priceless that you could not think of putting a price on it. It was so priceless that you had to keep on paying.

But when the Dhamma becomes an object you can buy, it becomes subject to market forces. It was the same with the Vajrayana. And now today, people are saying, “Let’s do away with the Sangha. Do away with the idea that the Dhamma should be priceless. Allow it to be taught for a price.” Of course, that makes it an object subject to market forces, and the Dhamma’s sure to suffer.

So we ought to do our part to make sure that this institution, this economy of gifts, continues and that there are people who are inspired by it. This is the responsibility of the monks—to be inspiring. After all, the Buddha says that to be an object of someone else’s generosity, the ideal object of generosity either is free of passion, aversion, and delusion, or is practicing for the sake of freeing him- or herself from passion, aversion, and delusion. This is how you keep the Sangha alive. You make that your goal. Passion arises: What can you do to get rid of it? Aversion arises: What can you do to get rid of it? When you recognize that you’re deluded, how can you replace that delusion with knowledge? Of course, as you pursue this goal, you’re going to benefit. But at the same time, the people who’ve supported you will benefit as well. The Sangha gets continued, and the values of what the Buddha taught get embodied.

I remember when I first went to Thailand years back, I arrived in the middle of the night. I woke up the next morning, looked out my hotel window, and there down on the street below was a monk going for alms. He stopped in front of a store. The woman in charge of the store went back inside, came out, put some food in his bowl, and then he went on. It was almost as if they belonged to a subversive society because they were doing something that went against the values of any material culture where the emphasis is on gaining wealth.

Here their exchange represented a tradition where the value was not measured in wealth; it was measured in the Dhamma. She, in the midst of her daily activities, had an opportunity to support it. So even though she was pursuing wealth herself, she saw the value of having in the society people who are not pursuing wealth, who are willing to live off gifts, whatever the gifts may be.

It’s liberating for both sides. On the side of the monk, think of Ven. Bhaddiya who had been a king before he ordained. He would go sit under a tree and exclaim, “What bliss, what bliss!” His fellow monks were concerned that maybe he was thinking about the bliss of being a king and that he missed it. So they told the Buddha. The Buddha probably knew what was going on, but he decided to call Bhaddiya in to question him so that he would have a chance to make his motivation public.

It turned out the bliss Bhaddiya was thinking about was not the bliss of being a king. In fact, when he thought of when he was a king—guards posted inside the

palace and outside the palace, inside the city and outside the city, inside the country and outside the country—even then he couldn't sleep for fear that someone would try to kill him. If you're trying to amass wealth, then once you've got it amassed, you're in danger. But now, he said, he sat under a tree. His needs were provided by what was given, and his mind was free like that of a wild deer. He was not in a position of taking anything from anyone. He was living off what was freely offered, and there would be no one else to try to push him out of that position.

So as monks, we have to be happy with what we receive as gifts. That keeps us safe and keeps our minds free. At the same time, the more we free our minds, the more we do become an unexcelled field of merit for the world.

I was recently reading an article where someone was saying that the whole idea of merit was something invented by the monks as a way of fooling people into supporting them. It had nothing to do with the Buddha's teachings, and it was high time that we got rid of the concept. But actually, the Sangha was designed in such a way as to facilitate people in making merit. It provides an opportunity for people to devote their lives to the practice. They become ideal recipients. And in their example, they inspire other people to be generous, to be virtuous, and to have goodwill for all. After all, these are the principles that merit is based on, and they're principles of karma that the Buddha saw in his second knowledge on the night of his awakening. They're intrinsic to the Dhamma.

The practice of merit is the first answer to the Buddha's question that lies at the beginning of discernment: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What is skillful? What is blameless?" Looking for happiness in generosity, looking for happiness in virtue and universal goodwill: These are blameless ways of looking for happiness. And the Sangha is designed in such a way as to facilitate that.

So as monks we should practice in a way to make ourselves worthy of people's gifts. We do that by focusing on our practice, training the mind in an institution that places the training of the mind as its bottom line. As for the economics of buying and selling, that gets pushed off to the side.

The fact that the Dhamma is supported by gifts is what keeps it pure, keeps it in line with its original principles, and keeps it immune to the fads of the day. It's in this way that the Dhamma is timeless, and we help maintain it in its timeless form. So even if we're not teaching the Dhamma per se, we're giving a gift of Dhamma to the world.