

CHAPTER-II

DHAMMAPADA –A TIMELESS MESSAGE OF MORALITY

Goutama Buddha undertook pain in traveling through the mountains and uneven paths during forty-five years giving instructions and enlightening many persons. He addressed the people in all walks of life without considering the caste, creed, rank, profession, sex or any other division. People of every grade of society –kings, ministers, princes and paupers, the literate and the illiterate, the highest and the lowliest, saints and criminals, men, women and children were nearer and dearer to him, and he often went to them to solve their problems, religious or temporal. The Buddha was never tired of fulfilling his role as teacher, guide and philosopher. When he becomes certain that a person was capable of correction, he would go to such a person, speak to him sympathetically in understandable language and endeavour to put him in right track. All his activities were for the good, weal and happiness of mankind.

The *Dhammapada* belongs to the *Khuddaka Nikaya* or the 'Minor Collection'. It consists of 26 chapters of 423 verses arranged and classified in its present form naming it the *Dhammpada*. Each chapter of this anthology receives its name from its contents. For instance, the chapter on the mind (*Citta Vagga*), describes the features of man's mind. The one on the wise (*Pandita Vagga*) speaks of the characteristics of an intelligent man; the chapter on the fool (*Bala Vagga*) about the characteristics of a fool. The *Dhammapada* is a holy book having a collection of clear-worded exposition of the *Dhamma*.

When giving a subject of meditation or to sing to those who sought his guidance, the Buddha was so careful as to study fully their character, temperaments and the peculiarities of minds, for he knew

how diverse the tendencies and inclinations of human being are. To mind there never was a religious teacher who understood the various propensities of human beings so well as the Buddha. Through penetrative insight (*prajna*), through his highly developed mind, he understood the thoughts and aspirations of beings, their longings and hopes and sympathized with them. Instead of calling a man as sinner the Buddha tried to discover any good, latent possibilities in them, and strove to bring them out. Thus, would he treat these 'sinners' by raising them from the lower to higher levels of life? An exemplification of this policy of the Buddha is found through a study of the circumstances under which the verses of the *Dhammapada* were to be uttered.

As a teacher, as a path revealer, the Buddha used to possess patience and sympathy. There is no evidence to show that he ever flamed forth in anger, or tried to take revenge on any being human or divine. Even to his worst his opponents he did not manifest any signs of ill-will. His forbearance, his attitude towards abusive and hateful folk, is clearly seen in this verse (320) of the *Dhammapada*: "*As an elephant in the battlefield bears an arrow shot from a bow, so shall I endure abusive speech, for most people are ill-natured*".

Those who want to understand the problem will go through the verses of the *Dhammapada* a great deal of facts on the life and teaching of the Buddha. The touching tales of how the Master tended a sick monk, deserted and forlorn; consoled and enlightened Kisagotami who lost her only child when it could only just lisp; how he caused to appease the hunger of a weary farmer who lost his ox, yet was eager to listen Buddha who said, 'hunger is the greatest malady' (*iigacca parama raga* 203); how he paved the way to higher states of sanctity to a poor weaver's daughter who knew not that she was to die that very day; and numerous other episodes form the background

circumstances under which the Buddha uttered the stanzas of the *Dhammapada* to different people on different occasions while journeying from village to village, from town to town. The Universality and eternity of prescriptions is worth mentioning. These prescriptions of the Buddha are not only for his time, but also for all time i.e., eternal, for all persons and under all circumstances, and it is left to each individual to select the particular prescription suited to him and try to remove the ailment which he is suffering from. From this it follows that an individual has got a liberty to act as per the instruction of Buddha after considering his own situation. That is why; Buddha is called a physician who provides much option to the patient. He has autonomy to choose any path which is suitable to him as per his own capacity and disease.

In a commentary on the *Dhammapada* supposed to be written by the renowned commentator, the Venerable Buddhaghosa we found an account of the persons and circumstances that led to its utterance. The stories of this voluminous book are translated into English by E. W. Burlingame under the title 'Buddhist Legends' in the Harvard Oriental Series. These stories are also available in Sinhala in classic '*Saddharma Ratanavaliya*' (the String of Gems of the Sublime *Dhamma*) by the Venerable Dharmasena of Sri Lanka. Readers of these stories will find a wealth of information on the conditions of ancient India. The careful student of culture will find the accounts of India's folklore, customs manners, observances and practices, absorbingly interesting and informative.

In a world of confusion, in an age of conflict, hate and violence, for the complex conditions of today in which technology and economic advance predominate, we need a message of hope, love and wisdom, a message that encourages and inspires the worldly -minded who tend to deviate from the path of duty and rectitude. Those who are in

search of such a lofty message will certainly find it in the ancient but ever fresh verses of *Dhammapada*. One important fact we all should bear in mind is that the fundamental truths do not change in a changing world.

Once it was reported in the newspapers that the late Sri Jawaharlal Nehru in a friendly conversation with Chou-Ea-Lai, the late Chinese Premier, in Delhi had said: "*The victor creates hatred in the defeated the live in pain, Happily the peaceful live having given up both victory and defeat*".

This is nothing but the 201st verse of the *Dhammapada*. Though uttered 2500 years ago, this message the world needs today more than at any other time. What better message could a political leader give to another such political leader?

Mahatma Gandhi often called to mind the perennial philosophy enshrined in the *Dhammapada*:

"Hatred never by hatred
Is appeased in this world.
By love alone is it appeased,
This is an ancient principle." (V. 5)

The opening pair of verses of the *Dhammapada* explains briefly the moral causation or Karma, one of the principal teachings of the Buddha. They tell us in no uncertain terms that there is no external agency that punishes the bad and rewards the good deeds of beings, but that the doer of the deed is responsible for his own actions, he suffers or enjoys the consequences of deeds and it is his concern to do good or to do bad. This is individual moral responsibility.

Again how forcefully and convincingly does the master exhort us to have self-reliance when he says; "*Oneself is one's protector, (attahi attano natho), who else could be the protector? With self (mind) well subdued one obtains the protection (final emancipation) which is difficult to gain*" (160).

Unfortunately almost all the translators have made a gave mistake by translating the line as "Self is the lord of self". Even translations of recent times have blindly followed their predecessors, without giving a thought to the key word here, "*natha*" which means protection (support, refuge, and help). We should think of the negative word *a-natha*, does it mean lordless? No, it means without support, without protection, helpless. The wrong translation gives, erroneous notion of a big self, controlling small.

The more we dive into the mine of the *Dhammapada*, the more precious stones we gather. The ethics of Buddhism in the fewest possible words is the oft-quoted but ever fresh verse (183).

"Sabba papassa akaranam,
Kusalassa upasampada,
sacitta pariyodanam,
etam buddhanasasanam"

"The giving up of all evil
the cultivation of the good,
the cleansing of one's mind,
This is the teaching of the Buddhas"

The *Dhammapada* also brings home to the lover with full of hopes, and the bemoaning mother, the stark truth of life when in a message of sympathetic guidance it says: "*pemato jayati soko.*" "From

affection, arises grief, from affection arises fear, to him who is free from affection, there is no grief, whence fear?" (213)

To the raw recruit in the *Sangha*, the order, verses 33 and 34 bring a message of gentle warning :

"The restless fickle mind,
hard to guard and control,
the wise man straightens,
as a Fletcher an arrow".

Like a fish jerked out of its watery abode and cast on land, even so this mind does flutter Therefore the realm of *Mara* (passions) should be abandoned."

Do we not see the fragility of the fragile; do we not realize the dead sure fact of what we call life when we read the 41st verse?

"Before long this body, devoid of consciousness, discarded will lie on earth, worthless as a log of wood".

The *Dhammapada* is full of instances where sudden transformation took place some brief indication like the following: '*Attanam damayanti pandita*'.(80). "*The wise tame themselves*". "*Andhakarena onaddha padipam na gavessatha*"(146) '*Enveloped in darkness would you not seek a light?*'"

It is not possible to bring more gems of "purest ray serene" from this mine of mines – the *Dhammapada*. The joy and inspiration one derives from reading or bearing the beautiful Pali verses cannot be expected from a translation, and glorious beauty of the verses cannot be produced in any translation prose or verse. The weight or gravity of the thought is more reflected in the Pali language and for this reason it

has been written in this. Other languages cannot express the same feeling.

Finally, a study of the *Dhammapada* in a very non-infatuated way reveals that it is message radiating joy and hope, and not a philosophy of pessimism. The *Dhammapada* is such a luminous and priceless gem that it has influenced the lives of millions the world over. It is an unfailing guide to the art of living in a noble and honest manner. It is also a consolation and hope to those having troubled minds. In short, it can be said that an individual being can get rid of sufferings of his life if he follows the advice and instruction of Buddha depicted in the *Dhammapada*.

DHAMMAPADA:

ITS THREE PRIMARY AIMS

From ancient times to the present, the *Dhammapada* has been regarded as the most succinct expression of the Buddha's teaching. In the countries following Theravada Buddhism, it is a guidebook for everyday life, which should be read regularly by all the persons. For this reason the admiration of *Dhammapada* has not been confined to followers of Buddhism alone, but it has been taken with regards by persons belonging to other religions for the sake mental peace and happiness.

To his followers, the Buddha is neither a god, a divine incarnation, nor a prophet bearing a message of divine revelation, but one who has reached the highest spiritual attainment, Supreme Enlightenment (*Bodhi*). To the Buddhists the Enlightenment which provides the true nature of object (*tathata*) is the Supreme attainment. He is a world teacher who out of compassion, points out the way to *Nibbana* (Sanskrit: *Nirvana*), final release from suffering. His teaching,

known as the *Dhamma*, offers a body of instructions explaining the true nature of existence and showing the path that leads to liberation. Free from all dogmas and inscrutable claims to authority, the *Dhamma* is founded upon Buddha's own realization of reality, and leads one who practices it to that excellence.

In its twenty-six chapters, *Dhammapada* spans multiple aspects of the Buddha's teaching, offering a variety of standpoints from which to gain a glimpse into the heart of *Dhamma*-Truth. The inspirational verses on the fundamentals of the *Dhamma* are meant to be used as a basis for personal edification and instruction. As water, though once in essence, assumes different shapes due to the vessels into which it is poured, so the *Dhamma* of liberation takes on different forms in response to the needs of the beings to be taught. This diversity is evident in the verses of *Dhammapada*.

The Buddha's teachings found in the *Dhammapada* apparently are designed to meet three primary aims; human welfare here and now, a favorable rebirth in the next life, and the attainment of the ultimate good. The last aim is twofold; path and fruit.

(i) The first aim is concerned with establishing wellbeing and happiness in the immediately visible sphere of concrete human relations. This level shows man the way to live at peace with himself and his fellow men, to fulfill his family and social responsibilities, and to restrain conflict and violence, which inflict the individual, society, and the world. The guidelines here are basic ethical injunctions proposed by most world religions, but in the Buddha's teaching they are free from theistic moorings and grounded upon two directly verifiable foundations: concern for one's own integrity and happiness and welfare of others. For instance, one should avoid all evil, cultivate the good and cleanse one's mind (Verse-183). Other verses provide more

specific directives. One should avoid irritability in deed, word and thought and exercise self-control (231-234), and practice the five precepts, which teach abstinence from destroying life, from stealing, from committing adultery, from speaking lies and from taking intoxicants, treat all beings with kindness and compassion, live honestly and righteously. Instead of finding others' faults one should examine one's own faults, make a continual effort to remove impurities just as a silversmith purifies silver (50, 239). There is no need to despair for past evil; one who abandons the evil for the good "illuminates this world like the moon freed from clouds (173)".

The Buddha's teaching reveals moral justice in an impersonal universal law, the law of *Kamma*, which reigns over all sentient existence. *Kamma* means action springing from intention, as bodily deed, speech and thought. Unwholesome *kamma* is action rooted in mental states of greed, hatred and delusion; and wholesome (*kusala*) *kamma*, action rooted in mental states of generosity or detachment, goodwill and understanding. The willed action may fade from memory but they leave subtle imprints on the mind, seeds with the potential to come to fruition.

The objective field in which the seeds of *kamma* ripen is the process of rebirths called *samsara*. Life is not an isolated occurrence beginning with birth and ending in death. Each single lifespan is part of series of lives having no discoverable beginning in time and continuing as long as the desire for existence stands in fact. Rebirth can take place in various realms. There are not only the familiar realms of human beings and animals, but ranged above we meet heavenly worlds of greater happiness, beauty and power and ranged below internal worlds of extreme suffering. The cause for rebirth is *kamma*, which determines the sphere into which rebirth takes place, wholesome actions (*kusala*) bringing rebirth in higher forms,

unwholesome (*akusala*) actions rebirth in lower forms. After yielding rebirth, *kamma* continuous to operate, governing the endowments and circumstances.

The second level of teaching found in the *Dhammapada* is to follow this ethical law leading upwards- to inner development, to higher rebirths and to richer experiences of happiness and joy. However, all states of existence in *samsara*, even the lofty celestial abodes, are lacking in genuine worth: for they are all inherently impermanent, without any lasting substance, and thus, for those who cling to them, potential bases for suffering. The disciple of mature faculties does not long even for rebirth among the gods. Having understood the intrinsic inadequacy of all conditioned things, his only aspiration is to attain *Nibbana*, the unconditioned state where there is no more birth, ageing and death, and no more suffering i.e., the ultimate cessation of miseries.

The third level of teaching found in the *Dhammapada* comes out of this aspiration for final deliverance. The Four Noble Truth provides the framework for this aspiration. The first truth concerns various forms of suffering, existence itself being impermanent and substanceless, essentially unsatisfactory. The second truth is craving or thirst (*tanha*) for pleasure and existence, which drives us through the round of rebirths, bringing in its trail suffering. The third truth declares that the destruction of thirst (*tanha*) arising out of suffering may come to an end, and the fourth prescribes the means to gain release, the Noble Eightfold Path: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (Chapter 20, *Magga Vagga*).

The Noble Eightfold Path is arranged into three groups of training: Moral discipline, i.e., *Sila*, concentration (*samadhi*) and

wisdom (*prajna*). By the training in morality, the coarse forms of mental defilements and kept under control. By the training in concentration, the mind made calm, pure and unified. The training in wisdom climaxes in the deliverance of mind.

The practice of the path in all three stages is feasible for people in any walk of life. The Buddha taught it to lay people as well as to monks, and many of his lay followers reached high stages of attainment. However, application to the development of the path becomes most fruitful for those who have relinquished all other concerns in order to devote themselves wholeheartedly to spiritual training, to living the 'holy life' (*brahmacarya*). Thus, the Buddha established the *Sangha*, the order of monks and nuns, as the special field for those ready to dedicate their lives to the practice of his path, and in the *Dhammapada*, the call to the monastic life resounds throughout. The uttering '*Sangham saranam gacchami*' emphasizes the importance of gathering of the like-minded people for the sake of social welfare.

The *Dhammapada* recognizes those who have reached the goal. At the first, called 'Stream-entry' the disciple gains his first glimpse of "The Deathless", and enters irreversibly upon the path to liberation. This achievement alone, the *Dhammapada* declares, is greater than lordship over all the worlds (178). Following Stream-entry come two further stages which weaken and eradicate still more defilements and bring the goal increasingly closer to view. One is called the stage of Once-returned, the other the stage of non-returned. The fourth and final stage is that of the *Araht*, the Perfected One, the fully accomplished sage who has completed the development of the path, eradicated all defilements and freed himself from the cycle of rebirths. The term '*arhat*' is the shorter form Sanskritized '*arhanta*' i.e., one who has killed all his enemies i.e., the anger, lust etc through different

afore-said training. This is the ideal contribution of the *Dhammapada*. In Chapter seven of the *Dhammapada* the *Arhat* serves as a living demonstration of the truth of the *Dhamma*.

The *Arhat* ideal reaches its optimal exemplification in the Buddha, the promulgator and master of the entire teaching. It was the Buddha who, without any aid or guidance, rediscovered the ancient path to deliverance and taught it to countless others. His arising in the world provides the precious opportunity to hear and practice the excellent *Dhamma* (182,194). He is the giver of refuge (190,192), the Supreme Teacher who depends on nothing but his own self-evolved wisdom (353).