

Virtuous Practices of Lay Buddhists

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Ordinary Worldly Virtuous Practices

Practices that Bring About Rebirth in the Human and Heavenly Realms

Transcendental virtuous practices are based on the advancement of virtuous practices in everyday life. In other words, they are based on people's ordinary virtuous practices, and developed further. To guide and support all sentient beings towards liberation, the Buddha-dharma also teaches those righteous practices that bring about rebirth in human and heavenly realms and direct people toward liberation. In undertaking these transcendental virtuous practices, prior to attaining liberation, Buddhist practitioners continually cycle within the human and heavenly realms. Those who are not Buddhists can gain rebirth in the human and heavenly realms if they undertake the basic virtuous practices. Therefore, the worldly, everyday righteous practices promoted in the Buddha-dharma can be considered largely the same as worldly virtuous practices. Whenever the Buddha gave teachings to newcomers, undoubtedly, "he would first talk about how they can develop righteousness, and those who heard the teachings would feel happy to practice. Buddha taught them about generosity, morality, and practices to gain human or heavenly rebirths. This is like the way all buddhas give teachings."¹

¹ See the *Sūtra on Teaching the Ill* in the *Madhyamāgama*.

Birth and death are continuous, until liberation. Our wholesome and unwholesome karmic forces, to a large extent, determine our destiny. The matter of how we ensure progress, peace and happiness in this present life and in future lives before gaining liberation from this cycle of birth and death is certainly something that Buddhists are concerned about. The Buddha-dharma teaches us to seek not only the “ultimate happiness (liberation)”, but also “present-life happiness” and “future-life happiness”.

The methods for fulfilling a wish to live a life that is meaningful, peaceful and happy in this present life and in future lives require the motivation and practices² for rebirth in the better realms of human and heavenly beings.³ Such practices are undertaken to learn and to enact certain virtuous deeds that enable this present human life to be more beautiful and fulfilling, and to attain a heavenly or human rebirth in the next life.

During the Buddha’s time, ordinary people sought beauty and fulfilment in this human realm or longed for the bliss and freedom of the heavenly realms. According to the Buddha-dharma, the heavens are not as good as this human realm. However, the Buddha took such worldly inclinations

² While the Chinese text has 心行 (*xīn xíng*), which literally means “mind practices”, the translation has used only the word “practice”. Here, practice should include mental aspirations, which become the motivation for actual deeds.

³ The human and heavenly realms are considered better than other realms in the Buddhist cosmos, which are filled with suffering.

into account with skilful means, and thus he also spoke about the practices that will lead to a heavenly rebirth.

In the other Indian religions, teachings on the practices that bring about rebirth in the human and heavenly realms are imbued with ritualistic and superstitious acts, such as the offering of sacrifices to the deities, praying and reciting mantras.⁴ In contrast, practices that bring about rebirth in the human and heavenly realms, taught by the Buddha, incorporate the virtuous practices that bring harmony and happiness to oneself and to others. These practices include acts of generosity, moral acts, and meditation, which purifies the mind. Here in particular, the meditation refers to the four immeasurable minds of loving kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and impartiality. The merits gained from giving are not as good as those gained from upholding the precepts, while the merits gained from upholding the precepts are inferior to those from the meditative states of the four immeasurable minds. This was a teaching of the Buddha to Sudatta in the *Ekottarikāgama, Chapter 27 on Complete Attainment of the Four Noble Truths*. The reason is that, although giving is actually a virtuous deed that benefits others, it is often undertaken in the

⁴ In Buddhism, there is also the practice of reciting mantras. This is the adapted form of the worldly practice, which Buddhists use as a means by which to connect our minds to the pure minds of the bodhisattva or buddha whose mantras we recite.

absence of pure intention. For example, the *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* indicates that:⁵

... some people give because they seek wealth,⁶ want to embarrass someone,⁷ feel averse to someone.⁸ Others give out of fear, to entice someone to do or believe something, or because they fear death. Sometimes people give ostensibly to delight others but really want to deceive them,⁹ or because they feel obligated to give, since they have wealth. Others give for the sake of outshining others, or they give out of envy or arrogance.¹⁰

⁵ Lamotte's French translation of this text and an English translation based on Lamotte's version is as follows: "Nongenuine giving is giving inappropriately: motivated by self-interest, arrogance/ haughtiness, dislike, fear, to seduce another, fear of death, in jest, to keep up with the wealthy, rivalry, jealousy, pride, power, fame, enchantment, avoiding bad things and to gain an advantage, to beguile a crowd/audience, a gift made carelessly or with disrespect."

⁶ Examples of such situations include businesses offering gifts to entice customers to buy more of their products, and people offering gifts to gain greater rewards for themselves.

⁷ The Chinese word 愧 (*kui*) has the verb sense of causing someone to feel ashamed. [動] 辱人而使之感到羞慚。 <https://pedia.cloud.edu.tw/Entry/Detail/?title=愧&search=愧>

⁸ An example here could include aversion to certain people, such as beggars, and so someone might give them some gifts with the wish that they should go away.

⁹ An example is of someone offering help to gain another's friendship and trust but really wanting the benefits of association with that person, rather than to establish a friendship.

¹⁰ An example of such giving is when someone sees another person gaining recognition, praise etc. for their act(s) of generosity and then wanting that same treatment or status, and thus they carry out similar deeds.

Yet others give because they seek fame or blessings, want to remedy a streak of ill fortune, or want to influence the community. Some give to those who are poor but in a disrespectful manner, and look down upon those who are poor and destitute.

All these kinds of giving are denounced by the Buddha. But even if one gives with a pure mind and wholesome intentions, the merits of giving are not superior to those of upholding the precepts. What is given is simply a personal sacrifice of one's own possessions, rather than¹¹ upholding the precepts by controlling our defilements so that our behaviour accords with the ideals of worldly peace and harmony, happiness and security.¹² Generally speaking, the practice of upholding the precepts focuses on one's speech and actions.¹³

¹¹ There is an underlying comparison in which external possessions are easier to relinquish while vowing to uphold the precepts; this is an internal practice that is a more difficult level of practice.

¹² Here, security refers to living a life with high morals such that people do not harm each other and so that there is safety and security. The Chinese word is 善生 (*shàn sheng*), which literally means "to make beings live well without fears." 「對於一切有情的悲濟，雖不為局限於人類的學者所諒解，但擴展慈悲不忍的同情到一切，顯出了對於善生的無限尊重。」（《佛法概論》，p.254）

¹³ For example, the five precepts of no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, and no taking of intoxicants.

The practice of purifying and developing one's morality, such as meditating on loving kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and impartiality, is even more precious. These practices of meditation can tame one's mental defilements and enhance one's empathy toward all sentient beings. Even though one cannot attain awakening by relying only on meditation, the practice of meditation can become a steppingstone to attaining liberation.

In conclusion, the Buddha always taught that acts of generosity and upholding the precepts can lead to be rebirth in the human and lower heavenly realms; if someone wants to be reborn in the higher heavenly realms of form or formlessness, they must develop the meditative concentrations that are free from desire. Nevertheless, meditation is inclined to self-benefit and is focused on one's inner world. If a person attaches to the meditative states, such as those achieved through meditation on loving kindness,¹⁴ or the meditation attained through loathing of the

¹⁴ *Metta* (loving kindness) meditation is a method of meditation that projects loving kindness and compassion towards oneself and then gradually extends it to all beings. It is a method that develops the mind's concentration and also nurtures kindness so that one is able to extend compassion to all people, even those we dislike.

inferior and seeking the superior,¹⁵ they will be reborn in the heavens of form or formlessness. In fact, according to the teachings in the Buddha-dharma related to attaining true awakening, the practice of meditation is not as safe as the practice of upholding the precepts that bring about rebirth in the human realm.¹⁶

Righteous Livelihood

For lay Buddhists, a primary concern is to address their righteous economic activities because these are closely connected to the security and happiness of their families and themselves. This concern also has an important effect upon society. In *Sūtra 91* of the *Samyuktāgama*, the Buddha taught Ujjaka that, “there are four matters that can ensure security and happiness for lay people in this present life.”

¹⁵ The meditation method of loathing the inferior and seeking the superior is a method whereby one reflects on the dissatisfaction of the lower realms and the superior qualities of the higher realms. In this way, one is no longer attached to the human realm therefore and seeks the higher heavenly realms. Similarly, the heavenly realms contain many levels; to progress to the higher heavenly realms, one must consider the vices of the lower heavens, relative to the upper heavens. However, this method is limited because once the highest level of heaven is reached, there is no superior heaven to compare with.

¹⁶ Rebirth in the heavenly realms poses a risk to a person’s cultivation of liberation because they may become enchanted by the bliss of the heavens and forget about the transcendental Buddhist path.

The first is possession of skills, which is “to learn all different types of skills so as to earn a living.”¹⁷ If a person does not have sufficient knowledge and skills to enable them to maintain a proper occupation, then they will have to rely on the support of others, and they will certainly suffer from unfortunate outcomes. The *Śṛṅgāḷaka Sūtra* also points out the same idea, as seen in *Sūtra 91* of the *Samyuktāgama*, which says, “one should first develop a skill, then wealth can be gained.” In *Sūtra 1283* of the *Samyuktāgama*, proper occupations include “the six types of occupations: farming, trade, raising animals, storage services, builder, and furniture maker.” In *Sūtra 91* of the *Samyuktāgama*, proper occupations include farming, trade, government positions/public servants, scribing, bookkeeping, and arts and crafts. All proper occupations can enable support of one’s life. Occupations such as those related to sex work, killing, alcohol, fortune-telling, and fraud¹⁸ are all improper. A clear example of an improper occupation can be found in the *Sūtra on the Brahmin Dhānañjāni*, in the *Madhyamāgama*, where Dhānañjāni deceived his fellow brahmins and other people to assist the king, while also lying to the king in order to side with the brahmins and people. In this way, Dhānañjāni

¹⁷ *Samyuktāgama, Sūtra 91.*

¹⁸ The Chinese 厭禁 (*yàn jìn*) literally means “to not provide an answer when asked so as to withhold information and deceive others,” and 大稱小斗 (*dàchēng xiǎodǒu*) literally means “to use faulty scales while conducting trade”. These two concepts have been combined as “fraud” in the translation, to capture the broad meaning.

used the government's powers to oppress the people, and at the same time he used the strength of the people to deceive the government. In doing so he was able to extract bribes, and extort and exploit both sides to gain wealth illegally. All of this was because he wanted to please his wife. In fact, a person cannot mitigate their crimes of gaining wealth illegally with the reasoning or excuse that they needed to provide for their family, make offerings to the deities, or conduct charity acts.

The second matter to ensure the security and happiness of lay people in this present life is protection. This means that a person seeks protection of their own wealth by suitable means so that it does not get stolen or used up recklessly.

The third matter is having good spiritual friends. This means associating with people who are inherently good, and refraining from mixing with bad people who are deceptive, violent, and unrestrained or undisciplined in their actions.¹⁹ This is because bad people are one of the causes leading to loss of wealth. The *Śṛṅgāḷaka Sūtra* teaches that there are six causes of the loss of wealth: addiction to alcohol, gambling, being unrestrained (doing things at improper times), over-indulgence in entertainment, associating with bad people, and laziness.

¹⁹ One who is unrestrained or undisciplined should be understood in the sense of one who does not diligently do good; someone who has no self-restraint or discipline against doing bad deeds.

The fourth matter to ensure the security and happiness of lay people in this present life is possession of economic budgeting, which means being able to ensure a good balance between saving and expenditure. In other words, one should avoid being both wasteful and miserly. Wasteful expenditure, no matter where it is spent, will not lead to good outcomes. Being miserly will cause someone to be ridiculed, much as a dog which has starved to death (even while they had plenty of food available). If someone is like the miserly elder Rucika, who did not enjoy his wealth, share it with his family, or donate it to charity, and thereby to generate merits, they will miss out on creating benefits for their future lives and can also suffer unhappy and insecure situations in this present life.

The righteous livelihood outlined by the Buddha can be considered as a very suitable approach for the environment and society of that time.

Good Social Relationships

Each person living in society has mutual relationships with others. If we want to live peacefully in our society and have a society that maintains good order, we should all endeavour to fulfil our responsibilities according to our respective roles. The Buddha once taught Śṛṅgāḷaka, the son of a householder, how to pay his respects to the six directions, which is similar to the Confucius principle of the five relationships. Because Śṛṅgāḷaka, the son of a householder, had adopted his family's traditional spiritual

teachings and had paid respects to the directions above, below and the four cardinal directions, the Buddha tactfully taught him how to pay respects to the six directions that symbolize social relationships.

Paying respects to the six directions is basically to place oneself at the centre. The East represents the parents; the South symbolizes teachers; the West one's partner, and the North typifies friends. The directions below and above denote servants and spiritual teachers, respectively. These six directions symbolize our relationships with others: parent with child; teacher with student; spouse, friends and relatives with each other; master with servant;²⁰ and devotee with spiritual teacher. In these relationships we have mutual responsibilities. In other words, individuals' responsibilities within the relationships are not one-sided. The detailed explanation is available in the *Dirghāgama* and *Madhyamāgama*. In the meaning of the six directions, there is the relationship of spouses with each other. This relationship requires loyalty and moral integrity towards each other. The relationships of government with citizen and siblings with each other are not mentioned in the meaning of the six directions, but they can be considered as the relationship between friends and relatives. In the *sūtra*, the explanation of the relationship between friends and relatives includes the idea of a hierarchy that is similar to the relationship between a manager

²⁰ In the Buddha's time there were servants and slaves. In our present time we can view this relationship in a similar way to the employer and employee relationship.

and the team members they supervise. In relation to our own friends and relatives, we should employ the four all-embracing virtues to draw them together. That is, through the virtue of giving, we should use our material wealth or knowledge to help our friends and relatives to improve their lives, materially and spiritually. Through the virtue of kind speech, we engage in discussions amicably and constructively. As for the virtue of beneficial deeds, we should be considerate of our friends and relatives' benefits. The virtue of cooperation means we should work with our friends and relatives to undertake tasks and to support them, through thick and thin. These four all-embracing virtues are essential in a social environment, and they are qualities especially important in any leader. Therefore, it is said in *Sūtra 699* of the *Samyuktāgama*, “these [virtues] to embrace the world are like a cart driven by a navigator... Because of these four all-embracing virtues — the Dharma teachings in accordance with [the truth], there are wise and noble beings, and they take care of all beings in this world.” Bodhisattvas take up the responsibility of teaching and guiding sentient beings, and they employ these four all-embracing virtues to do so. This practice is essentially the extension of the virtuous practice of maintaining relationships with friends and relatives. Regarding a master–servant relationship, apart from organising appropriate tasks for the servants, a master was required also to provide them with appropriate clothing, food and medicine. Moreover, the master should frequently offer their servants delicious dishes of food at appropriate times and treated them properly,

including provision of sufficient rest time. This requirement of a master in the ancient times was certainly very generous and considerate towards the servant. Within the meaning of the six directions there is a special inclusion of the teacher and student relationship, as well as the spiritual guide and devotee relationship. From this we can see that the Buddha held high regard for culture and education.

Governance Based on Virtues

The Buddha abdicated his position as crown prince and renounced the worldly life because he was dissatisfied with the political situation of his time, which was filled with power struggles and mutual invasions between countries. In the *Samyuktāgama, Sūtra 1,236* the Buddha commented that:

The victor gains more enemies,

The defeated suffer poor rest.

Upon leaving victory and defeat behind,

One can sleep peacefully.

The Buddha was an advocate of pacifism between countries and tribes. He seldom talked about political issues and the rulers of his time. Furthermore, he did not encourage people to blindly pledge allegiance to a ruler. Concerning the rise or fall of a tribe and their country, the Buddha once taught the minister Varṣkāra seven factors that can prevent decline in a society (*Dirghāgama, Sūtra on the Buddha's Last Journey*). In the olden

days, a country and the people's prosperity or suffering hinged upon whether the king was wise and able. Therefore, the Buddha once taught that a king should have ten qualities: (1) integrity and kindness, (2) acceptance of the criticism by the subjects, (3) generosity and rejoicing with people, (4) ethical attainment of wealth, (5) no improper desire for other men's wives, (6) no consumption of alcohol, (7) no indulgence in entertainment, (8) abiding by the laws without bias or favouritism, (9) no conflicts with the ministers, and (10) good health. According to the *Ekottarikāgama*, these ten virtues are focused on nurturing a king's morals, which are regarded as the basis for social morals. In the *Zhong Benqi Jing*²¹ it is said that:

*Those who are leaders in this world
Should behave with righteousness without deception,
Carefully teach and show [people] proper etiquettes.
Such are criteria for kings that accord with the Dharma.
If a king is righteous, compassionate and forgiving*

²¹ The *sūtra Zhong Benqi Jing* is essentially the biography of the Buddha. It includes information about when the Buddha gained the prediction of Buddhahood from Dīpaṃkara Buddha, but mainly covers the events in the Buddha's life, starting from the first turning of the Dharma wheel up to when he returned to Kapilavastu to teach and convert his clan. 「《中本起經》(約西元二〇〇—二二〇年譯)上卷,從定光佛(然燈 Dīpaṃkara)授記起,回迦毘羅度釋種止;五比丘中有十力迦葉(Daśabalakāśyapa),與《十誦律》相同,這是說一切有部初期的佛傳。」(《初期大乘佛教之起源與開展》, p. 581)

*Benevolent and benefits people,
Ensures fair distribution of wealth,
Then people will come and support him.*

This is a very valuable teaching! The main principles for a ruler presiding over a government are righteousness and fairness, and to embody these virtues in their own actions as well as working for the benefit of the people. The aspect of “fair distribution of wealth” is especially important; it is to ensure there is not a wide gap between the rich and poor. In such a way, a king will naturally gain the support of the people and realize a state of governmental stability and prosperity for the country. In the Buddhist texts there are narratives about how a *cakravatin* king²² uses the righteous Dharma to govern the world. Generally, this is explained as the ideal Buddhist governing system. In fact, it was an actual governing system in ancient India, but it has become a legend passed through Indian tradition.

According to the Buddhist tradition, the seer Asita predicted that Prince Siddhārtha would become a *cakravatin* king if he did not renounce the home life for spiritual practice. Based on the Buddhist *sūtras*, there were several *cakravatin* kings in the ancient times, ever since a justice had first

²² *Cakravatin* is a world ruler; one who is able to rule over the whole world.

been elected by the people.²³ Previously it was discussed that a *cakravatin* king had ruled over the four continents. This is effectively the lost records of the ancient Indian and European conquests. The Buddhist governing system of a *cakravatin* king is similar to the ancient Chinese governing systems of benevolent rulers (emperors Xu Yan and Song Xiang also had similar ideologies).²⁴

In the *Madhyamāgama*, it says that the governing system of the righteous Dharma does not employ weapons and force; rather, it uses the Dharma to rule and guide so as to bring forth peace and stability. In the *Sūtra on the Practices of the Cakravatin King* in the *Dīrghāgama*, it records that when the governors of various states (subordinate to the empire) came to offer wealth to the *cakravatin* king, the king replied, “No need, no need, oh good

²³ The Chinese 眾許平等王 (*zhòng xǔ píngděng wáng*) refers to a particular period to indicate the very early time when political systems were not yet fully established but tribes did nominate a person to be a justice to help people sort out disagreements. 《佛法概論》：接著經濟問題嚴重起來，有的辛苦耕作而反得不到收穫；有的游手好閒，到處飽食無憂。大家覺到公共沒有法紀，不能安定，於是就公推田主——梵語刹帝利，即是國王來分配，這近於中國古代的均田傳說。有了國家組織，制裁權力，多少減少些紛爭。國家制的出現，為了經濟的不平；國主是大眾公舉的，所以稱為「眾許平等王」。(p. 132)

²⁴ King Yan of Xu state is said to have lived some time in the Western Zhou dynasty. Legend has it that he adopted benevolence as the principle for governing the state and was well-loved and supported by the people (<http://www.ivantsoi.com/hydccl/orgpage.html?page=4387>).

Duke Xiang of Song lived during the Spring–Autumn Period of Chinese history, during the Zhou Dynasty. He, too, promoted the ideal of benevolence in governing his country (<https://pedia.cloud.edu.tw/Entry/Detail/?title=宋襄公>).

men! You all have made offering to me [by governing your states very well]. You only need to govern your people in accordance with the righteous Dharma and do not allow deception and improper activities to occur in your countries.” The “righteous Dharma” is referring to the virtuous teachings of the five precepts and ten wholesome deeds.²⁵ The reason that a *cakravatin* king conquers other countries is not to gain wealth or territory, but for the sake of promoting a virtuous governing system so that people and animals can live with happiness and security.

Special Practices for Lay Buddhist Followers

Five Accomplishments of Lay Practitioners

Male and female lay followers learn and practice the Buddha-dharma while maintaining a householder lifestyle. In terms of their economic and social activities at home, these are largely the same as what has been discussed above. However, lay followers are required to uphold special practices in order to rise above the everyday worldly moral practices, and then to move in the direction of liberation. In the *Samyuktāgama*, *Sūtra* 927, these special practices are indicated as the five-fold accomplishment.

²⁵ The five precepts are no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no false speech and no taking of intoxicants. The ten wholesome deeds are no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no harsh speech, no lying, no divisive speech, no idle speech, no greed, no hatred and no ignorance.

1. Accomplishment of Preliminary Confidence

The first is the accomplishment of preliminary confidence, which is to have right faith in the Buddha. This is because the Buddha is the source of the Dharma and the leader of the *saṃgha* (community of monks and nuns). A lay follower should develop a steadfast and correct confidence in the Buddha. Such a confidence is defined as “[a temporary state of] mind with non-defilement as its underlying nature; deep recognition [is its cause] and aspiration [is its result].”²⁶ This means that a follower has the aspiration to achieve the [temporary state of] undefiled mind through superior understanding of the Triple Gem. This kind of accomplishment is equivalent to the practices of right view and right intentions in the Noble Eightfold Path.

²⁶ The Chinese saying 深忍樂欲 (*shēnrěn lèyù*) is better explained in *Cultivating Confidence*, which says, “What is confidence? A [temporary state of] undefiled mind is its essence. This definition is very difficult to comprehend, and we need to explain it based on the causes that lead to the arising of confidence and the results that are borne from having confidence. In terms of the perspective of causes, it is said that ‘deep recognition (深忍)’ is a profound understanding. In other words, it is a ‘superior understanding’. Because an understanding that is profound and powerful can initiate confidence, hence it is said that “the cause of confidence is superior understanding.” In terms of the perspective of results, it is said that “aspiration is the fruit of confidence.” ‘Aspiration (樂欲)’ is a vow or eagerness to fulfil one’s goals. Where there is confidence (faith), there must be vows or eagerness.” 「深忍」，是深刻的忍可，即「勝解」。由於深刻的有力的理解，能引發信心，所以說「勝解為信因」。「樂欲」，是要實現目的的希求、願望。有信心，必有願欲，所以說「樂欲為信果」。(CBETA 2020.Q4, Y15, no. 15, p. 88a4-6)。

2. Accomplishment of the Precepts

The second is the accomplishment of the precepts, which in essence refers to the five precepts. The purpose of upholding the five precepts is not merely to cease all evil, but also to undertake what is wholesome. For example, the precept of no killing also embodies the protection of and caring for life. Apart from the five precepts, some lay Buddhists also uphold the eight precepts (periodically) for a full day and night.

The eight precepts include the five precepts and the additional precepts of (1) abstaining from the use of luxurious bedding, (2) abstaining from wearing jewellery, make-up or perfume, and abstaining from engaging in dancing and music, and (3) abstaining from eating after midday. In terms of the precept of no sexual misconduct in the five precepts, lay practitioners who uphold the eight precepts are required to abstain from all sexual activity, including the normally permissible intimacy between husband and wife. A lay practitioner who takes the vow of celibacy is referred to as “a lay follower of pure conduct”. The practice of the eight precepts, and celibacy, is a way for lay Buddhists to partly undertake the monastic practice. The purpose is to tame and control their desires through living in a stricter manner.

3. Accomplishment of Generosity

The third is the accomplishment of generosity, which is explained in the *sūtras* as, “one should abide in the state of no attachment to family with the mind free from the stain of stinginess and practice the generosity that leads to liberation. One should also diligently and constantly practice giving, delight in giving away their wealth, and give to all equally.”²⁷ That one should abide in the state of no attachment to family means having no selfish thoughts of family wealth. It is essential that lay Buddhists free their minds from attachments to family so that they may accomplish the mindset of leaving behind worldly bondages and heading toward liberation. When a person makes offerings to their parents, teachers, elders and the Triple Gem, they should have respect as their motive. In addition, when they make offerings to the poor, sick, and destitute, they should have the mindset of compassion and empathy as their intention. A person may also give public goods for the benefit of society as a whole.

For example, it is said in *Sūtra 997* of the *Samyuktāgama* that, “creating parklands [that allow people to enjoy] the cool shade of the trees; providing

²⁷ *Samyuktāgama, Sūtra 927*

The Pali parallel in English is, “It’s when a lay follower lives at home, rid of the stain of stinginess, freely generous, open-handed, loving to let go, committed to charity, loving to give and to share. Then they’re considered to be a generous lay follower.” (Translation by Bhikkhu Sujato, <https://suttacentral.net/sn55.37/en/sujato>)

bridges and boats that help people cross to the other side; building welfare homes and providing rest stations for travellers and digging wells to provide water and so on, the merits of such deeds will grow day by day.” The above accomplishment of precepts and generosity are equivalent to the practices of right speech, right action, right livelihood and right effort in the Noble Eightfold Path.

4. Accomplishment of Learning the Dharma

The fourth is accomplishment of learning the Dharma. The previous items of generosity and precepts place emphasis on nurturing merits and virtues. If we want to gain right understanding, as taught in the Buddha-dharma, and then progress towards attaining liberation with right awakening, we must learn the Dharma. The practice of this item includes visiting monasteries, listening to Dharma teachings carefully, remembering and upholding the teachings after learning them, contemplating and investigating the profound meanings in the Dharma teachings, and so on.

5. Accomplishment of Wisdom

The fifth is the accomplishment of wisdom. The main point of this item is to practice the Noble Eightfold Path for the sake of liberation, and then to awaken to the truth. This is equivalent to the practices of right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration in the Noble Eightfold Path. In another *sūtra*, the Buddha taught Ujjaya four types of accomplishments, and the

accomplishment of learning was included in the accomplishment of wisdom. This is because learning refers to the wisdom of learning.²⁸

Only with these five accomplishments can we say that the main tasks of an *upāsaka/upāsikā*²⁹ is perfected. The procedure of these five practices is that someone has confidence as their foundation, and relies on practices of generosity and precepts as the means to establishing themselves within society, and then turns to learning the Dharma and developing the wisdom needed to realize the truth, which enables liberation. Such is a true lay Buddhist, which is not an easy feat.

Although these practices are praiseworthy, nevertheless they continue to be centered on self-benefit. If a person can practice as such, and also teach others to practice in the same way; that is, “to be able to benefit oneself and also benefit others,” then “such people are hard to come by,” who “glow with benevolence amongst all humankind.”³⁰ In addition to these five accomplishments, if a lay Buddhist wants to practice meditation, then the common practice is meditation upon the four immeasurable minds.³¹

²⁸ A common path for the development of wisdom is presented as the three wisdoms: learning, contemplation, and practice. The wisdom of learning is the initial stage.

²⁹ *Upāsaka* means ‘male lay Buddhist’ and *upāsikā* means ‘female lay Buddhist’.

³⁰ *Samyuktāgama, Sūtra 929*

³¹ Meditation practice on the four immeasurable minds is the meditation on loving kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and impartiality.

Six Recollections

Lay Buddhists whose dispositions are weak, in addition to the practice of the five accomplishments, are also taught the three recollections, which are to recollect the Buddha, Dharma and *saṃgha* (Triple Gem). In some other teachings they are taught the four recollections, which are to recollect the Triple Gem and morality. Sometimes they are also taught the recollection of generosity, and even the recollection of heavens, which in total makes six recollections. These teachings can be found in the *Samyuktāgama*. This practice was mainly taught to lay Buddhists, but was also taught to the monastics on some occasions. Examples are as follows.

The first group of examples relates to not seeing the Buddha and *saṃgha*. One day, when the householder Mahānāma heard that the Buddha and his *saṃgha* was departing Kapilavastu after the rain retreat, he felt a great sadness.³² Similarly, the householder Nandi was also saddened when he heard that the Buddha and the *saṃgha* were to leave Śrāvastī at the end of the rain retreat.³³ Likewise, in *Sūtra 859* and *Sūtra 860* of *Samyuktāgama*, the brothers Ṛṣidatta and Purāṇa were saddened by the impending departure of the Buddha and the monks.

³² *Sūtra 932* and *Sūtra 933*, *Samyuktāgama*

³³ *Sūtra 857* and *Sūtra 858*, *Samyuktāgama*

The second set of examples is about when lay Buddhists were taken ill. Examples include the village householder Hāliddikānigahapati,³⁴ the householder Sudatta,³⁵ the householder of the Eight Villages³⁶ and also the householder Dharmanandi.³⁷

The third example is the situation concerning merchants who felt fearful when travelling in the wilderness.³⁸ The fourth example is the situation regarding monks feeling fearful when living in solitary hermitage in the forests.³⁹

Such practices were taught because the wisdom of some Buddhists was less developed, and they were unable to use wisdom to tame their emotions. Such devotees were tormented by separation from loved ones due to death or isolation in the wilderness. Hence, they were taught to recollect (bear in mind) the virtues and merits of the Triple Gem as well as their own merits in upholding the precepts and undertaking generous deeds. Further, they recollect that they can gain rebirth in the heavens. In this way they can gain comfort. In the course of the Buddha-dharma's spread and flourishing, the

³⁴ *Sūtra 554, Samyuktāgama*

³⁵ *Sūtra 1030, Samyuktāgama*

³⁶ *Sūtra 555, Samyuktāgama*

³⁷ *Sūtra 1033, Samyuktāgama*

³⁸ *Sūtra 580, Samyuktāgama*

³⁹ *Sūtra 581, Samyuktāgama*

practice of the recollection of the buddhas had an unprecedented development.

It is said that the Buddha taught Queen Vaidehī the practice of attaining rebirth in the Western Pureland of Amitābha Buddha, called Blissful. This is also because she met with very tragic circumstances, similar to the aforementioned examples. Therefore, in the *Daśabhūmi-vibhāsā* (*Detailed Exposition on the Ten Stages*), Nāgārjuna states that these recollection practices are a provisional teaching for people who are emotionally troubled. This method of relying on recollection of a certain object to comfort oneself is common to all religions. Theistic followers all rely on the great powers of a super being, and gain relief and comfort through faith and prayers. The logic behind recollecting the buddhas and so on, is in fact not all that different to the theistic reliance on a super being, which is actually to rely on the power of oneself.

In the *sūtras*, theistic reliance on another's power is also used to explain this practice of recollection. *Sūtra 980* of the *Samyuktāgama* says: ⁴⁰

[The Buddha taught that] Śakra told the heavenly beings:
“when you all are in combat with the asuras and fear arises,
you should think of my banner, ‘destroyer and conqueror’.
When you recollect my banner, your fear will disappear ...”

⁴⁰ See also *Chapter 24 on Esteemed Banner* in the *Ekottarikāgama*.

[The Buddha concluded,] *“similarly for all you merchants, when you are travelling through the wilderness and fear arises, you should recollect the Buddha, Dharma and saṃgha.”*

For people who are emotionally troubled, methods such as the six recollections, which rely on the powers of others to gain comfort, are relatively effective. However, such methods can be found in all theistic religions. If one assumes that such methods can lead to liberation and true awakening, that would be contrary to the Buddha’s original intentions.

Lay Devotee Role Models

Here, a few lay devotees from the Buddha’s time are presented to provide a glimpse of how lay Buddhists lived in that society and time.

First is Sudatta, a rich householder whose assets, businesses, and financial lending operated on both shores of the Ganges River. After he became a lay disciple of the Buddha, apart from the famous act of paving Prince

Jeta's garden with gold,⁴¹ *Sūtra 1031, Samyuktāgama* also shows that Sudatta “shared all his wealth with the disciples of the Buddha, whether they were monastics or lay people.” Sudatta’s deeds of letting go of selfish attachment to his personal wealth, and his mindset of viewing that wealth as belonging to all Buddhists, are highly praiseworthy. Such quality of non-self is also seen in the story of Rṣidatta and his brother. According to *Sūtra 860, Samyuktāgama*, they were high officials of King Prasenajit, and “they never considered their family wealth as their own but shared it with the Buddha and others such as the *bhikṣus*, *bhikṣuṇīs*, *upāsakas* and *upāsikās*.” The reason the householder Sudatta shared all his wealth with others is because he was inspired by the guidance of the Buddha, and so he vowed that, “from now on, my doors will not be locked. Moreover, I will not turn away any *bhikṣu*, *bhikṣuṇī*, *upāsaka*, *upāsikā* and all travellers who are in need of food and supplies.” Ever since then he “set up charity services around the four city gates and also gave offerings to the poor and needy in

⁴¹ The story of the Jeta Grove was that Sudatta had invited the Buddha to stay at Śrāvastī for the rain retreat and the Buddha had agreed on the condition that proper lodging was provided for him and the whole *saṃgha*. Sudatta went around, looking for a suitable location, and found one, but it belonged to Prince Jeta, who did not want to sell it. Instead, he named a price, saying that if Sudatta could cover the whole park with gold then that was the price he would sell it for. But Sudatta was determined and so he made gold tiles and laid them to cover the ground. The Prince was amazed at Sudatta’s devotion to the Buddha. But Sudatta only covered the grounds and not the trees, so the Prince said, “I will give you the land, but the trees are still mine. I will offer the trees to the Buddha.” Thus, the full name of the Jeta Grove Monastery in Chinese is literally “Jeta’s Trees and Anathapindika’s Park”.

big markets as well as at his own house.”⁴² It is no wonder that Sudatta was recognised by the title people gave him, Anathapindika, which means the “one who gives relief to the poor”.

The second example is Nandipāla (Ghatikara in the Pali canon), who was a poor labourer. He gave up his desire to become a monk for the sake of looking after his blind and elderly parents. However, he did live a life similar to the monastics. He did not have social contact with widows or single women. Also, he did not employ slaves or keep animals, nor did he engage in farming and merchant trading. He upheld the five precepts and regularly practiced the eight precepts as well as the precept against accumulating money and valuables. His only way to support himself and his parents was to make and sell pottery. Craftspeople earn a living from what they make, and such pottery is a suitable livelihood for one learning and practicing the Buddha-dharma. As for farming, it more or less involves harm to other beings; raising animals indirectly leads to their killing or harm. Merchant activities effectively try to buy things cheap and sell them for a higher price, which may exploit some people. In regard to keeping slaves, it is not allowed in Buddhism.⁴³

⁴² For the details of this story, see *Chapter 10 on Protecting the Mind* in the *Ekottarikāgama*.

⁴³ For the details of Nandipāla, see *Sūtra Given at Vebhaḷiṅga* in the *Madhyamāgama* (MA63).

The third example is that of Mahānāma, who was the Buddha’s cousin. After the Buddha’s father, King Śuddhodana, passed away, Mahānāma took over as ruler of Kapilavastu. He was devoted to the Buddha-dharma, and the Buddha praised Mahānāma as “[one who] always treats all beings with compassion.”⁴⁴ In *Chapter 34 on Views of Equality* in the *Ekottarikāgama* it is said that when King Virudaka came to invade and kill everyone in the Śākyan clan, Mahānāma could not bear to see the genocide of his people and so he went to King Virudaka to try and save his people. Mahānāma proposed the following action: “I will dive into the lake and until I surface again, please let my people escape. Once I come up from the water, you may continue the invasion.” No one would have guessed that when he dived into the lake, he used his hair to tie himself to the root of a tree at the bottom of the lake so that his body would not be raised to the surface after he died. This act greatly touched King Virudaka, and he stopped the slaughter of the Śākyan clan. This act of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others by this Buddhist disciple was so tragic yet touching.

⁴⁴ *Chapter 6 on Great People with Pure Faith* in the *Ekottarikāgama*.