

8. Virtues of a Good Spouse

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 14:06

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa

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Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So we continue with our exploration of the Buddha's teaching about lay life. I thought I would do this one which is rather quaint to our modern ears. But it tells us a little bit about that society. And I don't think it's that too distant from us. You might have said these things to a woman right up until the 1960s, really. Anyway, this is what Bhikkhu Bodhi has called "The Woman of the Home."

On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Sāvattihī in the Eastern Park in the mansion of Migāra's mother. Then Visākhā, Migāra's mother, approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him and sat to one side. Visākhā was one of his main disciples, very rich. And as you can see, it was in her park, so pretty well off. And the Blessed One then said to her: "Visākhā, when a woman possesses four qualities, she is heading for victory in the present world and is successful in this world. What four? Here, Visākhā, a woman is capable at her work, she manages her domestic help, she behaves in a way that is agreeable to her husband, and she safeguards his earnings."

These days you can put "partner" where it says "woman," but I'm keeping it to "woman" because it gives us a flavour of his time.

"And how is a woman capable at her work? Here, Visākhā, she is skilful and diligent in regard to her husband's household chores, whether with wool or cotton. She investigates the appropriate means and is able to act and arrange everything properly. And in this way, a woman is capable at her work."

So this tells you a little bit about what a woman at home might do. Knitting, very much like you would expect somebody right up until, say, the 60s.

"And how is a woman one who manages the domestic help?" So this is only for those rather rich people. "Here, Visākhā, in regard to her husband's domestic helpers, slaves, servants, and workers, she knows by direct inspection what they have done and failed to do. She knows when they are sick and healthy, and she distributes to each the appropriate share of food. And in this way, a woman manages domestic help."

Now this would take you to "Upstairs Downstairs," wouldn't it? Don't know about the slaves. That goes back a bit.

"And how does a woman behave in a way that is agreeable to her husband? Here, Visākhā, a woman would not commit any misdeed that her husband would consider disagreeable, even at the cost of her life. In this way, a woman behaves in a way that is agreeable to her husband."

Now those were the days. We have to remember that in the book of Manu, which is a Brahminical text, a woman is seen to be as a chattel of the husband, and a woman is not capable of liberating herself because she can't get *moksha* — she has to be reborn as a man. So you can see how when the Buddha came along and liberated women from that oppression, saying that they could be fully liberated in this very lifetime, it was like men. It was revolutionary, really.

"And how does a woman safeguard her husband's earnings? Here, Visākhā, whatever a husband brings home, whether money or grain, silver or gold, she succeeds in protecting it and guarding it, and she is not a spendthrift, thief, wastrel, or squanderer of his wealth. And in this way, a woman safeguards her husband's earnings."

I'm thinking of this Indian man who came to the vihāra once, years ago. He was in a state of — I think he was overcoming shock. What had happened was he had done the thing of handing over his wages to his wife. And she had taken care of all the expenses. And unknown to him, she'd been sending this huge amount of money home to her side of the family. And he'd found this out a bit late in life. He was about to retire. So they were obviously spendthrift, you see, wasteful, and a squanderer of his wealth.

"When, Visākhā, a woman possesses these four qualities, she is heading for victory in the present world and is successful in this world. And when she possesses four other qualities, she is heading for victory in the other world and is successful in regard to the other world. And what four? Here, Visākhā, a woman is accomplished in faith, moral discipline, generosity, and wisdom."

"And how is a woman accomplished in faith? Here, Visākhā, a woman has faith. She places faith in the enlightenment of the *Tathāgata*."

So notice that — not in the *Tathāgata*, in the enlightenment of the *Tathāgata*, in the enlightenment of the Buddha.

"And how is a woman accomplished in moral discipline?" So your basic moral law. She "abstains from destruction of life, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, from false speech, and from wines, liquors, intoxicants, the basis for negligence."

So that's the main reason for not taking intoxicants — it's the basis for negligence. You do things under the influence that you wouldn't normally do. "In this way a woman is accomplished in moral discipline."

"And how is a woman accomplished in generosity? Here, Visākhā, a woman dwells at home with a mind devoid of the stain of stinginess, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in relinquishment, one devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing. And in this way a woman is accomplished in generosity."

Generosity comes up very much in the Buddhist teaching. Whenever he gives a talk to lay people, he always starts with generosity. And here it's beautifully put why we should be generous: "devoid of the stain of stinginess, freely generous, open-handed." So these are all adjectives for generosity, but "delighting in relinquishment" — delighting in relinquishment. That's tough, isn't it? Delighting in giving something away. I mean, giving something away is one thing, delighting in it is something else. And "devoted to charity." "Delighting in giving and sharing."

So that's one thing we parents teach children, isn't it? To share. And often in children, it comes very naturally to want to share, doesn't it? And they delight in it. Then, of course, we get stingy.

But that business of relinquishment — remember every time we give we have to let go of something. That's the process of relinquishment, of renunciation. And eventually everything has to be renounced — everything. When we say everything has to be renounced, we're talking about our relationship to something, which is about holding on.

I was at a vihāra, you see, and a monk asked me where did I get my hat? So I said, well, I don't know. He said, "I'm looking for one like that," you see. Now, if I'd have been delighted in relinquishment, I'd have immediately given him my hat. But I didn't. I did not delight in relinquishment. I thought, I'm not giving him my hat. However, I did make up for it, because later on I sent him my hat. But it took about three months for me to get around to delighting in relinquishment. Not until I'd got another hat either. So you can see I've got a long way to go.

"And how is a woman accomplished in wisdom? Here, Visākhā, a woman possesses the wisdom that sees into the arising and passing away phenomena. That is noble wisdom and penetrative, and leads to complete destruction of suffering."

So that's, again, the actual spiritual path, which is about undermining certain delusions. And it always starts with impermanence, because that's the most obvious one you can catch. Anybody can see impermanence. If you say to somebody, you know, everything changes, they say, "So what?" I mean, the seasons change, they know it changes. But it's the penetrative seeing of changing.

And remember that that penetration is not so much out in the world, it's within here. The sense of I is also arising and passing away and has no substance. When something arises and passes away, it has no real existence. It's not an entity, is it? And remember it's perceiving this constantly that allows us to come to this lovely phrase from the Buddha that there's nothing in the world worth holding on to. And then of course relinquishment becomes easy — you stop holding on to things. And that's a sign to us — the more that we can do that, the more we're releasing ourselves from suffering.

"So when a woman possesses these four qualities, she is heading for victory in the other world and is successful in regard to the other world."

Here the Buddha is mixing, you see, what you might call the virtues that we need for ordinary daily living

and those virtues we need to liberate ourselves from suffering. It's quite realistic, isn't it? We've got to be able to handle life, we've got to be able to do things which are to our personal betterment within society, like the job we do. And that runs hand in hand with the practice, with spiritual practice, which is about liberating ourselves from suffering.

So the four that are successful in this world are: capable at our work, managing our lives, our domestic lives, behaving in a way that's agreeable to those around us, specifically our spouses and partners, and safeguarding the earnings, the wealth of our family.

And what are those factors that bring about accomplishment, that bring success and victory in the other world? So that's faith, trust. I mean, these days, it's funny how it's translated — that is normally confidence, trust in the Buddha's teaching, to put trust in it. Moral discipline. So remember that the Buddha brought our whole problem down to our ethics. Ethics is about relationship. So our relationships manifest our delusion or our wisdom — the way we relate to things, the way we relate to ourselves. That's ethics. Generosity, which is the positive side of ethics. The virtue leads to everything else. And wisdom — wisdom in the sense of a direct, penetrative truth-seeing which liberates us from this fundamental delusion about identity, about who we are or what we are.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you, by developing domestic virtues as well as spiritual virtues, liberate yourselves from all suffering, sooner rather than later.

Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu.

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