

Recognizing the Dhamma

Introduction to the Study Guide

Shortly after her ordination, the Buddha's step-mother, Mahapajapati Gotami, asked him for a short Dhamma-instruction that would guide her in her solitary practice. He responded with eight principles for recognizing what qualifies as Dhamma and Vinaya, and what does not. The commentary tells us that after her instruction, Mahapajapati Gotami in no long time became an arahant.

The eight principles have been widely cited ever since. One Thai writer has called them the "constitution of Buddhism" as they form the standards against which the validity of any interpretation of the Dhamma or Vinaya must be judged. Perhaps the most important point that these principles make is that any teaching has to be judged by the results that come when putting it into practice. They are an excellent illustration of the teachings given in the well-known Kalama Sutta (*Anguttara Nikaya*, 3.65), as well as in the teachings that the Buddha gave to his son, Rahula (*Majjhima Nikaya*, 61).

The Canon illustrates these principles not only with abstract discussions but also with stories, and the stories are often more memorable than the discussions. Thus this study guide differs from its companions in that it is predominantly composed of stories. Bear in mind as you read the stories that they are often framed in somewhat extreme terms to drive their points home. Sister Subha, Kali, Prince Dighavu, and the monk whose limbs are being removed by a saw would not be as memorable if their stories were framed in more realistic terms.

Also bear in mind that there is some overlap among the principles, and that a passage may illustrate more than one at a time. Thus, for instance, the story of Ven. Isidatta analyzes the fetter of self-identity views, at the same time illustrating the principles of modesty and non-entanglement. The most extensive overlap is between the principle of dispassion and that of not being fettered, as passion in its various forms covers three of the ten fetters that bind a person to the round of rebirth. Thus the section on dispassion contains passages dealing with how to overcome the three "passion fetters" — sensual passion, passion for the sense of form experienced in the jhanas of form, and passion for the sense of formlessness experienced in the formless jhanas — whereas the section on being unfettered treats the remaining seven fetters.

The Eight Principles

I have heard that at on one occasion the Blessed One was staying at Vesali, in the Peaked Roof Hall in the Great Forest.

Then Mahapajapati Gotami went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, stood to one side. As she was standing there she said to him: "It would be good, lord, if the Blessed One would teach me the Dhamma in brief such that, having heard the Dhamma from the Blessed One, I might dwell alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, and resolute."

"Gotami, the qualities of which you may know, 'These qualities lead:

to passion, not to dispassion;
to being fettered, not to being unfettered;
to accumulating, not to shedding;
to self-aggrandizement, not to modesty;
to discontent, not to contentment;
to entanglement, not to seclusion;
to laziness, not to aroused persistence;
to being burdensome, not to being unburdensome':

You may categorically hold, 'This is not the Dhamma, this is not the Vinaya, this is not the Teacher's instruction.'

"As for the qualities of which you may know, 'These qualities lead:

to dispassion, not to passion;
to being unfettered, not to being fettered;
to shedding, not to accumulating;
to modesty, not to self-aggrandizement;
to contentment, not to discontent;
to seclusion, not to entanglement;
to aroused persistence, not to laziness;
to being unburdensome, not to being burdensome':

You may categorically hold, 'This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher's instruction.'"

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Mahapajapati Gotami delighted at his words.

(Anguttara Nikaya, 8.53)

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