

(Upāsaka,sampadā) Mahānāma Sutta

The Discourse to Mahānāma

(on the Accomplishments of a Lay Follower)

[The spiritual qualities of the true lay follower]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 55.37)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

Introduction

This sutta, in its conciseness, is apparently a shorter version of the more comprehensive version, **the (Upāsaka) Mahānāma Sutta** (A 8.25/4:220-222), or at an earlier time, it could have formed the introductory section of the (Upāsaka) Mahānāma Sutta. The (Upāsaka,sampadā) Mahānāma Sutta defines the spiritual qualities of a true lay follower (upāsaka) as:

- (1) Accomplishment in moral virtue (*sīla,sampadā*),
- (2) Accomplishment in faith (*saddhā,sampadā*),
- (3) Accomplishment in generosity (*cāga,sampadā*) and
- (4) Accomplishment in wisdom (*paññā,sampadā*).

In **the (Mahānāma) Gilayana Sutta** (S 55.54), these four qualities are called the four assurances (*assāsaniyā dhammā*), since they bring great solace to us.¹ These four qualities are also given in the concluding section of **the Dīgha,jānu Sutta** (A 8.54.10-15/ 4:284), but in the sequence: faith, moral virtue, generosity and wisdom. There they are known as “the qualities conducive to life hereafter” (*samparāyik’attha samvattanika,dhamma*).

Mahānāma was a Sakya rajah, the son of Amit’odana, a brother of Suddh’odana (the Buddha’s father). As such, he was the Buddha’s cousin, and also Anuruddha’s older brother. He is declared by the Buddha to be “the chief of those who give choice almsfood” (A 1:26). His life is given in the Aṅguttara Commentary (AA 1:393), where he is said to have fed the Order at Kapilavatthu (his home town) for a whole year.

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¹ S 55.54/5:408-410.

The Discourse to Mahānāma (on the accomplishments of a lay-follower)

(S 55.37/5:395)

[395]

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying in Nigrodha's Park at Kapilavatthu in Sakya country.

2 Then, Mahānāma the Sakya approached the Blessed One, saluted him and sat down at one side.

Qualities of a lay follower

Seated thus at one side, Mahānāma the Sakya said this to the Blessed One:

3 “Venerable sir, in what way is one a **lay follower** (*upāsaka*)?”

“Mahānāma, when one has gone for refuge to the Buddha, one has gone for refuge to the Dharma, and one has gone for refuge to the Sangha, then, Mahānāma, one is a lay follower.”

4 (1) “In what way, venerable sir, is a lay follower **accomplished in moral virtue** (*sīla,sampanno*)?”

“Mahānāma, when the lay follower

- (i) refrains from destroying life,
- (ii) refrains from taking the not-given,
- (iii) refrains from sexual misconduct,
- (iv) refrains from false speech,
- (v) refrains from strong drinks, distilled drinks, fermented drinks and that which causes heedlessness,²

—then, Mahānāma, he is accomplished in moral virtue.

5 (2) “In what way, venerable sir, is a lay follower **accomplished in faith** (*saddhā,sampanno*)?”

“Here, Mahānāma, the lay follower has faith.³ He has faith in the Tathāgata's awakening thus:

So too, is he the Blessed One:⁴ for, he is arhat, the fully self-awakened one, accomplished in wisdom and conduct, well-farer, knower of worlds, peerless guide of tamable people, teacher of gods and humans, awakened, blessed.

Thus, Mahānāma, he is accomplished in faith.”

6 (3) “In what way, venerable sir, is a lay follower **accomplished in charity** (*cāga,sampanno*)?”

² “Strong drinks...that causes heedlessness,” *sura,meraya,majja-p,pamāda-t,ṭhāna*, also tr as “strong drinks, distilled drinks and fermented drinks that causes heedlessness.” Comy says that there are five kinds of “strong drinks” (*surā*): made from crushed seeds (*piṭṭha,surā*), from cakes (*pūva,surā*), from rice (*odana,surā*), from fermented yeast (*kiṇṇa,pakkhita,surā*), from a mixture of ingredients (*sambhāra,sāmyutta,surā*) (DA 3:944; VvA 73; VbA 381). Comy also says there are 5 kinds of “distilled drinks” (*meraya = āsava*): made from flowers (*pupph'āsava*), from fruits (*phal'āsava*), from honey (*madhv-āsava*), from sugar (*gul'āsava*), and from a mixture of ingredients (*sambhāra,sāmyutt'āsava*) (DA 3:944). *Majja* seems to be a general term for “drinks”. However it is likely that *majja* is the weakest of the three, while *surā* is the strongest. On when the precept against intoxicants is not breached, see Pāc 51 (V 4:110).

³ “Has faith,” *saddho hoti*, or “(he) is one with faith.”

⁴ Alt tr: “For the following reasons, too, he is the Blessed One [the Lord]...” On the meaning of *iti pi so*, see CPD: *ṭiti: ...kitti-saddo abhuggato: “~pi so bhagavā: araham sammā-sambuddho...”* (“for the following reasons, too, he is a *bhagavā*: because he is *araham*...”), V 3:1,13 = D 1:49,27 = M 2:133,22 = S 1:219,31 = A 3:312,8, qu Vism 198,4 and MahvṬ 26,11 (VA 112,4 = DA 146,5 ≠ Vism 198,8: *so bhagavā ~ pi araham ~ pi sammāsambuddho ...iminā ca iminā ca kāraṇenā ti vuttam hoti*). Translating *iti pi so* this way explains the double occurrence of *Bhagavā*. See LS Cousins, “Review of *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*,” in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 4, 1997: 165. The Skt parallel to this opening reads: *Iti hi sa bhagavām tathāgato*, but *tathāgato* here is missing from the Pali version. See *Dhājagga S* (S 11.3) = SD 15.5 Intro (2).

“Here Mahānāma, the lay follower lives the household life with a mind free from the stain of stinginess, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in letting go, devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing.

Thus, Mahānāma, he is accomplished in charity.”

7 (4) “In what way, venerable sir, is a lay follower **accomplished in wisdom** (*paññā,sampanno*)?”

“Here, Mahānāma, the lay follower is wise, possesses wisdom directed to [noting] the rising and falling away [of phenomena] that is noble and penetrative, leading to the complete destruction of suffering.

Thus, Mahānāma, he is a lay follower accomplished in wisdom.” **[396]**

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