

The contents of this paper are CONFIDENTIAL and may not be reproduced in whole or in part without permission of the author.

SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES

CONCEPT OF DUTY IN SOUTH ASIA

THE DUTY OF A BUDDHIST
according to the Pali scriptures

Richard Gombrich (Oxford)

The trouble with being one of the last to give a paper in this series on Duty in South Asia is that I have been scooped: I cannot spend several pages in trying to define duty. Those of you who did not know what duty was before the seminar began have now been instructed, and those who did know have perhaps been persuaded that you didn't. So I shall not define duty.

Another thing I shall not do -- and for this I apologize -- is to discuss the duty of Jains, as promised in the programme. I have not had the time to work on it. The general picture drawn in the next three paragraphs fits Jainism too, but I have to leave the subject there.

My subject is duty in Buddhism. This too I must begin with a negative. The subject is not the word dharma in Buddhism. I was alarmed to see in Dr. Kunst's learned paper the statement (p.6 lines 2-3), "It is gratifying to see that the seminars have made a provision for a separate treatment of dharma in Buddhism." If he was alluding to me, I am afraid he will be disappointed. But, as he tells us on p. 2, para. 3, the Ven. Dr. Rahula, in a recent paper on dharmatā, has drawn attention to the 14 meanings of dhamma listed in the Abhidhanappadīpikā, and none of them is "duty".

This is not to say that I disagree at all with the discussions of the term dharma by Dr. Kunst and by Dr. Weightman and Dr. Pandey. But, as Dr. Taylor tells us, the classical view differentiated between varṇāśramadharmā and sādharaṇadharmā, between the duty attached to one's station in life and one's duty as a sentient being. The former, of course, is the major subdivision of svadharmā; Dr. O'Flaherty's paper on the svadharmā of demons reminds us that the two are not synonymous. However, the terms varṇāśramadharmā and svadharmā are absent in Buddhism, and that for an obvious reason. Buddhism is prima facie the religion of a renouncer, a man who has left society and its norms behind him.¹ A Buddhist layman, who has not yet left society behind him, may have duties deriving from his station in life, whether he be king or outcaste, but these are not his duties qua Buddhist. As a Buddhist he is on his own, seeking salvation; and it is rather forced to call that a "duty". When I turned my mind to the topic of "duty in Buddhism" the one phrase which kept echoing through my thoughts was katam karaṇīyaṃ, "what had to be done is done". This is part of the stereotyped description of an attainment of Enlightenment; it occurs again and again in the Canon. Once a person has been converted to Buddhism he wishes to attain nirvāna; in Buddhist terminology, he enters on the Noble Eightfold Path by acquiring "right views" (sammā diṭṭhi), which lead him directly to "right resolve" (sammā samkappa), and that resolve is to follow

the path to its end. But that is hardly a duty, for it is self-imposed; it is a duty to no one but oneself. One might object that to speak of duty to oneself is not happy in the Buddhist context; but in the language of daily speech Buddhists did of course talk of 'self'. In the Attavagga of the Dhammapada it says:² "One should not subordinate one's own good (atta-d-attham) even to the great good of another; having understood one's own good one should be intent on the true good (sadattha)". Therefore I would summarily answer the question of what is a Buddhist's duty qua Buddhist -- of what is the svadharma of a Buddhist, if you like -- by saying that it is only to seek nirvana; then the decision whether we should call that a duty is arbitrary; but the fact that the phrase "svadharma of a Buddhist" is my jocular coinage indicates to me that we should not.

The lack of a Buddhist svadharma, to remain for a moment with these Sanskrit categories, leaves us with the sādhāraṇa dharma, the duties common to all, but, as Dr. Taylor well puts it, this was never more than a preceptual tradition. Sādhāraṇa dharma is banal. It is generally expressed in platitudinous maxims: be kind, tell the truth. The primary Buddhist formulation of this universal morality, the five "precepts" or rather undertakings of the laity, is expressed negatively: don't kill, don't steal, don't have wrong sex, don't lie, and don't drink, because that leads to the other four things. No details. To call these rules platitudinous is not to call them flabby; such blanket commands and prohibitions are terrifying in their generality, for it is hardly possible to keep them. Ethically they are admirable. But their generality makes them intellectually uninteresting: they provide little material for discussion. If I were just to tell you that Buddhists are not supposed to kill or steal or lie or sleep around, you might object that I had not differentiated them from anyone else; and yet there is not that much more to tell.

Not that much more; but there is something. Without erasing the rather negative picture of my subject which I have drawn, I can add some details by mentioning the comparatively few things which Buddhists are positively told to do, as a more specific corollary to what they are to avoid.

There are within Buddhism four social statuses: monk, nun, layman and laywoman. For our purposes we can reduce these to two; using the unmarked gender, I shall talk of monks and laymen.

The Buddhist laity retained their status obligations as members of the wider society, except that the obligations otherwise due to brahmins were transferred to Buddhist monks; brahmins who converted to Buddhism were of course, from the Buddhist point of view, on a par with other lay householders, and inferior in status to any monk. To denote lay people of respectable status the doublet brāhmana-gaḥapatīyo, 'brahmins and householders', is often used, but it does not mean that brahmins were not themselves householders; it is rather a summary expression to denote the propertied classes. Members of these classes are often referred to individually as kulaputta, literally "son of a family" but more accurately "man of respectable family". These remarks on social stratification are extremely relevant to Buddhist ethics, for the Buddhist ethos has a distinct flavour of what one might loosely call "middle class values" -- very different, for example, from the Sermon on the Mount. No Buddhist layman was asked to emulate the lilies of the field; disregard for property was all very well for monks, but their material wants would be met by those who remained in society. Thrift is a virtue often commended. Though Buddhist ethics are not couched in terms of svadharma, or of the doctrine of varṇa, they undoubtedly reflect the values of a particular class.

The most celebrated text on Buddhist lay ethics is the Sigālovāda (Advice to Sigāla) Sutta³; it is the only long sermon devoted to the subject. Its form is interesting, and typical of the Buddhas explicit reformism; he substitutes for a traditional ritual an ethical practice. Nominally he claims to be reinterpreting the ritual, but in fact he is abolishing it. He meets a householder called Sigāla, who is worshipping the six directions: the four cardinal points, nadir and zenith. Questioned, Sigāla says he promised his dying father always to worship the six directions. That is not how to do it, says the Buddha. He proceeds to give a lot of general moral advice, and ends up⁴ by identifying the east as parents, the south as teachers, the west as wife and children, the north as friends and companions, the nadir as slaves and servants (kammakara) and the zenith as religious wanderers (samana) and brahmins. The nadir and zenith plot Sigāla's social position.

The general moral advice which precedes this identification is heavily weighted towards thrift and prudence. Six outlets for wealth are to be avoided:⁵ drinking, being on the streets too late, visiting fairs, gambling, keeping bad company, and laziness. On all these the Buddha expatiates. There follows a lot of advice on choosing the right friends; though it is extremely sound, it may strike us as slightly priggish. Qualities to be desired in a friend include that he should restrain you from wrong and exhort you to right, that he should "tell you what you have not heard before", and that he should show the way to heaven. In another text,⁶ however, the Buddha says that only compassion should make one follow, serve or honour a person inferior to oneself in morality, concentration or wisdom. This may serve to remind us that in India self-righteousness is rarely considered a grave defect.

Most of the duties enjoined on relatives and associates require no comment here, excellent though they are, because they are unsurprising. It is worth noting that one of the five duties of a husband towards his wife is to provide her with adornment. The wife, for her part, is no lady of leisure, but must look after what the husband earns, and be skilful and hard-working. The duties towards servants are also noteworthy: to assign work according to their strength; to provide food and wages; to look after them when they are ill; to give them a share of rare delicacies; and to give them holidays. The servants are to reciprocate by rising before their master, retiring after him, taking only what he gives them, doing good work, and speaking well of him. The very last duties to be listed are perhaps not the least important: the householder is to be friendly to religious wanderers and brahmins in thought, word and deed, to keep open house for them, and to provide their temporal wants (amisa).

A similar spirit pervades all moral advice to laity. In a text addressed to women⁷ they are recommended to be skilful and industrious at their husband's indoor work, whether it be wool or cotton; to manage the servants; to do what pleases the husband; and to guard his earnings. In these four ways a woman will "win this world"; the next world is to be won by trust in the Buddha, by keeping the five precepts, by giving alms, and by understanding the Buddhist way to liberation. This distinction between the virtues which "win" this world and those which win the next clearly conveys to us the relatively humble place assigned to these social duties.

Moreover, the call to these humbler virtues is made explicitly in terms of self-interest. It is true that in a certain refined sense all Buddhist ethics invoke self-interest, as they serve the ultimate end of one's own spiritual liberation. The ethic is an ethic of intention; the pure

thoughts purify the mind, and so bring it nearer to attaining nirvāna. This however is quite a different order of self-interest from the prudential ethic invoked in the Buddha's sermon to the householders of Pāṭaligāma (later to become Asoka's capital, Pāṭaliputra) shortly before his death⁸. Here the Buddha preaches that immorality entails five disadvantages: poverty, a bad reputation, social diffidence, anxiety on one's deathbed, and a bad rebirth. As a corollary, morality brings five benefits, from wealth in this life to a good rebirth in the next.

Five again are the things to be gained from wealth⁹. This wealth is characterized as "acquired by strenuous effort, amassed by the strength of one's arm, gained by sweat, righteous (dhammika), righteously acquired". With it a man can properly care for his dependents; care for his friends; guard against such catastrophes as kings and thieves; give their due tithe to kin, guests, the dead members of the family, the king and the gods; and make to religious wanderers and brahmins offerings which will lead him to heaven. If his wealth then diminishes, a man has no regrets, because he has used it well; he is equally free from regret if it increases. In another text, however,¹⁰ the Buddha reassuringly says that the wealth of a man who uses it thus may be expected to increase, not diminish.

The kind of moral advice purveyed in the Sigālovāda Sutta is echoed in Asoka's edicts: Asoka enjoins children to obey their parents, masters to behave well towards their servants. These are examples of dharma, a term which Asoka uses in the Buddhist way. Whether or not Asoka was as thoroughly and exclusively imbued with Buddhist teachings as later Buddhist texts claim, there is no doubt that everything in his edicts conforms to the spirit of Buddhist ethics found in the Canon, and in particular to a concept of royal duty radically different from the ksatriya syadharma of the dharmaśāstras and the Bhagavad-Gīta. This difference can be expressed, as I have suggested, as the absence of the very idea of svadharma; a king has the same duties as anyone else, except that his greater power naturally gives him greater responsibilities. Fascinating as they are, Asoka's edicts unfortunately do not give us enough information to decide whether he followed the advice which the Buddha gave in the Kūṭadanta Sutta". That text, like the Sigālovāda Sutta, is a sermon given in the form of a reinterpretation of a traditional ritual. The brahmin Kūṭadanta (Crooked-teeth) has heard a rumour that the Buddha knows how to perform a great sacrifice; he himself does not, and wishes to learn. He so far demeans himself as to go and ask the Buddha, a non-brahmin, to instruct him. The Buddha tells him a fable of how a great king was instructed by his chaplain in the performance of a great sacrifice. The chaplain told the king that there was much lawlessness and civil disorder in his kingdom; property was insecure. The king should deal with this not by taxation, nor by attempting to suppress it by force, but by improving the lot of the people directly. "The king should supply seed and feed to those who are working at agriculture and animal husbandry; he should supply capital to those who are working at commerce; he should organize food and wages for those working in his own service. Then those people will be keen on their job, and will not harass the countryside. The king will acquire a great pile. The country will be secure, free from public enemies. People will be happy, and dancing their children in their laps they will live, I think, with open doors".¹² The king took this advice, and only after taking these measures performed a sacrifice in the traditional sense - though in his sacrifice of course no animals were killed. At the end of the story the Buddha admitted, when challenged, that he himself had been the chaplain.

I do not intend in the slightest degree to disparage the beauty of this famous passage by pointing out that it is above all, or at least in the first instance, the interests of the propertied classes which are being advocated. The first thing the chaplain deprecates is the raising of extra taxes; he then goes on to recommend (and the Buddha adds that there occurred) the supply of capital to businessmen, a measure more radical than any monarch can actually have undertaken on a wide scale. But one would love to know what Asoka made of it.

In some verses in the Sigālovāda Sutta¹³ the Buddha recommends that half of one's wealth should be used for one's business, a quarter consumed, and a quarter saved against an emergency. That suggests to me a high rate of reinvestment. If one wonders where religious donations and offerings are to come from, the commentator Buddhaghosa answers¹⁴ that they are part of consumption; a very fair view, if we remember that such donations (ceteris paribus) buy a seat in heaven.

Pasenadi, King of Kosala, is said¹⁵ to have asked the Buddha one day whether there was one thing (dhamma) which could accomplish both ends, those of this world and the next. Yes, said the Buddha: diligence (appamāda). Just as the elephant's foot is the chief and paragon of all feet, so (we may understand) diligence is chief and paragon of all moral qualities. Diligence can win you longevity, health, beauty, heaven, birth in a good family, and pleasures (rati). The modern salutation "Take care" would have met with the Buddha's approval.

The Buddha's own words are so explicit that it hardly needs me to point out that this diligence, which in psychological terminology is called sati "awareness", and was probably the Buddha's distinctive contribution to yogic soteriology, is in economic terms realized as the virtue of thrift.

Again, there is nothing pejorative about pointing out that for the symbiosis of laity and religious mendicant (bhikkhu) it was essential for the layman to be generous; but in order to be generous he had first to be thrifty. The distinctively Buddhist social relationship I have designated as that between monk and layman; within this relationship the layman is in fact known as "donor", (dayaka) a status which in Buddhist countries is ascribed even before it is achieved. A good dayaka has to be dependable; and he in turn is likely to take kindly to a doctrine which stresses a careful, Apollonian attitude to life and its problems.

But social relations are reciprocal. What now of the monk's side of the bargain?

It is reported¹⁶ that soon after the Buddha had begun preaching his message, at the point when the world contained 61 enlightened beings (arhat) (including himself), he said to the others, "Go, monks, travel for the welfare and happiness of many people, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, welfare and happiness of gods and men. Let no two go the same way." In asking his disciples to spread his message to the public, he was acting in consonance with his own decision, a little earlier, not to remain in solitude, quietly enjoying the bliss of his own Enlightenment, but to give himself the trouble of announcing his discovery to the world -- an activity which was to dominate the remaining¹⁷ 45 years of his life. Though it is never so expressed, the principal duty of a monk -- his own search for salvation apart -- is to maintain this tradition, and to preserve the Dhamma for those who have ears to hear it.

The two claims on a monk -- his own quest for Enlightenment and his spreading of the Buddha's word -- are not always easy to reconcile. The conflict between them came to a head in a famous episode in Buddhist history. Late in the first century B.C., in the reign of King Vaṭṭagāmaṇī, Ceylon suffered from invasion and a terrible famine. Many monks died; others emigrated to India. Those remaining feared that the Canon, which still depended on oral tradition, would be lost. Their concern led to a meeting near the town of Mātālē at which the Pali Canon and its commentaries were for the first time committed to writing. The same crisis produced the controversy whether religious learning was more important than the practice which led directly to Enlightenment. Obviously both are desirable; they appeared as alternatives only at a time of crisis. On this occasion the monks decided that the basis of Buddhism (sāsana) is learning. Though this decision certainly appears discordant with the Buddha's own views, it was perhaps a lucky one for us. What in fact emerged as a result was division of labour: a tradition, still today of great importance in Theravāda Buddhism, that a monk can choose either of two roles: book duty (ganthadhura) or meditation duty (vipassanādhura)¹⁷ (The word I have translated "duty" literally means "yoke".) The corollary of choosing book-duty is likely to be living in a village; the corollary of choosing the contemplative life is likely to be living in isolation in the jungle. I should stress that the two roles do not involve exclusive emphasis: the village monk is supposed to meditate, and the forest monk to be learned. But the roles are just that: prescriptions for action in social circumstances. The "book-monk" is to consider it his duty to preserve (and promulgate) knowledge of Buddhism; the meditator recognizes no such claim upon him. But these two roles are, in theory at least, freely chosen, and may be abandoned or exchanged, just as a Buddhist monk is in theory free at any time to revert to the status of layman. (The constraints on this freedom are the societal pressures which may operate in individual circumstances, and thus do not concern us here).

The duty of the monk towards the laity may, then, be summed up as the duty to preach to them and to instruct them in Buddhism. Monasteries have of course been the traditional schools of Buddhist countries, and the instruction they imparted went well beyond what was necessary for the preservation of the scriptures. The involvement of monks in ritual, demanded by the laity -- an involvement very limited compared to that of a Christian priest, but nevertheless onerous -- occurs as an extension of preaching: sermons at funerals, commemorative ceremonies for the dead, the recitation of sacred texts to avert misfortune. Most of these rituals are occasions for the formal and demonstrative presentation of food (and sometimes of permissible possessions) to monks by the laity, so that they dramatically illustrate the reciprocity between the Buddhist roles of monk and layman.¹⁸

Finally, there is one other kind of Buddhist duty which deserves mention. The Buddha's followers were distinctive not in renouncing the world and becoming mendicants, but in the forming an organized community, the Saṅgha. In so far as they were a social community, they had roles and obligations towards each other. Monastic duties were called vatta in Pali, and there is not a great deal about them in the Canon. That section of the Canon devoted to the externals of a monk's life, the Vinaya Piṭaka, has two main parts, of which one consists entirely of an exposition of the rules governing the life of the individual,¹⁹ rules which are but an elaboration of his basic renunciations and abstinences. The other main part deals with the life of the community, but even here many of the formulations are negative or in terms of things permitted, rather than in terms of positive injunctions. Monks are exhorted to look after each other when they are sick. Most of their duties

towards each other, however, are summed up in one chapter²⁰ and the fourteen heads of this chapter came to be known as the fourteen major duties (duddasa maha vatcani).

Despite the term "major" (or "great"), the duties are laid out in the detailed and sometimes even trivial practical terms which are typical of the whole Vinaya Piṭaka. The fourteen headings are: the duties of a monk arriving at a new monastery; of a resident monk [towards arrivals]; of a monk leaving a monastery; behaviour in a refectory; on an alms round; of a forest-dwelling monk; of [cleaning] lodgings; of using a bathroom; of washing after defecating; of using a privy; of sharing a cell with one's preceptor; of a preceptor towards the junior who shares his cell; of a teacher towards his pupil; and of a pupil towards his teacher. A teacher (ācariya) is but a surrogate preceptor (upajjhāya), and the relation of each towards his pupil is identical, so the last two sets of duties are a verbatim repetition of the previous two. Many of the other ordinances, notably the precise instructions on cleaning out a cell, are also repeated under different heads. To give the flavour of this material, I quote one paragraph from the seventeen which describe a monk's duties towards his preceptor (with whom he shares a cell); it begins when the two are entering a village, which would normally be to beg for food.²¹

"He should not interrupt the preceptor when he is speaking. (But) if the preceptor is bordering on an offence, then, speaking himself, he should warn him. When he is returning, he should make ready a seat, having come back first; he should set out water for washing the feet, a foot-stool, a foot-stand; having gone to meet him, he should receive his bowl and robe, he should give back the inner clothing (given) in return, he should receive his inner clothing. If a robe is damp with perspiration, he should dry it for a short time in the sun's warmth, but a robe should not be laid aside in the warmth. He should fold up the robe. When folding up the robe, having made the corners turn back four finger-breadths, he should fold up the robe, thinking 'Mind there is no crease in the middle'. The waistband should be placed in a fold (of the robe). If there is almsfood and the preceptor wishes to eat, having given him water, almsfood should be placed near (him)."

Other duties mentioned in the commentaries include sweeping the monastic premises and whitewashing the stupa. But I need not expatiate further on details of the monastic life, on which there is good secondary literature.²²

The kinds of Buddhist duty discussed in this paper may now be summarized:

- A) The true duty of a Buddhist is to progress spiritually towards Enlightenment.
- B) Monks and laymen have certain reciprocal duties.
 - (i) The laity must materially support the monks. In harmony with this purpose, they are exhorted to thrift.
 - (ii) Monks are to preserve the doctrine (Dhamma) and preach to the laity.
- C) From the existence of a monastic community arise certain duties, minutely prescribed, of monks towards each other.

If in this paper I have taken the subject all the way down from the lofty generalities and philosophical speculations of Dharma to the details of how to fold up a monk's robe, this is not only (I hope) malice or incompetence on my part. It reflects the nature of my subject. One can never stress enough that Buddhism, for Buddhists, is practical: there is a goal, and all you need is to get there. The "big questions" which interest most people are the very questions the Buddha refused to answer. Take care of yourself, he said, have enough to eat, be sensible; eschew metaphysics. Then one day you will find that what has to be done is done (katam karaniyam). Taking the words in a more modest sense, I hope I may be allowed to end my paper on the same note. Katam karaniyam.

Footnotes

Abbreviations

AN - Anguttara Nikāya

DA - Dīgha nikāya Atthakathā

DN - Dīgha Nikāya. Small roman numerals are the serial numbers of the suttas, large roman the volume numbers.

SN - Saṃyutta Nikāya

1. Compare Lingat on the dhammasūtra tradition: "Pour le saṃnyāsiṇ on devra admettre qu'il n'y a plus de règle de dharma." On the other hand, Lingat shows that in the orthodox tradition a sūdra was not supposed to become a saṃnyāsin. Les Sources du Droit dans le Système Traditionnel de l'Inde (Paris etc. 1967). p. 67.
2. Dhammapada 166.
3. DN xxxi.
4. op.cit., § 27 = DN III, pp. 188-9.
5. § 7, p.182
6. AN. I. 125
7. AN. IV. 269-271.
8. DN II. 85.
9. AN III. 45-6
10. AN III. 75-8.
11. DN. v.
12. DN. I. 135
13. DN. III.188
14. DA. III. 177
15. SN. I.86-7
16. Mahāragga p.21
17. On this question see especially Walpola Rahula, History of Buddhism in Ceylon (Colombo 1956) pp. 158-161
18. For an excellent anthropological study of these complementary roles today see Jane Bunnag. Buddhist Monk, Buddhist Layman, (Cambridge 1973).
19. These rules are known collectively as the pāṭimakkha.

20. Cullavagga VIII I am grateful to the Ven. W. Rahula for this reference, and to Mr. Michael Carrithers for first drawing my attention to the fourteen major duties.
21. Cullavagga VIII. 11.4 Trans. I.B. Horner, The Book of the Discipline vol. V (London 1952), p. 312.
22. e.g. Walpola Rahula, op.cit., E.W. Adikaram, Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon (Colombo 1946); the books of Sukumar Dutt.