



The compassionate Buddhaⁱ

Section 11-2: Advice and Guidance to Lay Followers

For forty-five years, the Blessed One devoted his life to teaching the Dhamma, offering wisdom and guidance to both monastics and lay followers. He encouraged householders to cultivate happiness in family life while nurturing their spiritual development.

The Buddha urged his lay disciples—known as upāsaka (male lay followers) and upāsikā (female lay followers)—to uphold the five precepts as the foundation of a virtuous life. He also encouraged them to observe the eight precepts on full moon days and to lead lives of peace, kindness, and compassion toward all living beings.

The following are selected extracts from the scriptures that illustrate his profound guidance for lay practitioners.

How to Live a Household Life with Contentment

Advice to Young Sigālakaⁱⁱ

On one occasion, the Blessed One encountered a young householder, Sigālaka, who was paying homage to the six directions. Seeing this, the Buddha asked him about the purpose of his practice. Sigālaka replied:

“Lord, my father, when he was dying, instructed me to do so. And so, out of respect for my father’s words, which I revere, honour, and hold sacred, I rise early each day to pay homage in this way to the six directions.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Hearing this, the Buddha gently explained that an Ariyan disciple pays homage to the six directions in a different way—one that leads to true well-being and protection in both this life and the next. Eager to learn, Sigālaka asked about this noble practice, and the Blessed One responded:

“...Young householder, it is by abandoning the four defilements of action, by refraining from the four causes of wrongdoing, and by not following the six ways of squandering one’s wealth—through avoiding these fourteen evil ways—that the Ariyan disciple truly covers the six directions. By practicing in this way, he becomes a conqueror of both worlds, ensuring

well-being in this life and the next. And at the breaking up of the body after death, he will attain a good destiny, a heavenly world..."

The Four Defilements of Action

These four unwholesome actions arise from greed, ill will, delusion, and fear, and should be abandoned:

- 1. Taking life**
- 2. Taking what is not given**
- 3. Sexual misconduct**
- 4. False speech**

The Six Ways of Wasting One's Wealth

A wise householder avoids these six ruinous habits that lead to poverty and suffering:

- 1. Addiction to intoxicants (strong drink and drugs)**
- 2. Roaming the streets at improper hours**
- 3. Frequenting worldly entertainments and frivolous amusements**
- 4. Addiction to gambling**
- 5. Associating with bad company**
- 6. Habitual laziness and idleness**

Through abandoning these harmful ways and living with mindfulness, discipline, and wisdom, a householder establishes a life of contentment, security, and spiritual progress—laying the foundation for true happiness in this world and beyond.

♦ To do good, abandon evil

"If one regards oneself as dear
One should not yoke oneself to evil,
For happiness is not easily gained
By one who does a wrongful deed..."

Therefore, one should do what is good
As a collection for the future life.
Merits are the support for living beings
When they arise in the other world ^{iv}

Advice to Householders on Wealth and Future Well-being

The Blessed One's Advice to the Brahmin Householders of Veludvāra

On one occasion, a group of brahmin householders from Veludvāra approached the Blessed One and said: ^v

"Master Gotama, we have such wishes, desires, and hopes as these: 'May we dwell in a home filled with children... may we enjoy Kāsi sandalwood... may we wear garlands and fragrances... may we receive gold and silver! And with the breakup of the body, after death, may we be reborn in a good destination.'" ^{vi}

Hearing this, the Blessed One offered them profound guidance, saying:

"Householders, when a noble disciple possesses **seven good qualities** and **four desirable states**, he may confidently declare of himself: 'I am one who is finished with hell, finished with the animal realm, finished with the domain of ghosts, finished with the plane of misery,

the bad destinations, and the lower worlds. I am a stream-enterer, no longer bound to the nether realms, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as my ultimate goal.’

The Seven Good Qualities

A noble disciple purifies his conduct in three ways—by abstaining from unwholesome actions, encouraging others to do the same, and rejoicing in righteous deeds. These seven qualities are:

1. Abstaining from killing
2. Abstaining from stealing
3. Abstaining from sexual misconduct
4. Abstaining from false speech
5. Abstaining from harsh speech
6. Abstaining from divisive speech
7. Abstaining from idle chatter

The Four Desirable States

By cultivating these four qualities, a lay disciple establishes a strong foundation for both worldly and spiritual well-being:

1. **Confidence in the Buddha** – Trusting in the wisdom and awakening of the Blessed One
2. **Confidence in the Dhamma** – Trusting in the path that leads to liberation
3. **Confidence in the Sangha** – Trusting in the community of noble disciples
4. **Possessing unbroken virtue** – Upholding moral discipline with sincerity and care

Through the cultivation of these qualities, a lay follower ensures happiness in this life and secures a fortunate rebirth in the next.

The Advice to Young Dīghajāṇu

On another occasion, a young man of the Koliyan clan, named Dīghajāṇu, approached the Blessed One, paid homage, and requested guidance: ^{vii}

“Bhante, we are laypeople enjoying sensual pleasures, living at home in households filled with children. We use Kāsi sandalwood; we wear garlands, scents, and unguents; we receive gold and silver. May the Blessed One teach us the Dhamma in a way that will bring us welfare and happiness both in this life and in future lives.”

In response, the Buddha imparted this timeless teaching:

Byagghapajja, there are four things that lead to the welfare and happiness of a clansman in this present life. What four?

The Four Factors for Well-being in This Life

1. **Accomplishment in Initiative** – A layperson should be skilful, diligent, and wise in managing their livelihood, ensuring that their efforts lead to success and well-being.
2. **Accomplishment in Protection** – One should take necessary measures to safeguard wealth from kings, thieves, misfortune, and unworthy heirs.
3. **Cultivating Good Friendship** – Associating with wise and virtuous people leads to spiritual growth and wholesome living.
4. **Balanced Living** – One should manage income wisely, neither living in excess nor being overly frugal, while avoiding reckless behaviours such as womanizing, drunkenness, gambling, and associating with bad companions.

The Four Factors for Well-being in Future Lives

Beyond material well-being, the Buddha emphasized four qualities that ensure happiness in future lives:

1. **Accomplishment in Faith** – Having unwavering confidence in the Triple Gem
2. **Accomplishment in Virtuous Conduct** – Leading a life of moral discipline
3. **Accomplishment in Generosity** – Practicing selflessness and charity
4. **Accomplishment in Wisdom** – Cultivating insight that leads to liberation

By following these teachings, a layperson secures both worldly prosperity and spiritual advancement, leading to true and lasting happiness.

The Importance of Caring for One's Parents

The Buddha often emphasized the profound duty of caring for one's parents, recognizing it as both a moral responsibility and a source of great merit. In his teachings, he highlighted two essential aspects of this duty:

Providing material support and comfort to one's parents.^{viii}

1. Guiding them on the path of Dhamma—encouraging them to take refuge in the Triple Gem, cultivate Right View, and progress toward spiritual awakening, even to the level of stream-entry.

The Blessed One did not merely instruct others on honouring their parents—he personally exemplified this virtue. He not only cared for his own parents but also helped his stepmother, who raised him with great love and devotion, to advance on the spiritual path and attain liberation from the endless cycle of suffering. This has been discussed in greater detail in Section 2 of this compilation.

The following passage from the scriptures beautifully illustrates the Buddha's guidance on filial duty and the immeasurable gratitude one owes to their parents:

Parents—The First Teachers of Their Children

"Mother and father are called 'Brahmā' (sublime ones), and also 'first teachers.'

They are worthy of gifts from their children,
for they have boundless compassion for their offspring.
Therefore, a wise person should revere them,
honour them with love and respect,
serve them with food and drink,
with clothes and bedding,
by massaging and bathing them,
and by washing their feet.

By rendering such devoted service
to one's mother and father,
the wise are praised in this very life,
and after death, they rejoice in heaven."^{ix}

Two Persons Who Cannot Easily Be Repaid

The Buddha taught that repaying one's parents is one of the most difficult debts to fulfill. No matter how much wealth or power one bestows upon them, it still falls short of true

repayment. However, if one can guide their parents toward the path of Dhamma and establish them in faith, virtue, generosity, and wisdom, then they have truly honoured their parents in the highest way.

The Blessed One said:

“Even if one were to make one’s parents the supreme rulers over this vast earth, abundant with the seven treasures, one still would not have fully repaid them. Why? Because parents are of immense benefit to their children—they nurture them, provide for them, and introduce them to the world. However, if one helps parents develop faith when they lack faith, virtue when they lack virtue, generosity when they lack generosity, and wisdom when they lack wisdom—then one has truly repaid them, and even done more than enough for them.”^x

The scriptures further praise those who care for their parents with diligence and devotion:

*“The wise person, dwelling at home,
truly lives for the good of many.
Day and night, devoted to his mother, father, and ancestors,
he honours them in accordance with the Dhamma,
recollecting the boundless kindness they have shown him.”^{xi}*

The Importance of Making Merit and Sharing It

Another essential teaching the Buddha gave to lay followers was the practice of accumulating merit and dedicating it to departed relatives. He emphasized that beings in certain realms eagerly await such offerings, as these acts of generosity bring them great benefit.

Merit—A Source of True Happiness

The Blessed One encouraged all, including his monastic disciples, not to fear making merit, for it is the foundation of happiness and spiritual progress. Reflecting on his own past lives, he described the immense benefits he had gained through the practice of merit:^{xii}

“Do not be afraid of merit—merit is another name for happiness. I recall that for a long time, I experienced the desirable, lovely, and agreeable results of merit accumulated over many lifetimes. For seven years, I cultivated a mind of loving-kindness. As a result, for seven world cycles of dissolution and reformation, I never returned to this world of suffering. Instead, I was reborn in the realm of streaming radiance. When the world was re-formed, I became a great Brahmā... I was Sakka, lord of the gods... and hundreds of times I was a wheel-turning monarch.”

Thus, the Buddha advised:

*“One who aspires for the highest good,
who seeks true greatness,
should deeply revere the noble Dhamma,
ever mindful of the Buddhas’ timeless teachings.”*

The Great Benefits of Making Merit

The Buddha emphasized that making merit is the foundation of true happiness and spiritual progress. Through generosity, virtuous conduct, and meditative cultivation, one creates the conditions for a fortunate life and favourable rebirths.

Merit Leads to Prosperity and Well-Being

In one discourse, the Blessed One highlighted the importance of living in a suitable place and associating with noble friends, as these factors support a person in accumulating merit, which in turn leads to prosperity and good fortune:

*“...When a person dwells in a suitable locality
and makes friends with the noble ones,
when he has formed right resolutions
and done deeds of merit in the past,
grain, riches, fame, and reputation,
along with happiness accrue to him.”* ^{xiii}

Merit Supports Good Rebirths

The Buddha also taught that acts of generosity—such as offering gifts, providing food, and supporting the virtuous, travellers, and the sick—bring joy not only in this life but also in future existences: ^{xiv}

*“Therefore, with an unwavering mind,
one should give gifts where they yield great fruit.
Merit is the true support of beings
when they arise in the other world.”*

The Buddha praised Suppavāsā, ^{xv} the daughter of the Koliyan clan, for her generosity in offering food to him and the Sangha, declaring that her wholesome deeds would bring immense blessings: ^{xvi}

*“...Those who recollect such generosity
dwell in the world inspired by joy.
Having uprooted the stain of miserliness,
pure and blameless, they ascend to the heavenly realms.”*

Additionally, the Blessed One explained that three fundamental bases of merit lead to favourable rebirths: ^{xvii}

1. **Generosity (Dāna):** Acts of giving, which cultivate selflessness and compassion.
2. **Virtuous Conduct (Sīla):** Moral discipline that purifies the mind and heart.
3. **Meditative Development (Bhāvanā):** The cultivation of wisdom through mindfulness and meditation.

*“Even if one practices these three bases of merit in an average way,
they will be reborn among humans in favourable conditions.
But if one practices them in an excellent manner,
they will attain rebirth in the celestial realms.”*

Sharing Merit (Puñña) with Departed Relatives

A significant aspect of Buddhist tradition is the dedication of merit to departed loved ones. The Buddha frequently advised his followers to transfer the merits of their good deeds to their ancestors, as beings in the spirit realms often await such offerings.

A well-known example is King Bimbisāra's act of merit when he donated the first monastery to the Buddha and the Sangha.^{xviii} According to tradition, his departed relatives, suffering in the lower realms, longed for the merit of his generosity. Failing to receive it, they appeared in his dreams, prompting the king to seek the Buddha's guidance. The Blessed One, using his supernormal insight, confirmed that these beings were indeed awaiting merit. Upon the Buddha's advice, the king made additional offerings and dedicated the merit to them, leading to their release from suffering.

The Buddha then gave this profound discourse on the importance of remembering and supporting one's departed relatives:

*"They stand beyond the walls,
at the junctions and crossroads,
they linger at the doorposts,
returning to their former homes.*

*Yet when food and drink,
abundant and well-prepared,
is offered in generosity,
they remain forgotten.*

*But the compassionate, those with wisdom,
give to their departed relatives.
They offer pure and suitable gifts,
at the right time, with heartfelt devotion.
Thinking: 'May this reach our loved ones,
may they find peace and happiness!'*

*The assembled spirits rejoice,
accepting the offerings with gratitude.
And in turn, they bless their benefactors,
saying: 'May you live long!
May you prosper in goodness!
For you have honoured us,
and those who give are never without reward.'*^{xix}

Thus, the Buddha taught that by making merit and dedicating it to others—whether the living or the departed—one fosters happiness, deepens spiritual progress, and strengthens the bonds of compassion that extend beyond this life.

The Importance of Offering Merit to Departed Relatives

Following is another discourse beautifully illustrates the significance of dedicating merit to our departed loved ones.

On one occasion, the Brahmin Jāṇussoṇī^{xx} approached the Blessed One and asked:

"Master Gotama, we Brahmins offer gifts and perform memorial rites for the dead with the thought: 'May our offerings benefit our departed relatives... May they partake of these merits.' But, Master Gotama, can our gifts truly be of benefit to them?"^{xxi}

In response, the Buddha gave a profound teaching on the existence of certain departed beings who reside in a realm where they can receive and benefit from such offerings. He further explained that throughout this vast cycle of saṃsāra, it is impossible to say that our loved ones have never been reborn in unfortunate states, awaiting the merit of their relatives.

The Buddha concluded by affirming that there are indeed beings who can benefit from alms given in their memory, and that those who make such offerings also accumulate great merit for themselves.

Deeply moved by this teaching, Brahmin Jāṇussoṇī exclaimed:

“It is truly astounding, Master Gotama, and most wonderful! There is indeed great reason to give gifts and perform memorial rites for the departed, for such acts bring benefit not only to the recipients but also to the givers themselves.” ^{xxii}

How to Take Food for Good Health

The Buddha also provided practical advice on how to consume food mindfully to maintain good digestion and overall health. He frequently emphasized that a healthy body serves as a strong foundation for developing meditation and inner stillness.

*“One who is always mindful,
knowing moderation in the food they eat,
experiences a reduction in ailments.
They age slowly, preserving their life.”* ^{xxiii}

By eating in moderation and with awareness, one fosters both physical well-being and spiritual clarity.

How a Buddhist Should Dwell in Home Life

The Buddha frequently encouraged lay followers to cultivate generosity by supporting monks, nuns, and ascetics who dedicate themselves to spiritual practice, as well as by providing for family members, the poor, and those in need of food and clothing.

In addition to acts of generosity, he urged laypeople to develop meditative recollections (*anusati bhāvanā*) to strengthen their spiritual progress. These include:

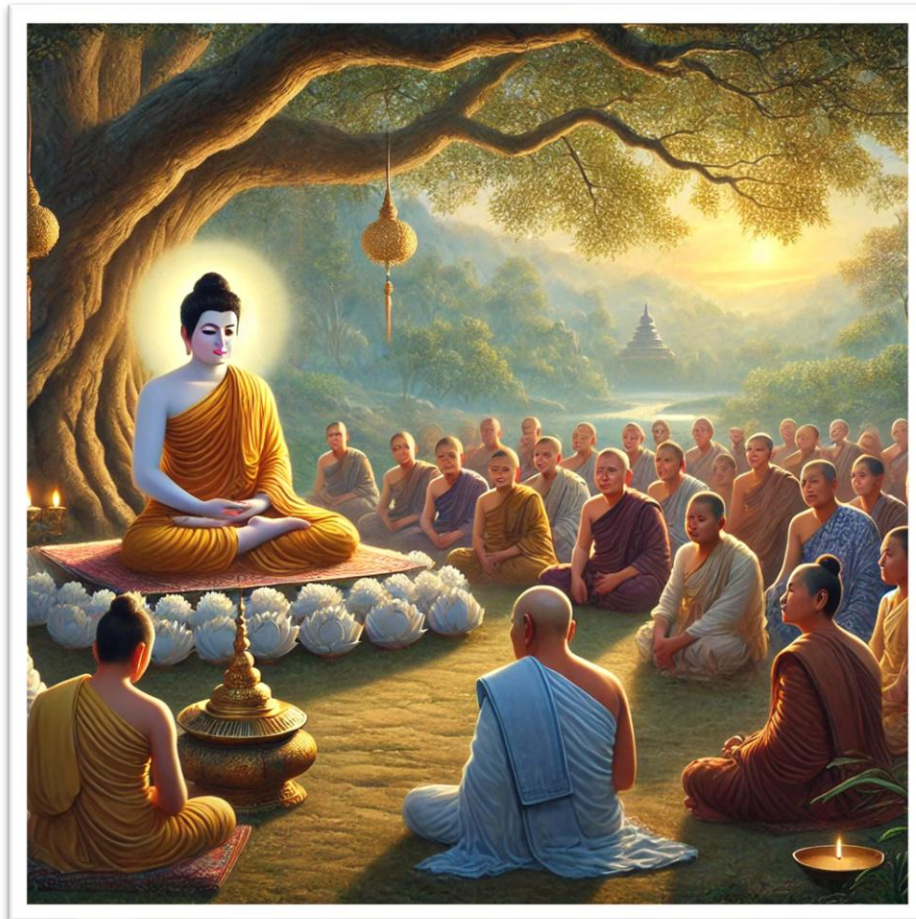
1. **Recollection of the Buddha’s qualities**
2. **Recollection of the Dhamma’s purity**
3. **Recollection of the Sangha’s virtue**
4. **Recollection of one’s own moral integrity**
5. **Recollection of one’s generosity and past good deeds**
6. **Recollection of the higher qualities of celestial beings (devas), inspiring one to cultivate wholesome qualities**

A well-known example of this guidance is found in the discourse given to Mahanāma the Sakyan. When he approached the Blessed One and asked how a layperson should live while engaging in worldly responsibilities, the Buddha instructed him to cultivate: ^{xxiv}

- **Faith** (*saddhā*) in the Triple Gem
- **Energy** (*virīya*) to uphold wholesome practices
- **Mindfulness** (*sati*) to stay attentive and aware

- **Stillness of mind** (samādhi) to develop inner peace
- **Wisdom** (paññā) to discern the true nature of life

By integrating these principles into daily life, lay practitioners create a strong foundation for spiritual growth while fulfilling their worldly duties with wisdom and compassion.



The Blessed One dedicated his life to teaching the Dhamma, imparting wisdom and guidance to both monastics and lay devotees for their lasting happiness in this world and beyond^{xxv}

Keeping Precepts Brings Happiness in This Life and Favourable Rebirth

The Buddha emphasized the importance of moral discipline for lay followers, encouraging them to observe the Five Precepts in daily life and the Eight Precepts on Uposatha ^{xxvi}. (observance) days. These ethical guidelines not only cultivate inner peace but also lead to happiness in this life and favourable rebirths in the next.

The following suttas highlight the profound benefits of keeping precepts:

The Five Precepts: A Path to Fearlessness and Well-being

The Buddha declared:

There are five gifts—great gifts, ancient and unadulterated, upheld by wise ascetics and brahmins. What five? ^{xxvii}

1. Abstaining from the destruction of life
2. Abstaining from taking what is not given

3. Abstaining from sexual misconduct
4. Abstaining from false speech
5. Abstaining from intoxicating drinks and drugs

By observing these precepts, one grants an immeasurable number of beings freedom from fear, enmity, and affliction. In return, one also enjoys freedom from fear, enmity, and affliction. Keeping these precepts brings happiness in this life and ensures a favourable rebirth.

The Eight Precepts: A Path to Higher Virtue and Heavenly Bliss

The Eight Precepts are traditionally observed on Full Moon and Uposatha days, fostering deeper spiritual practice. They are:

1. Abstaining from killing
2. Abstaining from stealing
3. Abstaining from sexual activity
4. Abstaining from false speech
5. Abstaining from intoxicants
6. Abstaining from eating after noon
7. Abstaining from entertainment and personal adornment
8. Abstaining from using luxurious beds and seats

The Buddha extolled the immense merit of observing the Eight Precepts, as illustrated in the following verse: ^{xxviii}

*“Whatever treasures exist in this world—
pearls, gems, and precious gold,
are not worth a sixteenth part
of an Uposatha observed in full.
Thus, a virtuous woman or man,
who upholds these eight factors
and generates merit leading to happiness,
will, blameless, attain a heavenly state.”*

The Blessings of Generosity

The Buddha repeatedly praised generosity, encouraging laypeople to offer alms to monks and ascetics, support the needy, and care for the sick.

In one discourse, the Buddha described the qualities of a noble giver: ^{xxix}

1. They give what is pure
2. They give what is excellent
3. They give at the right time
4. They give what is appropriate
5. They give with wisdom and discernment
6. They give frequently
7. While giving, their heart is filled with confidence
8. After giving, they rejoice in their generosity

“A noble giver shares what is pure and excellent,
timely and appropriate food and drink.
They offer gifts frequently,
supporting those who walk the spiritual path.
Having given with a heart full of faith,
they feel no regret but rejoice in their deeds.” xxx

“The wise praise such generosity,
for it leads to future happiness.
One who is intelligent, full of faith,
and rich in virtue is reborn in a peaceful, blissful realm.” xxxi

The Path to the Divine Realms

*“Faith, moral shame, and wholesome giving
are qualities cherished by the noble ones.
For this, they say, is the divine path,
leading to the radiant world of the devas.” xxxii*

By observing precepts and cultivating generosity, one paves the way for both present happiness and future liberation.

How to Be Free from Suffering

On one occasion, the headman Bhadraka approached the Buddha and said:

“Venerable sir, it would be good if the Blessed One could teach me about the origin and cessation of suffering.” xxxiii

In response, the Buddha engaged in a dialogue, leading Bhadraka to discover for himself how suffering arises and how it ceases:

Buddha: *“What do you think, headman? Are there people in Uruvelakappa on whose account sorrow and pain would arise in you if they were to be executed, imprisoned, or censured?”*

Bhadraka: *“Yes, venerable sir, there are such people.”*

Buddha: *“And are there people in Uruvelakappa on whose account sorrow and pain would not arise in you in such an event?”*

Bhadraka: *“Yes, venerable sir, there are such people.”*

Buddha: *“What is the reason that sorrow and pain arise in relation to some people but not in relation to others?”*

Bhadraka: *“The ones for whom sorrow and pain would arise in me are those to whom I have attachment.”*

Then the Blessed One said:

Whatever suffering arose in the past, whatever suffering will arise in the future, all of it has desire as its root and source; for desire is the cause of suffering.

In this way too, headman, it can be understood: ‘Whatever suffering arises, all of it arises rooted in desire, with desire as its source; for desire is the root of suffering.

Thus, the Buddha guided Bhadraka to recognize the causes of suffering and the way to abandon it.

How to Recognize a Good and Wise Person

The Buddha frequently advised his followers to associate with the wise and avoid the company of fools. This teaching is beautifully expressed in the opening verse of the **Mangala Sutta**:

*“Not associating with fools,
Associating with the wise,
Honouring those worthy of honour—
This is the highest blessing.”* ^{xxxiv}

How to Recognize Wise People

The Buddha once gave King Pasenadi of Kosala the following guidance: ^{xxxv}

*“Great king, a person's virtue is known by living with him...
His honesty is known through dealings with him...
His strength is known in times of misfortune...
His wisdom is known through discussion...
But this is known only after a long time, not a short time;
By one who is attentive, not by one who is inattentive;
By one who is wise, not by a fool.”*

He further warned:

*“A man is not easily known by outward form,
Nor should one trust a quick appraisal.
For in the guise of the well-controlled,
The uncontrolled move about in this world.
Like a counterfeit earring made of clay,
Like a bronze half-penny coated with gold,
Some move about in disguise—
Inwardly impure, outwardly beautiful.”*

How to Distinguish Between a Fool and a Wise Person

The Buddha provided a clear measure to discern the difference: ^{xxxvi}.

- A **fool** is one who engages in **bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, and mental misconduct**. Associating with such a person brings harm to both worldly and spiritual life.
- A **wise person** is one who cultivates **good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, and good mental conduct**. Associating with such a person brings great benefit, both in this life and beyond.

By choosing one's company wisely, one progresses towards peace, wisdom, and liberation.

End Notes: Section 11-2.

ⁱ AI generated image.

ⁱⁱ He became a lay follower of the Buddha. * The Sigālovāda Sutta is a popular sutta among Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma.

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- iii DN:31
- iv SN: 3:4 (Dear sutta)
- v SN55: 7 *The people of Bamboo Gate)
- vi SN55: 7 *The people of Bamboo Gate)
- vii AN8: 54 *His clan's name is Byagghapajja.
- viii AN2:33
- ix AN3:31
- x AN2:33
- xi AN8: 38.
- xii AN7: 62.
- xiii AN4: 31 (The wheel sutta).
- xiv AN4: 36.
- xv She was the mother of Sīvalī Thera, The Buddha designated her as the foremost among givers of what is excellent, see: AN1:263.
- xvi AN4: 57 (Suppavāsā sutta).
- xvii AN8:36.
- xviii See section 14: Part 2 for details. In [Maha Buddhavamsa—The Great Chronicle of Buddhas](#) by Ven. Mingun Sayadaw -describes this episode in details.
- xix KN:KP:7 (Tirokuddha sutta- Hungary Shades outside the wall, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi)
- xx He was a wealthy brahmin of Sāvattī became follower of the Buddha. Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta (MN:27) delivered to him.
- xxi AN10: 177 (Jāṇussoṇī sutta).
- xxii Ibid.
- xxiii SN3:13 (A Bucket Measure of Food sutta). * This advice was given to King Pasenadi Kosla, who followed the Buddha's advice and became healthy.
- xxiv AN11: 11, 12 & 13 * Details of anusati bhavana are mentioned in these suttas.
- xxv AI generated image.
- xxvi Upostaha is a Buddhist Observance Day that take place in Full moon and New Moon days. On those days lay people refrain from their daily home life, go to a monastery or a temple, take eight precepts and spend the whole day and the night doing chanting, listening to Dhamma talks and meditations.
- xxvii AN8:39
- xxviii AN8:42 * IN AN8:V Uposatha chapter has many suttas related to this subject.
- xxix AN8: 37 (Good persons gifts sutta).
- xxx Ibid.
- xxxi AN8:32 (Giving).
- xxxii Ibid.
- xxxiii SN42: 11.
- xxxiv KN:KP:5 (Mangala sutta, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi)
- xxxv SN3: 11
- xxxvi For details see: AN3: 2, 3 & 4.