

Dhamma in Practice: The Life of Vessantara

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Abstract: Dhamma, this phrase, and the ideas it is based on have been the most important aspect of Indian civilization throughout the ages. Regardless of linguistic, sectarian, or geographical variances, the fundamental idea of Indian religion and culture has always revolved around Dhamma. According to Buddhism, Dhamma often stands for, law, duty, righteousness, a goal of life (Puruṣārtha), cause, spiritual texts, quality, and religious teaching, good conduct, and behavior. Dhamma is a way of religious practice, a revered object of devotion whose properties are to be remembered and thought about by the practitioner to inspire faith and generate serenity; it is a transcendent reality and 'salvific Truth'. In the present context, Dhamma is more widely used as good conduct or proper behavior. In Buddhism, good conduct isn't just about avoiding harm, it's about actively alleviating suffering (dukkha) in the world. The ultimate embodiment of this ideal is the Bodhisatta, the future Buddha. Vessantara Jātaka presents a powerful example of sacrifice, where the protagonist, Prince Vessantara, embodies the pinnacle of generosity. He doesn't just give to those in need – he gives everything, even his most prized possessions and cherished family, leading to his own exile. This, scholars aptly call "atī-dāna," generosity beyond measure. This monograph at hand will elucidate the concept of Dhamma and how to inculcate Bodhisatta Vessantara's practice of Dhamma for the benefit of society.

Keywords: Dhamma, Vessantara, Vessantara Jātaka, The Buddha

Introduction

dhriyati lokān anena, dharati lokam vā (Apte 1965)

What Dhamma is? Is it a concept or a practice? There are a thousand questions revolving around this, and giving a simple answer in a line or paragraph is indeed a difficult task. Dhamma has been explained to be that which helps the uplifting of living beings. Therefore, that which ensures the welfare of living beings is surely Dhamma. The learned rishis have declared that which sustains is Dhamma. (Mahabharata, Shanti Parva 109:9-11). Dhamma is frequently interpreted as righteousness; merit; religious and moral duties; and religious law; dictating a person's conduct. The idea of dhamma is crucial to Indian philosophy and religion (Grimes, 1996). In Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism, it has a variety of meanings. It is challenging to give a clear, concise explanation of dhamma because the term has a rich history that spans a wide range of meanings (Ingalls 1957). In the Buddhist scriptures, the word "Dhamma" is typically employed in four different contexts: (1) Scriptural Texts, (2) Quality (*guṇa*), (3) Cause (*hetu*), and (4) Unsubstantial and Soul-less (*nisatta nijjīva*); *nisatta nijjīva* has significance in Buddhist philosophy. The early schools of Buddhism rejected the idea that any one fixed thing was responsible for existence as a whole; instead, they believed that reality was only accompanied by insubstantial experiences known as Dhammas. However, the term "Dhamma" is also used in other contexts, such as when referring to religious instruction (*dhamma-desana*)¹. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* defined Dhamma as *guṇa dravyapūrvakā* dhamma, which refers to Dharmmas that are connected as attributes and substances (Das, 1955).

Jainism defines dhamma as something that guides beings away from the problems of the world and keeps them steadfast in the utmost happiness. Dhamma is described in the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra, Dharma is that which brings happiness, both in this life and the next. *Yato Abhy-udaya-Nis-Shre-yasa-Siddhih, sah Dhammah*². In other words, the definition refers to

¹ exposition of the Buddha's teachings

² Dharma is essential for human flourishing. It is the path that leads to happiness, prosperity, and well-being.

anything that promotes *abhyu-daya*, prosperity (in this life), as well as *nishreyas*, the greatest happiness (in the afterlife), which is Dhamma, the joys of earth and heaven, and the bliss of realizing infinity and immortality, both during the life on Earth and afterward.

Dhamma, according to Nyaya-Vaiesika philosophy³, is characteristic of existence that allows the soul to experience happiness or to find redemption (Murthy, 1996). In Mahabhratha's Santi Parva, we can get a precise etymological definition of Dhamma. It describes Dhamma as that which holds all beings together in the unbreakable law of action and reaction, from which reward originates for good deeds and punishment for bad deeds, and therefore protects mankind. Dhamma is a fundamental tenet of the Hindu religion, which has more than a billion adherents. Hindus consider the Vedas to be revelations of dhamma. The word “dhamma” is derived from the Sanskrit word "*dhri*," which means to support or uphold (Menski, 2010). It represents all theologies, goals, institutions, and influences that have a bearing on how people behave both as members of society and as individuals. It is the rule of moral conduct, and adhering to it ensures both eternal salvation and earthly happiness. Dhamma, which governs a Hindu's life, is a synthesis of ethics and religion. The dhamma regulations take into account fasts and feasts, societal and familial ties, as well as individual preferences and habits (Aggarwal, 2015). Dhamma, in Buddhism, refers to the doctrine that is the eternal truth shared by all people. Buddhists hold that by engaging in meditation and cultivating the Buddha's way of life, people can liberate themselves from suffering. The Buddha's teachings, which he gave in India some 2,500 years ago, are also known as the dhamma. He frequently asserted that because of the variety of his teachings, every person might receive them in a way that is most beneficial to them. This implies that there isn't just one correct approach to comprehending Buddhist teachings. To enable people to experience and awaken through the dhamma teachings, Buddha offered vehicles.

The idea of a bodhisatta is an important theme in Buddhist philosophy and it is practically impossible to speculate on how this fundamental concept came to be. In modern Buddhism, those sentient beings who have a sincere desire to reach enlightenment and serve others are referred to be bodhisatta (Skt. Bodhisattas). Basham claims that the term "bodhisatta" may have originated in "a solely Buddhist framework" because it does not appear in the extensive Vedic literature, early Hinduism, or Jainism literature (Kawamura, 1981). Buddhists categorize sentient beings based on their attributes. Which of these attributes, according to the Jātakas stories, make a sentient person a bodhisatta is worth evaluating. The early Buddhist teachings do not include a comprehensive response to this query. The ten Pāramitās are sometimes called the requirements for becoming a bodhisatta. However, we are aware that neither the Cariyāpiṭaka nor the Jātakas collection includes any references to them. An in-depth analysis of the Jātakas stories reveals that bodhi is the only requirement for a sentient person to be classified as a Bodhisatta (Ci, 2004).

Grasp Buddhist practice requires having an understanding of the Buddha's previous lives. The stories offer a rich narrative foundation for understanding how to develop the virtues required for a fulfilling existence. The antepenultimate birth of the historical Buddha before he became Siddhartha Gautama serves as an example of the virtue of generosity (*dāna*), the final life celebrates Prince Vessantara's mastery of the virtue of generosity (*dāna*). A Jātakas is a birth story, and this anthology of tales is about the Bodhisatta, the being destined to become the current Buddha in his final life, and his numerous births—and deaths. Written in Pāli, the Theravada Buddhist sect's original language. Jātakas can be found

³ Amongst the six “darśanas” (orthodox schools) of Indian philosophy, Nyāya stands out as a dual focus on logic and knowledge acquisition (epistemology)

sporadically in the early Buddhist school's writings as well as in subsequent compositions and compilations, commentaries, and compositions. Although the JA is the largest and most well-known collection, there are numerous other jātakas collections both inside and outside of the Pāli scriptures, as well as more general collections of narrative that frequently include some Jātakas (Appleton, 2016). There are a total of five hundred and fifty jātakas¹ which are divided into twenty-two books (*nipātas*).

All 547 Jātakas stories originated from the same vow: a Bodhisatta pledged the foot of the Buddha Dīpaṅkara, to put off his enlightenment (*bodhi*) and release from the cycle of rebirths until he is prepared to become a Buddha himself and pass on his teachings. The *Jātakas* are distinctive and unique because they are the only compilation of tales in the world where a central character's growth is tested not only by the events of one lifetime but by hundreds. The Bodhisatta can take many different forms of rebirth because of the vow he made at the foot of Buddha Dipankar, rebirths including those of animals (such as monkeys, fish, elephants, horses, and mice), tree spirits, and serpent kings (*Nāga*), as well as many different social classes when taking human form, such as the untouchable, merchant, cook, archer, forester, warrior, musician, brahmin, minister, and king. He resembles god at times. He achieves all ten perfections (*pāramī*) of generosity (*Dāna*), virtue or restraint (*sīla*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), wisdom (*paññā*), effort (*virīya*), forbearance (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), resolve (*adhiṭṭhanā*), loving-kindness (*mettā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*) in these lifetimes, according to later commentarial traditions that quickly become incorporated into the Jātakas (Shaw, 2006).

The *Jātaka* tales bloom across diverse forms. We find them woven into various writings and brought to life with stunning artistry in paintings, stone reliefs, and bas reliefs. Throughout ancient times, the Sivi family line has been noted for its sacrifices and acts of compassion in Indian customs. The Bodhisatta was formerly born as Vessantara (Born in the merchant quarter) (Skt. *Viśvantara*) under the Sivi dynasty Jetuttara kingdom. His mother was Queen Phusati, and his father was King Saṅjaya. Because he talked the day after his birth, he gave the impression of being a child prodigy. It's interesting to note that a white elephant was also born on the same day. The miraculous ability to cause rain was bestowed on this elephant, who was given the name Paccaya. The paragraphs below include excerpts from the tale of Vessantara, sourced from the IGNCA website. These selected portions provide a brief glimpse into the story."⁴

“When Vessantara promised to make a significant donation at the young age of eight, the earth rocked because of his profound desire for generosity. At age 16, he wed Maddi (Skt. Madri). His offspring included Jali and Kanhajina. At that time there was a great draught in Kalinga. So, eight Brahmins from Kaingā came to Vessantara to beg for his white elephant to make the rain fall in their country. Vessantara acceded to their request and donated the elephant. When the people of Jetuttara heard of this news they were disturbed. Agitatingly, they went to the king and asked him to punish the prince by banishing him to the forest of Vankagiri. The will of the people eventually prevailed and Vessantara had to go on exile much to the unwillingness of the king. Before setting out he obtained the king's consent to hold an alms-giving ceremony called the “Gifts of Seven Hundreds (Sattasataka). On the occasion he gave away seven hundred pieces of seven hundred kinds of things to the needy people. When Vessantara took leave of his parents and was preparing to depart his wife Maddi insisted on accompanying him with her children Jali and Kanhajina. They left the palace in a royal chariot drawn by four horses. On the way four brahmins met him and begged for his four horses. After giving the four horses to the brahmins when he began to fasten the girth tightly round

⁴ <https://ignca.gov.in/online-digital-resources/jataka-stories/038-the-sacrifice-of-vessantara/>

his waist to put himself under the yoke and to drag the carriage there appeared four yakkhas in the form of red deer. They put their shoulders under the yoke like well-trained excellent horses and drew his carriage.

When they were thus involved in the pleasant conversation they encountered one more brahmin beggar, who begged for the carriage. So, Vessantara had to part with his carriage, too. He then lifted his son Jali in his arms, and Maddi lifted Kanhanjana; and thus they continued their journey on foot. The sun was scorching. So, The cloud overspread overhead to act as a canopy. The trees extended their branches to offer them delicious fruits as an offering to their virtue of charity. When they longed for water the lotus ponds appeared before them to quench their thirst. Further, the yakṣa shortened their path to protect them from exertion. Thus, treading through Suvannagiritala, Kantimara, Mount Aranjagiri, Dunnivittha, the capital of Cheta (where his uncle ruled), Gandhama Dāna, the foot of Mount Vipula to the river Ketumati (where a forester offered them food) and then by crossing the river Nalika along the bank of lake Muchalinda and further crossing a dense forest they finally reached Vankagiri. Vissakamma, the Engineer of Sakka had already built two hermitages for them in the forest. One was for Vessantara and the other was for the rest of the family. The power of Vessantara was so strong that no wild animal came near their hermitages. Happily, they spent four months. One day, one old Brahmin named Jūjaka came to the hermitage when Maddi had gone to the forest to bring some fruits for the family. Accosting Vessantara he begged for his two children because Amittatapana, his wife had demanded for two slaves for herself. As Vessantara was widely known for his Dāna-Pāramitā (perfection of charitability) the greedy Brahmin was intent on exploiting the situation. Vessantara tried to convince the Brahmin to change his mind in several ways. Yet, he insisted on accepting nothing but the two children. Knowing Jūjaka's mind the children were extremely terrified and ran away to a nearby pond and hid themselves. They, however, re-appeared when their father called them. And by then Vessantara had finally agreed to the shrewd demand of Jūjaka. The brahmin, then chanting some phrases of benediction to the donour ordered the children to accompany him. The children, who did not want to leave glued to the feet of their father to ask Jūjaka to wait at least until the arrival of their mother. But shrewd and mean Jūjaka without wasting time fastened the hands of the two delicate children with a creeper and forcibly dragged them to his destination. When Maddi returned late in the evening and did not find her children around, she asked Vessantara of their whereabouts. But Vessantara kept silence. She then repeated the same question several times, yet Vessantara did not utter a single word. So, she again went inside the forest and looked for the children for whole night. Next morning, when she returned she fainted. Vessantara then helped her regain consciousness. That was the time he apprised her of the whereabouts of the children and narrated the story. By then Maddi had mustered up the courage to endure the trauma. Surprisingly, she praised Vessantara's great act of Dāna-sīla (Conduct of charity).

Their sacrifice trembled the earth. And so did Mount Sineru with all its resplendent gems. Surprised, Sakka, the lord of the devas inquired into the cause. When he learnt the cause of the quakes owing to the sacrifice of Vessantara he visited the hermitage next morning to test the firmness of his vow in the guise of a mendicant and begged him for his wife. Even then Vessantara did not lose the firmness of his mind and nodded to donate Maddi as well. Besides, no anger sprang even in the heart of Maddi. She did not wail. She rather looked stupefied and stood like a statue with her eyes fixed on her husband with a fresh load of suffering.

Now, it was the time for Sakka to reveal his identity. He gave Maddi back to Vessantara. Furthermore, he offered eight boons to the great donor, which included the reunion of his family; his recall to the father's kingdom; and his ability to benefaction.

In the meanwhile, Jūjaka had traveled sixty leagues and having lost his way he reached Jetuttara, though he intended to reach Kalinga. His rugged appearance and harsh behaviour with the two delicate children attracted the royal guards, who brought him before the king. King Sañjaya, when saw his grand-children and learnt their story he bought them back from the cruel brahmin in lieu of handsome gifts and seven-storeyed palace. But Jūjaka could hardly enjoy those riches as he died of over-eating in a few days. The king along with Phusati, Jali and his army then marched to Vankagiri to bring back his son and the daughter-in-law. The white elephant Pacchaya also joined the procession as he had just returned from Kalinga as no one could subdue him there. Finally, after a month of merry-making in the forest they all returned to the kingdom, happily.”

Dhamma in Practice

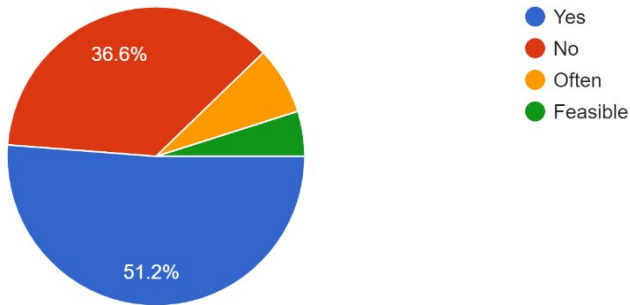
As it is very well written by Emanuel Swedenborg The Human being is born to perform charity (Swedenborg, 1995). Being charitable is a noble human trait that benefits society. It broadens people's hearts and spreads the gospel of brotherhood and unadulterated love. In the past, charitable giving was highly regarded. The wealthy people's alms allowed the saints and sages to live. According to the data gathered, approximately 51.2% of people practice charity, mainly in the form of money followed by clothing, education, and other materialistic items coming in second and third. Nonetheless, most charitable donations are made to beggars during festival times. and it is seen that 92% of people think that charity or being generous is needed to bring positive change in society.

Reasons why people practice charity in the contemporary era

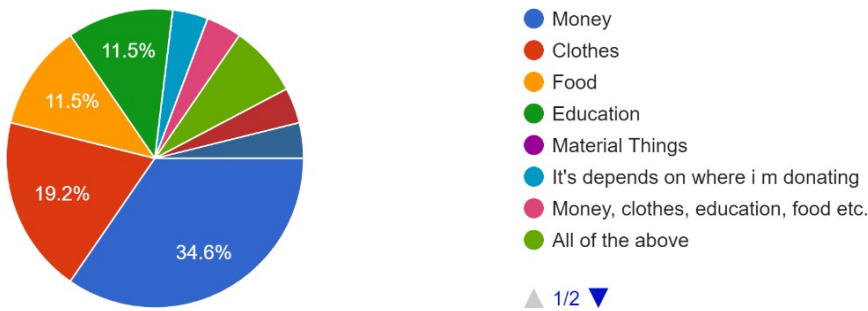
- 1) To help the needy
- 2) To attain peace of Mind
- 3) For status quo
- 4) Fear of mishappening
- 5) Out of compassion and empathy
- 6) For a mission/to bring change in society
- 7) For the religious purpose
- 8) For tax benefits

From the participants, we have collected data about the ways, occasions, and what they offer in charity to contribute to society.

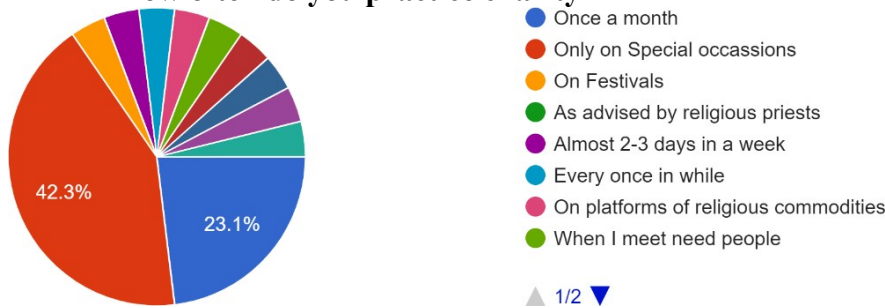
❖ Do you practice charity



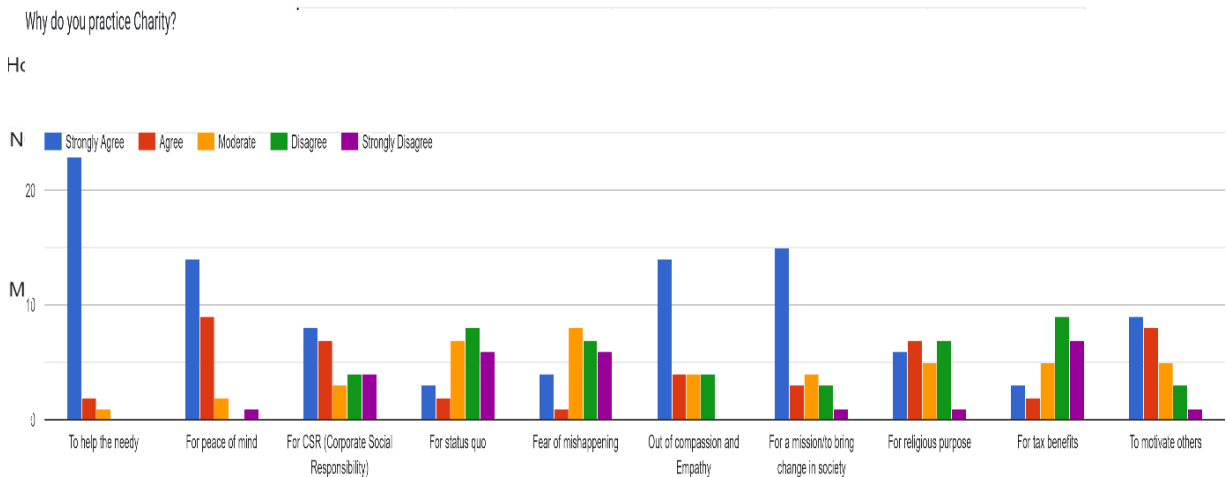
❖ **What type of Charity they do**



❖ **How often do you practice charity**



❖ **To whom do you practice charity**



The structure of the current economic system ensures that every effort is made to satiate all

of society's material needs. As we can see, our globe is advancing economically first at every moment, thus the success of such efforts can be seen everywhere. Spiritual virtues that are sorely absent in our contemporary culture, such as generosity, compassion, loving kindness, equanimity, morality, ethics, and nonviolence, are what people now need to seek for. There won't be any barriers to a dhamma's advancement alongside that of the material world if people love this dhamma/righteousness as highly as they do the material world. In "Buddhist Culture, The Cultured Buddhist," Robert Bogoda asserts that Buddhism shapes a person's mindset in such a way that one frequently questions how much and to what extent he is kind, considerate, honest, sober, truthful, attentive, and observant, diligent, energetic, cautious, patient, tolerant, and tactful. All of these quests assist a person in becoming a more cultured man. Massive property owners ought to be considerate of others and spread their gifts to good causes. In addition to those who give out of a feeling of charity, some do so to convert the recipients to their faith or creed. It is impossible to say that a charitable deed like this, which is carried out to convert others, is truly charitable. A calm and harmonious atmosphere can be created by putting the Buddhist idea of generosity into practice and sharing it with the rest of the world. One lessens attachment to an item when one chooses to give it to someone else. Giving routines can progressively lessen the mental component of craving. Giving that is accompanied by virtuous volition results in joyful future births that are conducive to coming across and engaging with the pure dhamma. It is crucial to practice giving to make the mind flexible enough to achieve Nibbana.

Characters identified in the life of Bodhisatta Vessantara as

- I. Vessantara as the Buddha
- II. Devadatta as Jūjaka and
- III. His wife Amittāpana as Chinchā
- IV. Sañjaya as Śuddhodana
- V. Phusati as Mahāmāyā
- VI. Rāhula as Jāli,
- VII. Uppalavanna as Kāñhajāina
- VIII. Rahulamata as Maddī

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