

CHAPTER 8 – LITTLE BY LITTLE

There was once a brahmin who often visited the Buddha and his monks near the city in which he lived. A brahmin is a person of the most respected or upper class of society in India, and brahmin men traditionally were priests, spiritual teachers, intellectuals, scholars, or advisors to a king.

Early one morning, the brahmin took a walk and went to a place where the monks usually stopped on their way from the place they were living to put on their upper robe before walking into the city. In the hottest weather when they were alone or only among other monks, they would wear just their lower robe with their upper robe folded over their shoulder. They would stop at this place to drape their upper robe to cover both shoulders. The brahmin liked to meet them there and walk with them into the city where they would receive their daily food from the residents.

When he arrived at the stopping place, the monks already were there, draping their upper robes over their shoulders. As the brahmin stood there, he noticed that this place was thickly overgrown with long grass. And he noticed that as one of the monks put on his robe, the edge of the robe dragged through the grass and became wet from the drops of dew which clung to the blades of grass in the early morning.



The brahmin considered that the wet robe would look untidy and feel uncomfortable. He felt that something should be done to prevent the monks' robes from getting wet in the long, wet grass. He thought, "The grass should be cleared away from this place."

So, on the following day, he brought his pickaxe to that place and cleared all the grass away. He then flattened the ground to make it as smooth and flat as a floor.

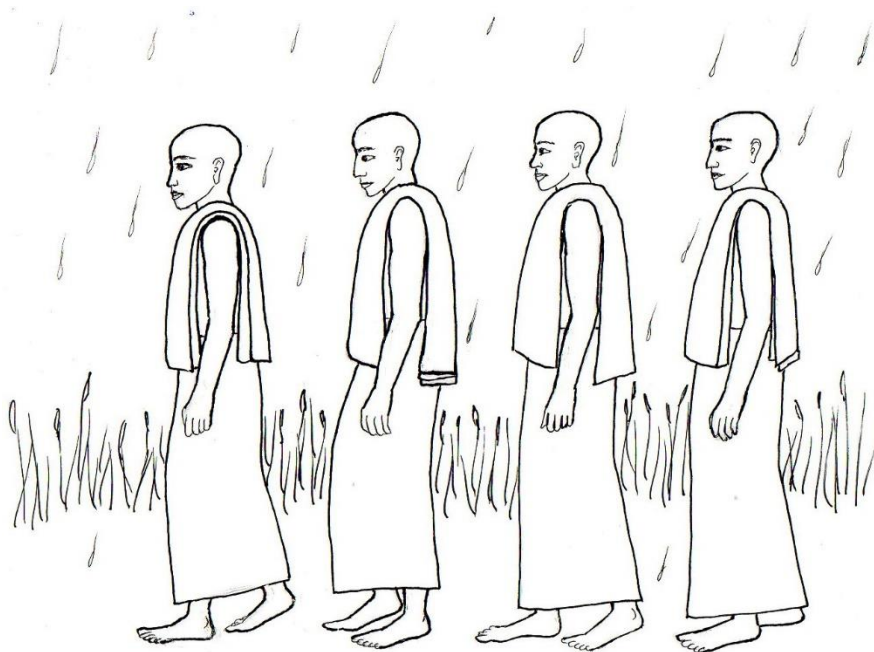
The next day, he went back to the stopping place. As the monks put on their upper robes, he noticed that the edge of the robe of one of the monks dropped to the ground and dragged in the dust.

The brahmin observed that the robe looked dusty and dirty. He felt that something should be done to prevent the monks' robes from getting dirty when touching the bare ground. He thought, "Sand should be sprinkled here."

So, he loaded a cart with sand, brought it to the monks' stopping place and spread the sand carefully and evenly over the bare ground.

Some days later, the heat was intense. When he went to meet the monks at their stopping place, he noticed that as the monks were putting on their robes, sweat was pouring from their bodies. The brahmin noticed that in the sun, the heat was almost unbearable, but in the shade, it was cooler. He felt that if all the monks had a place in the shade to stop and put on their upper robes, they would have protection from the hot sun and be more comfortable. He thought, "Here I ought to have a shelter built."

So, he bought wood and other building materials and organized some people to build a shelter at the stopping place. He was very pleased when he offered the shelter to the monks.



Another day, early in the morning, it was raining. As the brahmin watched the monks arriving at the stopping place, he noticed that their robes had gotten wet while walking in the rain. He considered that they wouldn't need to walk in the rain all the way back to the place they were living if a hall were built there. Then they could stay in the hall to eat, meditate and teach the Dharma. He thought, "Here I ought to have a hall built."

So, he bought a lot of wood and building materials and organized some people to build a large hall. When the hall was completed, he thought, "Now I will hold a festival in honor of the completion of the hall."

He invited the Buddha and his monks, the Sangha, to come to a festival at the hall. He along with others prepared food for all of them. When the Buddha and his large group of monks arrived, he guided them to their seats. There were so many monks that some were seated inside the hall and some were seated outside the hall. Then he and other volunteers offered the food to them. The brahmin felt very happy about the offerings he had made.

At the end of the meal, he took the Buddha's bowl as a signal to the Buddha to speak some words of appreciation for the meal.

The brahmin said to the Buddha, "Lord, as I stood in the place where the monks were putting on their robes and watched them, I saw that a monk's robe became damp from the wet grass, so I cleared away the grass and smoothed the soil for the monks. Then later I saw that a monk's robe dragged in the dust on the bare ground, so I sprinkled sand over the ground. Then on a very hot day, I saw that the monks were sweating, so I had a shelter built for them and then they would be protected from the hot sun. On another day, I saw the monks' robes getting wet from walking in the rain, so I had a hall built and then the monks wouldn't have to walk in the rain so much."

The Buddha listened to him and then said, "Brahmin, a wise man by doing good works, time after time, little by little, gradually removes the stains of his own unwholesome deeds."

The Buddha then explained with this stanza: "By gradual practice, little by little, from time to time, a wise person should remove his own impurities, as a smith removes the impurities from silver."

Questions:

1. What are men in India called who traditionally were priests, spiritual teachers, intellectuals, scholars, or advisors to a king? (brahmins).
2. What did the brahmin notice one the first morning in the story when he went to the monks' stopping place? (that a monk's robe got wet from the wet, long grass)
3. What did the brahmin think he should do when he saw the monk's robe had gotten wet from the grass? (remove the grass from the stopping place)
4. What else did the brahmin do to help the monks? (spread sand over the ground, had a shelter built, had a hall built, and offered food to the monks)
5. How did the brahmin feel after he had made the offerings to the monks? (very happy)
6. According to the Buddha, when we do good works, good deeds time after time, little by little, what do we gradually remove? (our impurities)

What the Buddha Said:

“Anupubbena medhāvi thoka thokaṃ khaṇe khaṇe, kammāro rajatass’ eva niddhame malam attano.”

“By gradual practice, little by little, from time to time, a wise person should remove his own impurities, as a smith removes the impurities from silver.”

Dhammapada 239

Dharma discussion – Awareness and Service:

The brahmin seemed like a servant to the monks, looking out for their comfort and even for their minor needs like keeping their robes dry and clean.

But, a brahmin is an upper class, educated, well-respected person—one who would not behave like a servant, so why would the brahmin behave like a servant to the monks?

Because he felt that it was a great honor, a great opportunity, and great good fortune to be able to serve the monks.

The Buddha’s monks were much more worthy of respect than he was, because they are deeply immersed in learning and practicing the Dharma to reach enlightenment, the highest goal.

Kings may have a noble purpose to govern many people, but that is not the highest goal in life.

And kings may be worthy of great respect from most people, but kings and brahmins bow to the Buddha and his monks and consider them to be more worthy of respect because of the monks’ greater wisdom and purity.

So, brahmins, wealthy people, and even kings were willing to serve and be very generous with their time, energy, food, and wealth to support and help the Buddha and his Sangha.

Why did they have such motivation to do this?

One reason is that it creates merit—good karma—ensuring their good future.

Another is that it made them feel happy knowing they were supporting the monks to teach more people the Dharma, attract more people to become monks and encourage more people to practice the Dharma, making the world more happy and peaceful.

And yet another reason is that it helped them develop good qualities and get rid of impurities.

Can you think of good qualities that we develop when we help others, such as monks, our parents and teachers?

When we give something, such as our time and energy, what is the feeling that we give with, or what is the good quality do we develop? Generosity.

What feeling or good quality might you have in your heart when you see someone who is stressed, uncomfortable, struggling, upset, in pain, or needing help? Compassion.

What feeling or good quality should you have in your heart toward those you are helping? Lovingkindness.

What quality, the opposite of arrogance, do we develop when we serve others? Humility.

What did the Buddha mean when he said that by doing good works, time after time, little by little, we gradually remove our impurities?

He meant that by doing good deeds, helping others, again and again, we get rid of our impurities, or negative qualities, such as ignorance, hatred, greed, jealousy, and arrogance. We can see for ourselves how this happens because any unpleasant feelings that we might have tend to decrease or disappear during the time we are helping someone. Even if we didn't feel like helping at first, what happens to our bad mood, boredom or anger, once we are very busy helping someone? We tend to forget it, so it goes away. And what happens to our laziness and selfishness? They disappear. When we help others, we focus on them—what they need, what they would like—so we forget our own unpleasant feelings and our self-centeredness. And we can enjoy the feeling of others being pleased with our help.

How can we find ways to help others?

We can learn from the brahmin in the story, how he started helping the monks. What brought his attention to the need to remove the grass, to put sand on the ground, and to build the shelter and the hall? He was noticing something. What did he notice? That the monks might be uncomfortable or might look untidy. If he wasn't noticing—carefully observing—whether others might be uncomfortable, need something, or want something, then he wouldn't have had the ideas of how to help. So, noticing—being aware—of whether others are uncomfortable, or might need or want something, gives us hints of how we can help.

How can we become more aware—how can we develop our awareness?

First, notice what gets in the way of our awareness—what habits make us unaware, distracted. Many of us have a habit of looking at our screens too much—our phone, tablet, TV, videogames. And some of us have a habit of only focusing on our friends and ignoring whatever else is going on around us. Second, we can practice mindfulness. Mindfulness makes us more and more aware of what is going on around us.

The brahmin in the story also shows us another method of finding ways to help others.

He started with something very simple—clearing away grass.

We too can start with helping our parents in simple ways. Can you think of any?

Carrying groceries, putting them away, setting the table before eating, clearing the table after eating, wiping the table, washing dishes, putting away clean laundry and dishes, sweeping the floor. What other activities can you do to help at home?

When we notice more ways to help more at home, then we develop a habit of helpfulness—and then we notice more and more ways to help wherever we are.

The brahmin started with the simple, perhaps boring service of clearing away grass and then he noticed more ways to help, and ended up with a very noble service of building a hall for the monks and organizing a festival for them, which he enjoyed.

Similarly, when we start helping in simple ways, like helping our parents, we develop a habit of helpfulness, and then we find all kinds of opportunities to be helpful.

Then we can find more interesting ways to volunteer, doing activities we enjoy very much.