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## Why Was Original Buddhism for Monks Only?<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Early Buddhism was a monastic religion: the Buddha's disciples were mendicant monks. However, there are many laypeople today who are practising Buddhists, meditating and following the eightfold Buddhist path towards *nirvāṇa*. This paper investigates how real this apparent inconsistency is. First, it is shown that the Buddha typically did not even speak about his own insights and doctrines to his lay followers; he only preached about general moral principles and gave wise advice, often with a noticeable conservative tinge. Since it is clear that Buddhism was not esoteric (i.e., it did not contain secrets revealed only to the initiated), this state of affairs can be explained only by supposing that the Buddha thought that true Buddhism was useful only for monks. It is never explicitly explained why it was so, but from several hints an answer may be tentatively reconstructed. Buddhist theory was only needed as a basis of Buddhist practice, and in the Buddha's age and environment, such practice was virtually impossible for laypersons living and toiling in a village, with a family, and taking care of children. One could not find the peace essential for meditation. Furthermore, such worldly life presupposes strong motivations and unavoidably generates desires, whereas Buddhist practice consists of the annihilation of precisely those desires.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, monks, laity, *upāsakas*, practice, inconsistency, incompatibility, meditation, desires

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Like most really great ideas, the Buddha's teaching is quite simple. Even including those elements that were not his inventions (e.g., the anthropology based on the five *skandhas*<sup>2</sup>) it could be completely described in ten pages. In contrast, Buddhist literature is immense. Even the most archaic collection of traditional texts (i.e., the Pali Canon) is vast, consisting of some fifty volumes. Yet it is not always easy to find in it straightforward answers to many fundamental questions related to the doctrine, and I believe that the title of this paper is one of those questions.

The question of why Buddhism was originally for monks only is more important in the modern world than it was ever before. There are many lay people today who are not necessarily religious in the traditional way (i.e., worshipping the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas), but rather they are practicing Buddhists. They follow the *ārya aṣṭāṅgika mārga* (the eightfold Buddhist path towards *nirvāṇa*), they meditate and they occasionally go on a retreat, yet they do not even plan ever to become monks. This may appear rather incongruent – do they accept the Buddha's wisdom or not? If not, why do they follow his path? If yes, how can they contradict his teaching at the very start, by practicing without first taking the monastic vows?

In fact, the statement implied in the question is far from self-evident, and its content has been underanalysed. It is common knowledge that early Buddhism was a monastic religion; the Buddha's disciples were *bhikṣus*, mendicant monks. The lay people we now would call Buddhists were only *upāsakas*, worshippers of the Buddha.<sup>3</sup> From several early accounts it seems that they were only admirers of the Buddha and his teaching without accepting the essential tenets of Buddhism. They did not accept Buddhism, because they were not given the chance: *the Buddha generally did not tell lay people what his discoveries were.*

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<sup>2</sup> Although this paper is based on the Pali sources, I use the Sanskrit terminology, for it is more familiar to many people. I tacitly change the terms (as also brahmana/brahman to brahmin) even in the translations quoted.

<sup>3</sup> Starting with Schopen (1985), the monastic–lay contrast is now considered to have been less sharp than previously supposed. See e.g. Bluck (2002). Bodhi (2001) collected some material suggesting that a few exceptional laymen even practised meditation.

### Teachings to Lay Persons

It is not the case that the Buddha did not teach lay people – he often did.<sup>4</sup> However, what he told them had very little to do with Buddhism. Let us see a few well-known examples. The very first instruction the Buddha gave after his enlightenment is so described in the *Vinaya-piṭaka*:

Then one of the brahmin caste – of the cursing kind – went to the Blessed One [...] and said: ‘What is a brahmin, Master Gotama? And what are the things that make a brahmin?’

Knowing the meaning of this, the Blessed One then uttered this exclamation:

The brahmin who is rid of evil things,  
Not cursing, undefiled and self-controlled,  
Master of Vedas, having completed his studies,  
Can rightly employ the word ‘brahman’,  
If he is proud of nothing in the world.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of minor uncertainties of interpretation, it is clear that the Buddha urges the Vedic priest to continue his profession in a more elevated spirit. He makes no effort at converting the brahmin and does not even hint at his own teachings.

This remains the general attitude of the Buddha towards laypersons<sup>6</sup> and their religion throughout his career, for we see it again at the very end of his life. In the village Pāṭali, he meets Sunīdha and Vassakāra, two high officials of the Magadhan court who are building the new capital, Pāṭaliputra, for the future empire. The Buddha’s advice to these brahmin ministers: worship local gods, for in exchange they will help you! *Do ut des*.

In the place where he builds his home, the one who is wise  
Should make an offering to the gods who may be there:  
When worshipped they worship him, when revered they revere him,  
And so they show concern for him, as a mother for her own son,  
And with the concern of the gods a man always sees good things.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> According to Kelly’s (2011: 40–45) very useful catalogue, 15 of the 32 suttas in the *Dīgha-Nikāya*, and 50 of the 152 suttas in the *Majjhima-Nikāya* are told to (or for) laypersons.

<sup>5</sup> *Vinaya-piṭaka*, *Mahā-khandhaka*, 2. Ajaṇṇa-kathā, 4. The translation is based on Ñāṇamoli (2001: 33), with these variations: – *Humhūka* is here ‘cursing’ (‘haughty haw-haw-ing’ and ‘haughty’ in Ñāṇamoli, while Horner [2007: 3–4] has ‘uttering the sound *hum*’). – *Vedanta-gūvusita-brahmacariyo* is ‘Master of Vedas, having completed his studies’ (Ñāṇamoli: ‘Perfect in knowledge, and living the brahma-life’; Horner: ‘Master of Vedas, who lives the Brahma-faring’). Further, *Dhammena so brahma-vādaṃ vadeyya* (‘Can rightly employ the word “brahman”’) could rather be translated as ‘He may utter the sacred speech according to the Eternal Law’.

<sup>6</sup> Of course a brahmin priest is a religious specialist; for our purposes, however, he is a layman as he lives in the world, in a family and in a home.

<sup>7</sup> *Dīgha-Nikāya*, 16. Mahā-parinibbāna-sutta, 154. Tr. Gethin (2008: 50).

One may be tempted to explain away these cases as accidental, cursory, inconsequential meetings, although this would not be very convincing: there must be a reason for why these instructions are remembered and put into verse. In the following examples, however, it is clear that the teachings given were considered by all parties very important – only they were not about Buddhism at all.

Before dining with the two ministers, the previous day the Buddha gave a lengthy talk to the farmers of Pāṭali village. His topic was the effects of virtue (and of its opposite):

For someone who is virtuous there are these five benefits for following virtue. What five? When someone is virtuous and follows virtue he accumulates great wealth on account of his lack of negligence. This is the first benefit. Again, when someone is virtuous and follows virtue his good reputation spreads around. This is the second benefit. Again, when someone is virtuous and follows virtue, whenever he enters an assembly, whether of nobles, brahmins, householders, or ascetics, he does so with confidence and not nervously. This is the third benefit. Again, when someone is virtuous and follows virtue, he dies untroubled. This is the fourth benefit. Again, when someone is virtuous and follows virtue, at the breaking up of the body, after death, he is reborn in a happy destiny, a heavenly world. This is the fifth benefit. These are the five benefits for following virtue for someone who is virtuous.<sup>8</sup>

These householders were the lay followers (*upāsaka*) of the Buddha, yet he spoke about nothing specifically Buddhist. He encouraged them to follow virtue not because this was the first step on the long way to enlightenment, but simply because it leads to profit, good reputation, confidence, peace of mind, and in the end to heavenly reward.

Similar in tone, but rather more specific and detailed is the instruction given to the Vajjis, a confederation of tribes living on the northern bank of the Ganges, opposite the expanding state of Magadha.

‘Ānanda, have you heard that the Vajjis meet together frequently and regularly?’

‘I have heard this, sir.’

‘Ānanda, as long as the Vajjis continue to meet together frequently and regularly, then they can be expected to prosper, not to decline. [...]

[And similarly,] as long as the Vajjis

– continue to sit down together in concord, to get up together in concord, and to conduct their business in concord,

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<sup>8</sup> *Dīgha-Nikāya*, 16. Mahā-parinibbāna-sutta, 150. Tr. Gethin (2008: 48), slightly modified: *sīla-sampadāya*, *sīla-sampanna* is here ‘for following virtue’, ‘follows virtue’ (Gethin: ‘of his success in conduct’, ‘succeeds in his conduct’) and *khattiya* is ‘noble’ (Gethin: ‘ruler’).

- continue not to make pronouncements that have not been agreed, not to revoke pronouncements that have been agreed, but to proceed in accordance with the ancient laws of the Vajjis that are agreed pronouncements,
  - continue to respect, honour, revere, and worship those among them who are their elders, and to listen to what they say,
  - continue not to abduct and force women and girls of good family into sexual relations,
  - continue to respect, honour, revere, and worship their ancestral shrines, both those that are central and those that are outlying, and not to neglect the appropriate offerings that were given and made in the past,
  - continue to provide holy men with proper care, protection, and guard, such that those who have not come to their realm are encouraged to come, and those that have come live easily,
- then they can be expected to prosper, not to decline.’

Then the Blessed One spoke to the brahmin Vassakāra, the chief minister of Magadha: ‘Once, brahmin, when I was staying in Vesālī at the Shrine of Sāranadā, I taught the Vajjis these seven principles for avoiding decline, and as long as these seven principles remain established among the Vajjis, as long as they abide by them, then they can be expected to prosper, not to decline.’<sup>9</sup>

According to the Buddha’s advice, the strength and safe survival of the tribe depends on unity, legal and religious conservatism and respect for the elders, for their women and for holy men. Instead of telling the Vajjis to embrace Buddhism and follow its precepts, he told them to keep their old laws and customs and to continue their own religious tradition.

As far as I can see, there is nothing ‘suspicious’ about these texts. There is nothing in them that would suggest later tampering, and there is no particular interest of any group of Buddhists that could have led to forging such teachings. They might well be what they appear to be: memories of how the Blessed One addressed lay persons. However, they contain nothing that is peculiarly Buddhist – any wise, honest, well-respected person with some authority could speak similarly.

There is an obviously later standardised formula that recurs throughout the canon more than 50 times. We quote it from the story of Upāli, the wealthy Jain householder turning Buddhist:

Then the Blessed One gave the householder Upāli progressive instruction, that is, talk on giving, talk on virtue, talk on the heavens; he explained the danger, degradation, and defilement in sensual pleasures and the blessing of renunciation.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Dīgha-Nikāya*, 16. Mahā-parinibbāna-sutta, 134–135, condensed. Tr. Gethin (2008: 39–41).

<sup>10</sup> *Majjhima-Nikāya*, 56. Upāli-sutta, 69. Tr. Ñāṇamoli–Bodhi (2009: 485).

We may recognise here the later preoccupation of the Buddhist church with persuading the laity to support it: the foremost virtue is *dāna*, giving, very often clearly emphasising that the proper gift is given to monks or the *Samgha*, the Buddhist Order. Here again the reward is heavenly happiness. However, with the negative evaluation of sensual pleasures and the praise of renunciation, some Buddhistic motifs are at least vaguely discernible. The reason for this seems to be that this sentence is regularly followed by a proper conversion, this time with the central doctrine:

When he knew that the householder Upāli's mind was ready, receptive, free from hindrances, elated, and confident, he expounded to him the teaching special to the Buddhas: suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path. Just as a clean cloth with all marks removed would take dye evenly, so too, while the householder Upāli sat there, the spotless immaculate vision of the Dharma arose in him: 'All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation'. Then the householder Upāli saw the Dharma, attained the Dharma, understood the Dharma, fathomed the Dharma; he crossed beyond doubt, did away with perplexity, gained intrepidity, and became independent of others in the Teacher's Dispensation.<sup>11</sup>

It appears that when the Buddha talked about the true Buddhist teaching to laypersons, it was normally with the intent of converting them into real Buddhists (i.e., monks), and he was usually successful. Upāli, however, remains a householder, although he considers himself something more than a simple worshipper (*upāsaka*): a *śrāvaka*, a disciple of the Buddha. However, in another story, Yasa's father, who is a rich merchant, becomes only an *upāsaka*.<sup>12</sup>

We may say that this much at least is true of the famous *upāya-kauśalya*, the 'skill in means'. This is a *Mahāyāna* device to explain the absence of their peculiar doctrines in the more orthodox *sūtras*. According to this, the Buddha was skilful enough to see that his first disciples were not brave or bright enough to receive the highest teaching, so he gave them *Hīnayāna* only. While this is clearly a late invention, we can see now that something very similar was in fact the Buddha's regular practice. He talked about the universality of suffering or about the nonexistence of a self mostly to his monks only, while to the laity he taught only some fairly general, benevolent moral rules.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Vinaya-piṭaka, *Mahā-khandhaka*, 7. Pabbajjā-kathā 26–28. Yasa was the first layperson to become a Buddhist monk. Samuels (1999: 233–234) quotes three further examples from the Nikāyas where the person receiving this teaching does not become a *bhikkhu*.

### Worldly Life is Unsuitable for Peace of Mind

Since the Buddhist doctrine was not a secret, it was not an esoteric knowledge offered only to the elect few,<sup>13</sup> the only conceivable explanation to this state of affairs is that the Buddha did think that true Buddhism was for monks only. Now I will try to suggest some answer to the original question: *why* was it for monks only?

There is precious little direct evidence concerning this question. In a frequently repeated formula, here quoted from the recurrent narrative of the future Buddha's way to enlightenment, there is an explicit hint at the answer. The Buddha tells the Jain Saccaka why he thought that he should leave home:

[...] before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisattva, I thought: 'Household life is crowded and dusty; life gone forth is wide open. It is not easy, while living in a home, to lead the holy life utterly perfect and pure as a polished shell. [...]'<sup>14</sup>

As is typical of the Buddha, he is not categorical. He does not say that it is impossible, only that 'it is not easy' to lead the holy life at home. The reason for this is only suggested. It is not that Buddhist practice is necessarily a full-time job, but rather that it needs solitude and purity, while 'household life is crowded and dusty'.

From a Buddhist perspective, this characterisation should be understood as largely subjective. As the relevant cause of suffering is not external-objective, but rather the subject's own mental attitude (i.e., 'thirst', excessive desire), so here also the source of the impurity is mostly within our own minds. The defilements are perfectly natural; they arise unavoidably as we grow up. Here is the Buddha's attempt at developmental psychology: a new-born baby has only biological needs.

When he grows up and his faculties mature, the child plays at such games as toy ploughs, tipcat, somersaults, toy windmills, toy measures, toy cars, and a toy bow and arrow.

When he grows up and his faculties mature [still further], the youth enjoys himself provided and endowed with the five cords of sensual pleasure [...] that are wished for, desired, agreeable and likeable, connected with sensual desire, and provocative of lust.

On seeing a form with the eye, he lusts after it if it is pleasing; he dislikes it if it is unpleasing. He abides with mindfulness of the body unestablished, with

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, when specifically asked about a point of his teaching, or challenged to a debate, the Buddha always spoke about the true Buddhist doctrine – also in front of laypersons.

<sup>14</sup> *Majjhima-Nikāya*, 36. Mahā-Saccaka-sutta, 371. Tr. Ñāṇamoli–Bodhi (2009: 335).

a limited mind, and he does not understand as it actually is the deliverance of mind and deliverance by wisdom wherein those evil unwholesome states cease without remainder. Engaged as he is in favouring ... he delights in that feeling, welcomes it, and remains holding to it. As he does so, delight arises in him. Now delight in feelings is clinging. [...] Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.<sup>15</sup>

Simply put, pleasant experiences lead to liking and then a wish to have them again (i.e., attachment). What is wrong with that? There is a famous, detailed and strongly worded account of all the troubles of the worldly life arising from clinging and desires in the Sutra on the Mass of Suffering.

And what, bhikṣus, is the danger in the case of sensual pleasures? Here, bhikṣus, on account of the craft by which a clansman makes a living – whether checking or accounting or calculating or farming or trading or husbandry or archery or the royal service, or whatever craft it may be – he has to face cold, he has to face heat, he is injured by contact with gadflies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and creeping things; he risks death by hunger and thirst.

*Now this is a danger in the case of sensual pleasures, a mass of suffering visible here and now, having sensual pleasures as its cause, sensual pleasures as its source, sensual pleasures as its basis, the cause being simply sensual pleasures. (= refr.)*

If no property comes to the clansman while he works and strives and makes an effort thus, he sorrows, grieves, and laments, he weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught, crying: ‘My work is in vain, my effort is fruitless!’ *refr.*

If property comes to the clansman while he works and strives and makes an effort thus, he experiences pain and grief in protecting it: ‘How shall neither kings nor thieves make off with my property, nor fire burn it, nor water sweep it away, nor hateful heirs make off with it?’ And as he guards and protects his property, kings or thieves make off with it, or fire burns it, or water sweeps it away, or hateful heirs make off with it. And he sorrows, grieves, and laments, he weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught, crying: ‘What I had I have no longer!’ *refr.*

Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause, sensual pleasures as the source, sensual pleasures as the basis, the cause being simply sensual pleasures, kings quarrel with kings, nobles with nobles, brahmins with brahmins, householders with householders; mother quarrels with son, son with mother, father with son, son with father; brother quarrels with brother, brother with sister, sister with brother, friend with friend. And here in their quarrels, brawls, and disputes they attack each other with fists, clods, sticks, or knives, whereby they incur death or deadly suffering. *refr.*

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<sup>15</sup> *Majjhima-Nikāya*, 38. Mahā-taṇhā-saṅkhaya-sutta, 408–409. Tr. Ñānamoli–Bodhi (2009: 358–359).



Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause...men take swords and shields and buckle on bows and quivers, and they charge into battle massed in double array with arrows and spears flying and swords flashing; and there they are wounded by arrows and spears, and their heads are cut off by swords, whereby they incur death or deadly suffering. *refi*:

Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause...men take swords and shields and buckle on bows and quivers, and they charge slippery bastions, with arrows and spears flying and swords flashing; and there they are wounded by arrows and spears and splashed with boiling liquids and crushed under heavy weights, and their heads are cut off by swords, whereby they incur death or deadly suffering. *refi*:

Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause...men break into houses, plunder wealth, commit burglary, ambush highways, seduce others' wives, and when they are caught, kings have many kinds of torture inflicted on them. The kings have them flogged with whips, beaten with canes, beaten with clubs; they have their hands cut off, their feet cut off, their hands and feet cut off; their ears cut off, their noses cut off, their ears and noses cut off; they have them subjected to the 'porridge pot,' to the 'polished-shell shave,' to the 'Rāhu's mouth,' to the 'fiery wreath,' to the 'flaming hand,' to the 'blades of grass,' to the 'bark dress,' to the 'antelope,' to the 'meat hooks,' to the 'coins,' to the 'lye pickling,' to the 'pivoting pin,' to the 'rolled-up palliasse'; and they have them splashed with boiling oil, and they have them thrown to be devoured by dogs, and they have them impaled alive on stakes, and they have their heads cut off with swords – whereby they incur death or deadly suffering. *refi*.<sup>16</sup>

In order to satisfy your desires you have to work, and that is unpleasant. Even if you can gain some wealth, possessions lead to new problems: different kinds of conflicts, often to sins and consequently punishment. I would suspect that this extremely negative characterisation of everyday life reflects the experiences of the times, the political instability connected to the growing of empires, the shocking loss of the previous autonomy of the tribes and the collapse of the old values.

However, the Buddha was very specific that even in the most favourable circumstances, even with due consideration for all the related issues, satisfying one's desires is an unsurmountable obstacle on the Path. One of his followers, Aritṭha, did not understand this. Here is a part of their conversation:

'As I understand the Dharma taught by the Blessed One, those things called obstructions by the Blessed One are not able to obstruct one who engages in them.'

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<sup>16</sup> *Majjhima-Nikāya*, 13. Mahā-dukkha-kkhandha-sutta, 167–169. Tr. Ñānamoli–Bodhi (2009: 180–182).

‘[...] have I not stated in many ways how obstructive things are obstructions, and how they are able to obstruct one who engages in them? I have stated that sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering and despair, and that the danger in them is still more. With the simile of the skeleton...with the simile of the piece of meat...with the simile of the grass torch [...] with the simile of the pit of coals...with the simile of the dream...with the simile of the borrowed goods [...] with the simile of fruits on a tree [...] with the simile of the butcher’s knife and block [...] with the simile of the sword stake...with the simile of the snake’s head, I have stated that sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering and despair, and that the danger in them is still more.’<sup>17</sup>

With another simile he pointed out that even the most arduous practice can bring no results if the practitioner still follows his desires and enjoys sensual pleasures.

‘Suppose there were a wet sappy piece of wood lying in water, and a man came with an upper fire-stick, thinking: “I shall light a fire, I shall produce heat”. What do you think, Aggivessana? Could the man light a fire and produce heat by taking the upper fire-stick and rubbing it against the wet sappy piece of wood lying in the water?’

‘No, Master Gotama. Why not? Because it is a wet sappy piece of wood, and it is lying in water. Eventually the man would reap only weariness and disappointment.’

‘So too, Aggivessana, as to those recluses and brahmins who still do not live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, and whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has not been fully abandoned and suppressed internally, even if those good recluses and brahmins feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment [...]’<sup>18</sup>

The impossibility of finding peace while still following worldly ways seems to stem from the way our minds work. While it is true that we act in accordance with what we think, it is equally true that we think in accordance with what we do: lustful practice fills the mind.

*Bhikkhus*, that one can engage in sensual pleasures without sensual desires, without perceptions of sensual desire, without thoughts of sensual desire – that is impossible.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, it is not the case that only those worldly motives lead to suffering that are more generally considered as problematic (e.g., sexual lust or the desire for wealth and power). A central point in the Buddha’s insight is that even

<sup>17</sup> *Majjhima-Nikāya*, 22. Alagaddūpama-sutta, 14–16. Tr. Ñāṇamoli–Bodhi (2009: 225–226).

<sup>18</sup> *Majjhima-Nikāya*, 36 Mahā-Saccaka-sutta, 374. Tr. Ñāṇamoli–Bodhi (2009: 335–336).

<sup>19</sup> *Majjhima-Nikāya*, 22. Alagaddūpama-sutta, 19. Tr. Ñāṇamoli–Bodhi (2009: 227).

the most respected and pure attachments, such as parental love, unavoidably produce grief, because everything in the world is perishable and temporary. Anything dear to us can cause pain with its loss. In fact, *only* those things that we consider important can cause real suffering.

‘[...] my dear and beloved only son has died. Since he died I have no more desire to work or to eat. I keep going to the charnel ground and crying: “My only son, where are you? My only son, where are you?”’

‘So it is, householder, so it is! Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are born from those who are dear, arise from those who are dear.’<sup>20</sup>

### The Monk’s Freedom and Superior Happiness

The only way to avoid the suffering caused by loss is not to be attached to anything or anybody. Everything and everybody in the world, all ‘bodies’ (*rūpa*: material form, visible appearance, beauty) should be regarded as ‘not mine’, since they are at most merely pleasant but essentially objective and neutral phenomena of the external world.

*Bhikṣus*, a well-taught noble disciple who has regard for noble ones and is skilled and disciplined in their Dharma, who has regard for true men and is skilled and disciplined in their Dharma, regards material form thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’ He regards feeling (/perception /formations /what is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, encountered, sought, mentally pondered) thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’ [...]

Therefore, *bhikṣus*, any kind of material form (/etc.) whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all material form should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’ [...] Seeing thus, *bhikṣus*, a well-taught noble disciple becomes disenchanted with material form (/etc.) [...] Being disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated.<sup>21</sup>

Obviously a person who does not consider anything as his own cannot be leading a worldly life. This attitude of complete detachment is far from automatic but at least possible in the case of a wandering monk, who has no family, no property, no caste, tribe or nation and no permanent residence. It is possible that there should be no one whom they love more than everybody else, no emotional

<sup>20</sup> *Majjhima-Nikāya*, 87. Piya-jātika-sutta, 353. Tr. Ñāṇamoli–Bodhi (2009: 718).

<sup>21</sup> *Majjhima-Nikāya*, 22. Alagaddūpama-sutta, 29, 43–44. Tr. Ñāṇamoli–Bodhi (2009: 229, 139–140).

attachment to anybody, anything or any place. The promised reward is complete freedom and complete bliss:

Just as a bird, wherever it goes, flies with its wings as its only burden, so too the *bhikṣu* becomes content with robes to protect his body and with almsfood to maintain his stomach, and wherever he goes, he sets out taking only these with him. Possessing this aggregate of noble virtue, he experiences within himself a bliss that is blameless.<sup>22</sup>

Complete freedom does seem to follow from non-attachment; happiness, however, does not. Nevertheless, according to the Buddha, it does follow from the essential tool of re-building our mind-set (i.e., meditation). He said that the bliss and serenity experienced in the meditation technique he discovered surpasses anything a man in the world can even imagine.

‘Venerable sir, I have long understood the Dharma taught by the Blessed One thus: “Greed is an imperfection that defiles the mind, hate is an imperfection that defiles the mind, delusion is an imperfection that defiles the mind.” Yet while I understand the Dharma taught by the Blessed One thus, at times states of greed, hate, and delusion invade my mind and remain. I have wondered, venerable sir, what state is still unabandoned by me internally, owing to which at times these states of greed, hate, and delusion invade my mind and remain.’

‘Mahānāma... It is because that state is unabandoned by you internally that you are living the home life and enjoying sensual pleasures.

Even though a noble disciple has seen clearly as it actually is with proper wisdom that sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering and despair, and that the danger in them is still more, as long as he still does not attain to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, he may still be attracted to sensual pleasures.’<sup>23</sup>

The ‘rapture’ referred to is that which is experienced in the first *dhyāna*, meditative state, and after that, especially with the fourth *dhyāna* comes what is ‘more peaceful than that’.

Interestingly, this passage does not only suggest that merely understanding Buddhist theory is not enough (it is but the first step on the noble eightfold path) and meditative practice is essential. It also says that in the unlikely case that a layperson should find internal peace, they would unavoidably leave home and would become a homeless beggar. Although the reason for this is not explicitly stated, it is clear why it is so. You are not a prisoner or a slave; so you stay in

<sup>22</sup> *Majjhima-Nikāya*, 38. Mahā-taṇhā-saṅkhaya-sutta, 411. Tr. Ñāṇamoli–Bodhi (2009: 274).

<sup>23</sup> *Majjhima-Nikāya*, 14. Cūḷa-dukkha-kkhandha-sutta, 175–177. Tr. Ñāṇamoli–Bodhi (2009: 186).

your home with all of its troubles because you want to. However, once you gain complete unattachment, there is nothing that would keep you in the home, and of course you would choose freedom.

### Conclusion

I think that now we have the complete picture. The Buddha's project was to find a way out of suffering. Since the root of suffering is desire, desires should be given up. However, it was practically impossible to live in the world the Buddha knew without desires, so one essential step on the way was to opt for the homeless life of the monk.

It seems quite logical why he did not preach real Buddhism to lay persons. Since he felt that they cannot follow the necessary practice, no decent goal could have been served by his telling householders, 'See how miserable your life is!' This would simply increase their suffering, and that was clearly contrary to the Buddha's fundamental aim. So he taught his central doctrine mostly to people who had already left home, and on rare occasions to those that were either on the brink of leaving it, or who were already so miserable that understanding the universality of suffering would help to allay their pain.<sup>24</sup>

Whether the Buddha's understanding of the uselessness of Buddhist doctrine and the impossibility of meaningful Buddhist practice for those living in the world is still valid today (in a peaceful and secure country, with enjoyable jobs, contraceptives and numerous harmless enjoyments), it is not for a scholarly paper of this kind to consider.

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<sup>24</sup> As in the popular story of Kisā Gotamī grieving over the death of her son (*Khuddaka-Nikāya*, *Apadāna-pāḷi* 2, Therī-apadāna-pāḷi, 3. Kuṇḍala-Kesī-vagga, 2. Kisā-Gotamī-therī-apadāna 73–83). Or in teachings given to dying persons: to Dīghāvu by the Buddha (*Samyutta-Nikāya*, *Mahā-Vagga*, 11. Sotāpatti-samyutta, 1. Veḷudvāra-vagga, 3. Dīghāvu-upāsaka-sutta) and to Anāthapiṇḍika by Sāriputta (*Majjhima-Nikāya*, 143. Anāthapiṇḍikōvāda-sutta).

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