The Dhammapada: The Sayings of the Buddha

Wednesday 7:15 – 8:45 PM                Tim Burkett and Guy Gibbon
(Tuesday morning option)                Minnesota Zen Meditation Center
September 29 - November 17              Fall 2010

Fall practice period explores the relevance of Buddha’s teaching to our practice as expressed in the *Dhammapada*, one of the most popular texts among Buddhists, and one of the great religious texts of the world. Organized into 26 themes including vigilance, awareness, the self, the wise, the immature, the path, and the mind, the Buddha’s teachings are presented in the form of short verses. Participants make a commitment to read and discuss the assigned material, to maintain a daily sitting practice, attend a minimum of two days of retreat, and attend at least one afternoon of work practice. In this regard, it is helpful to understand that practice periods continue a 2,500-year-old tradition started when Buddha and his students settled down for an extended period of practice during the monsoon season.

Reading material

There are dozens of English language translations of the *Dhammapada*, extending back to 1869. We have chosen Eknath Easwaran’s *The Dhammapada* (2007, $7.88 at Amazon), for the book includes an extensive introduction and chapter introductions that place individual verses into the context of the broader Buddhist (Theravada) canon. This extensive background material makes the book particularly user-friendly, for the *Dhammapada* must be read with a guide. For those of you who find it useful to compare different translations, we recommend (but do not require) Gil Fronsdal’s *The Dhammapada: A New Translation of the Buddhist Classic with Annotations* (2006, $8.00 Amazon) and Glenn Wallis’s *The Dhammapada: Verses on the Way* (2004, $9.56 Amazon).

How to read the *Dhammapada*

In reading the *Dhammapada*, we recommend that you keep two questions in mind. The first question concerns the purpose of the *Dhammapada*. In brief the verses in the book have served as a user’s guide to the Buddha’s most basic teachings since (according to tradition) the time of the Buddha. For our purpose, these teachings consist of the Four Noble Truths (that there is suffering in this world, that the root cause of suffering is desire or attachment to worldly things, that it is possible to overcome suffering, and that the way to overcome suffering is the Eightfold Path), the Eightfold Path (training in right belief, right conduct, and right mindfulness), and the Middle Way (“The middle course, lying between too much and too little, is the way of my Eightfold Path”). Given this context, a first question to ask when reading a verse is, “What basic teaching or concern of the Buddha is the verse pointing to or illuminating?” (Common themes here are “the nature of the self, the value of relationships, the importance of moment-to-moment awareness, the destructiveness of anger, the ambiguity of the world’s beauty, the inevitability of aging and physical decay, and the certainty of death” (Wallis, p. 92). Easwaran’s background introduction and chapter guides expand on and illuminate these themes;

Our second question concerns the relationship between the 423 verses in the *Dhammapada* and practice. Jack Kornfield gives us a clue in his foreword to Frondal’s book: “These teachings in the *Dhammapada* are as true now as the moment they were offered from the Buddha’s own lips. One page, one verse alone, has the power to change your life. Do not merely read these words but take them in slowly, savor them. Let them touch your heart’s deepest wisdom. Let your understanding grow. Seeing
what is true, put these words into practice.” In other words, the verses in the Dhammapada are to be put into practice, not just read. The second question to keep in mind, then, is “How can I put the meaning of a verse into practice?” For participants well-versed in Soto Zen teachings and practice, this question can also be read, “As a Soto Zen practitioner, how can I put the meaning of a verse into practice?” (We will explain what the difference is between these two versions of the question during the practice period.)

It should be stressed that in this practice period our goal is to understand and make use of the Buddha’s basic teaching (the so-called First Turning of the Wheel) as expressed through the Dhammapada. Our intent is to use this teaching to inspire and inform our practice during the seven weeks of fall practice period.

**What happens in our weekly group meetings?**

Except for the first and last class, each 1½-hour class session is divided into four parts: review of procedure for that session (5 minutes), reports on chosen verses by ‘buddies’ with discussion (65 minutes), concluding overview remarks by Tim or Guy (15 minutes), and selection of verses for the following week by buddy pairs (5 minutes). Ideally, a buddy pair will generally consist of one more experienced participant and one less experienced participant. At the end of the first session and for the following six weeks, each buddy pair will select several verses from the assigned reading to work on together during the week. The task of each pair is to answer the two questions discussed above, “What basic teaching or concern of the Buddha is the verse pointing to or illuminating?” and “How can I put the meaning of a verse into practice (from the perspective presented in the Dhammapada and/or from a Zen perspective)?” Each week one member of the buddy pair will present the conclusions of their discussion to the practice group. Discussion of those conclusions by the group at large are encouraged.

In the first class, the course instructors will provide some background to the book, set up buddy pairs, explain the format of the sessions, assign verses for the following week, and discuss what it means to participate in a practice period at MZMC. Everyone will fill out a commitment sheet and meet individually with head teacher, Tim Burkett. Also read one or two verses in the first two chapters of the Dhammapada for the first week, though we will not have time to discuss the verses (the point is to familiarize you with the style of presentation in the Dhammapada). Four chapters of the book are assigned for each of the following six weeks (starting with Chapters 3-6). In the eighth week, there will be a special sotoho ceremony for Guy Gibbon (to be explained during practice period).

**What amount of reading and practice do you have time for?**

1. Really not much at all – then work on your questions with your buddy (only use e-mail if you are pressed for time), give your presentation in class if it is your turn that week, listen to the other presentations, and honor your practice commitments per the attached commitment sheet, which will be reviewed the first evening.
2. A moderate amount – then the above plus read all of the chapter introductions, dip into the verses in each chapter, and read through Easwaran’s introduction.
3. A fair amount – then the above plus read all of the verses and notes for each chapter (in both books) and the short glossary in Easwaran.