

Commentary on the Dasadhamma Sutta

Dasadhamma Sutta (AN 10.48): Ten Things translated from the Pali
by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

"There are these ten things that a person gone-forth should reflect on often. Which ten?"

The first thing to note is that this is a practice, a reflection practice, and it is being recommended to those who have made a definite commitment. It is an appropriate practice within the context of that commitment. For the purposes of this talk I am assuming that Order Members have gone forth. There is an effective going forth which is the flipside of effective going for refuge. In this teaching the Buddha is pointing towards what we could call a Real going forth, which is the twin of Real going for refuge.

So, my rendering of the opening line is:

These are ten things that should be reflected on again and again by an Order Member.

1. 'I have become casteless': a person gone forth should often reflect on this.

Bhante in giving a talk in India on the Yogachara located the origins of caste in the *klishto- mano vijnana*, the defiled mind consciousness. Caste is a human creation and a wrong view. It's a human creation that is designed to be divisive. Of course, we, in the West, don't have caste, but that doesn't mean that the defiled mind consciousness is not busy expressing wrong views through the creation of divisive ideas and structures. For instance, the nation state is a human construct and is also often the source of divisiveness. How would it sound if the Buddha had said, 'stateless' or 'nationless' instead of 'casteless'.

One of the many ways in which we create and consolidate our sense of self is by identifying strongly with some particular section of humanity, who become 'us' as opposed to the rest who are 'them'. In this way we reinforce our delusions. Group identity also perpetuates divisions and hatreds and leads to conflict. When reflecting on one's group identity, it is important to remember that this is not about other people's identity with particular groups, which may be important or even essential for them – especially if they don't have the context of a spiritual commitment and spiritual community. This is a reflection for those who have gone forth. Envy, jealousy, pride, and a host of other little 'maras' are given fertile ground to breed in through our tendency to identify with a group or identify ourselves as a member of a group. So, this is about letting go of group identities, whether they are based on physical characteristics or in ideologies.

This first reflection about not having a caste is also about how we see and treat other people. The ideal is to be aware of each other person as a person, in their own right, regardless of our views about them or their status in society and even regardless of what group identity they are attached to. This is very difficult to achieve – if we are honest with ourselves, we will probably have to admit that more often than not we are relating to our interpretation of another person rather than to them in all their complexity. It is difficult to know another person, even those we assume we know well.

My rendering of this is:

I no longer hold to any group identity, such as nationality, gender, sexual orientation, family, skin colour, class, ethnic origin, the wealthy, the poor.

socialist, capitalist and so on. This should be reflected on again and again by an Order Member.

2. *"My life is dependent on others': a person gone forth should often reflect on this.*

The second point is about the fact that the lay people feed the Bhikkhus because they trust that by feeding those who are pure they will gain merit. So the Bhikkhu is being exhorted to be worthy of that trust and of his free meal. As Order Members we become an example of a committed spiritual practitioner, whether we like it or not. We become the 'Fourth Sight' for others. This means we have a certain responsibility thrust upon us. We are seen as representatives of Buddhism and of the Triratna Order and exemplars of going for refuge to the Three Jewels, because we have made a public statement of faith in and commitment to the Three Jewels and confidence in the Order as a context for giving expression to that faith and commitment. If we tell lies, swear, eat meat, drink alcohol, or if we give generously, speak kindly, respond with patience or with anger; whatever we do or say or write will reflect on the Order and on the Dharma.

Also we depend on each other. The Order is the context in which we practise, and we trust each other to carry on going for refuge, so that the Order continues to be a genuine spiritual community. Our spiritual practice, our skilfulness and our unskilfulness affects the integrity of the Order and its effectiveness as a context for others to practise in.

My rendering:

Others put their trust in me because I have been ordained. I should live and practise in such a way as to be worthy of their trust, generosity and receptivity. This

should be reflected on again and again by an Order Member.

3. "'My behaviour should be different [from that of householders]': a person gone forth should often reflect on this.

If we go forth from group identity and no longer identify ourselves in terms of roles and norms of the society around us, we will stand out as different. We will be noticeably more honest, friendly, helpful, and straightforward. Our views and behaviour will not necessarily be those of the majority. Our views and behaviour will not be quite so predictable, habitual and without subtlety as group views and behaviour. And we will be more open to changing what we think when there is reason to. The world and its views and concerns are powerfully impinging on us all the time and if we permit it, we will be receiving an immersive conditioning in views, attitudes, opinions, and behaviours that are not based on the Dharma. This can be quite insidious, and it requires a lot of awareness to notice this gradual process. The slow stain of the world. It's not just our behaviour that needs to be different from those who have not gone forth, it's also our communication and even our thinking.

I have vowed to live by the ten precepts. I should observe the precepts so that it is noticeable to others that my behaviour, communication and attitudes are ethical and governed by deeply held principles. This should be reflected on again and again by an Order Member.

4. *"Can I fault myself with regard to my virtue?": a person gone forth should often reflect on this.*

This could be seen as an example of the sometimes negative bias of the Pali Canon. We could add 'can I rejoice in myself with regard to my virtue?'. This fourth reflection is one that we may be tempted to give only a passing thought to, but it is actually quite demanding. It's about being ethically sensitive. To really become ethically sensitive we need to quieten, to become more tranquil and equanimous, so that we can look objectively at our own behaviour, thought patterns and communication and assess them candidly. For many of us this implies a reduction of input and being more discriminating about what we input into our minds, as Bhante mentions in his sets of fifteen points for Order Members. The speed at which we live our lives, the volume of information we take in and the kind of information we expose ourselves to all have an impact on our ethical sensitivity. This reflection is related to Hiri (hiri) but that word is not mentioned in the text. The word used here is *upavadatai*, which means blame and also something like 'to tell (secretly) against'. The idea is that you have your own internal spy who knows what's really going on and can tell you the truth if you are willing to listen. This is your conscience. Just by the way, I have noticed sometimes in discussions of the precepts that people like to talk about the ethics of others or of the Order, but shy away from scrutinising their own ethical life too closely. Sometimes this is because people don't know how to go further with ethical practice and sometimes it's avoidance. In this teaching the Buddha is asking us to take a good look at our own ethical lives. If we do, we may find that we are doing very well and

therefore have a sound foundation to build on and take further.

How ethically sensitive am I? Am I aware of my conscience being troubled in any way? Could I rejoice in my ethical sensitivity? This should be reflected on again and again by an Order Member.

5. "'Can my knowledgeable fellows in the holy life, on close examination, fault me with regard to my virtue?': a person gone forth should often reflect on this.

The fifth reflection is about the impression our behaviour would make on the rest of the sangha if they knew about it. It is referring to *apatrapya* (*ottapa*). This could give rise to further questions. Are there some things we keep secret from our friends in the Order? Do we have the opportunity to confide and confess to friends in the Order? Are we willing to be questioned and even admonished by our friends in the Order with regard to our observance of the precepts? Could we make greater use of the Order to help us to refine our ethical sensitivity and become more scrupulously skilful? Perhaps a paraphrase of something Bhante once said about living in communities could be applied here – being an Order Member is an opportunity, not an achievement. In other words, the Order is a context in which to practise and it is only meaningful when we use it in that way. It is worth noting that these last three reflections are all about ethical behaviour or skilfulness. This is a reminder that the ten precepts, which we vow to uphold at the time of our ordination are a very important practice if our effective going for refuge is going to blossom into Real going for refuge. The ten

precepts include ethics, meditation and wisdom and are therefore an essential and sufficient practice, which is why they are so central to our ordination.

Would other Order Members or my preceptor(s) be troubled by any of my actions, words or attitudes, if they were aware of them? Or would they rejoice in my actions, communication and attitudes? This should be reflected on again and again by an Order Member.

6. *"I will grow different, separate from all that is dear & appealing to me': a person gone forth should often reflect on this.*

This sixth reflection is about both impermanence and separation. Our attachments are so comfortable and intimate, so much part of who we are, that it is often difficult for us to notice them. The fundamental attachment is, of course, the attachment to self and we can become aware of that through its grosser manifestations, sometimes. But often we will simply rationalise our egocentricity with, what to us, is a completely reasonable conceptualisation of our delusions. Arising out of our self-attachment, is attachment to possessions, status, groups and views. This sixth reflection is encouraging us to let go of our mental and emotional clinging, because the reality is that everything will be snatched from us by impermanence. This goes to the heart of how we cause ourselves pain. It may be obvious that generosity and a sense of abundance is the natural expression of non-attachment.

I will be separated from all that I hold dear, either at death or before. Am I aware of my strong attachments

and how they hold me back? This should be reflected on again and again by an Order Member.

7. *"I am the owner of my actions (kamma), heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir': a person gone forth should often reflect on this.*

The seventh reflection reminds us that we can rely on the law of karma. All of our skilful actions, such as our meditation or devotion will definitely have consequences and we will experience the fruits of our efforts. If we want to experience contentment and happiness or become wise, we need to set up the conditions and undertake the actions that are appropriate, and the consequences will follow. In spite of knowing this in theory, I have always found myself surprised when I do actually experience the results of persistent practise. But it is what happens.

I experience the consequences of my own actions of thought, word and deed, good and bad. I should not depend on others for my contentment, and I should not blame others for my dissatisfaction. This should be reflected on again and again by an Order Member.

8. *"What am I becoming as the days & nights fly past?': a person gone forth should often reflect on this.*

"I wasted time and now doth time waste me", Richard II. This is perhaps one of the most challenging of these reflections. There are two aspects to the reflection. Firstly, there is the relentless passing of time, taking us

rapidly to the edge of a cliff where we cannot stop or pause, but are pushed onwards to plunge into ---what? – whatever arises in dependence on the conditions we are setting up as time races relentlessly on. Which of course brings us to the second part of the reflection – how are we spending our time? Or to put it another way, what conditions are we setting up? What are our minds engaged with predominantly? What is the usual tenor of our emotions? What do we do most of the time? How do we express ourselves verbally? What effect do we have on other people? Do we notice the effect on us of the internet, TV, radio, shopping, our conversations, our reading and so on? Are we content or restless? These reflections can lead us to further reflections on the nature of the spiritual path, the discipline needed, the motivations that drive us and how strong our commitment to the Three Jewels is ongoingly. These could be very challenging reflections and also very rewarding. They can take us into depth from the starting point of our very mundane activities.

The days and nights pass without pause. How do I spend my time? This should be reflected on again and again by an Order Member.

9. *"Do I delight in an empty dwelling?": a person gone forth should often reflect on this.*

This is about spending time in solitude. Whether we delight in solitude or not it is necessary to have some solitude if this practice of reflection is going to be effective. Based on my own experience, which is of course limited, I do not believe I can continuously go for refuge effectively unless I have time away on solitary retreat frequently, i.e., at least once a year.

Solitude is a very clear mirror, which shows us who we are in fine detail. This self-knowledge is the essential fuel of spiritual progress. Solitude is not simply a matter of being alone. Being alone comes easy to introverts. Solitude as a spiritual practice is about looking into our hearts and minds unflinchingly, seeing what is there, both the good and the bad, owning it as our own and learning about the next steps of our spiritual path. It is about reflecting on our life in the light of the Dharma and allowing the Dharma to permeate and shape our lives.

In solitude I can become deeply aware of myself: my habits, my conscience, and my spiritual progress. Do I spend sufficient time in solitude? This should be reflected on again and again by an Order Member.

10. "Have I attained a superior human attainment, a truly noble distinction of knowledge & vision, such that — when my fellows in the holy life question me in the last days of my life — I won't feel abashed?": a person gone forth should often reflect on this.

The tenth reflection imagines someone who is dying, with just a short time left to live and they are asked by others in the Sangha what all their years of practice have amounted to. What has it all meant? What is there to show for it? Have they evolved to a state of consciousness that is higher or more refined or more insightful than that of ordinary folk who have not taken up Dharma practice? Have they experienced some liberation from craving, ill-will and delusion? There are two aspects to this reflection: What has happened as a result of all the years of spiritual practice and am I aware

of what has happened? Just as at the beginning of the path there is Dukkha and there is the awareness of Dukkha, at every stage of the Path, there is the breaking of the bonds that bind us to the wheel and there is the knowledge of the destruction of those bonds. Awareness of the fruits of practice at every stage along the way is a source of inspiration for further practice. As Order Members we can gain encouragement from what we have established so far and build on what is positive and insightful in our lives, rather than worrying about what we have not yet achieved.

Am I aware of the fruits of my spiritual practice? Could I say that I have become more aware, kind, confident, wise, positive, compassionate, and free? This should be reflected on again and again by an Order Member.

"These are the ten things that a person gone-forth should reflect on often."

These are the ten things to be reflected on again and again by one who is effectively going for refuge to the Three Jewels.