

Success - The Key to It via Buddhism - Old and New

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In the world today, in the year 2005, now in the first century of the third millennium, **SUCCESS** is the word with the most dominant note. It is so everywhere, and in every sphere of life. More so in the Sri Lankan home today, as to who heads, leads and guides the life pattern in the home, whether wife or husband or even the daughter who just graduated from the university with honours in Business Administration. This concept of **being on the top of the ladder**, on the merit of some single area of achievement [often through examination paper work !] we believe is the biggest blunder in society today, whether in matters of religion or society, or even political wisdom.

Buddhism, and that with the Master of the Creed himself, more than twentyfive centuries ago, has given thought to this, to this whipping-up-concept of **success** and **achievement**. We are prepared today, on a closer scrutiny of the teachings of the Master, to believe and accept that the Buddha was good enough then and is so even now to be a Teacher of gods and men - ***sathā devamanussānaṃ***.

That is why we are told in a very convincing manner, convincing only to the saner and sober, that the Buddha was once asked through a divine intermediary - ***aññatarā devatā*** - as to what factors or qualities of life make success [***ākankhamānā sotthānaṃ***]. This is the genesis or beginning of the Maṅgala Sutta.

The word ***maṅgala*** basically means succeeding, thriving and doing well. It also means the absence of failure, defeat or disaster. There is nothing mysterious in or about the word. ***Sotthi*** or ***suvatthi*** is the best known Pali word denoting this. You would have heard it said many a time in the refrain ***Etena***

saccena suvatthi hotu or *Sotthi te hotu sabbadā* uttered to you by Paritta chanting monks. Buddhist texts have special treatises dealing with this aspect of success in life where the words *sotthi* and *maṅgala* are freely used to denote this idea.

The Mangala Sutta, with which I am sure you are so familiar, introduces itself to us saying that in the world of the humans and the divines, they were keen on sorting out as to what brings about success and prosperity among them: *Bahū devā manussā ca maṅgalāni acintayum*. I choose to translate the word *maṅgala* here as **success-generating-factors**. Do you really think the Buddha handed out holy water and holy thread to these inquiring wise people who are referred to here as *devā*. I am sure he never did.

How then did the Buddha respond to their inquiry? He listed out to them thirty-eight items of social and spiritual virtues. He insisted that their diligent accomplishment [*etādisāni katvāna*] rewards the doer with success everywhere *sabbattha-m-aparājitā*. Prosperity would be their invariable lot [*Sabbattha sotthiṃ gacchanti*]. That's the top rung of their social and spiritual accomplishment [*Taṃ tesam maṅgalam uttamaṃ*]. This is something which is very much in the hands of people themselves. People have to be wise and virtuous, energetic and enterprising. A mere regular sing song and a ceremonial thanks giving will not do it.

The Mangala Sutta is virtually a complete prescription towards the achievement of this goal. If all these items are put into perfect practice, one shall never suffer failure or frustration. One shall always be blessed and blissful. This sutta is a complete manual for building up a successful and stable life, prescribing as it were what to do, when to do and how to do. Both in terms of the individual and the society in which he lives. Then there would be no need whatsoever for any supplication to a power besides oneself. It provides for a many-tiered religio-cultural build-up by man for man.

Finally, it is also widely known that wherever one achieves success and attains a state of prosperity, there comes in its wake the unnerving need to protect it and prevent the possibility of its disintegration and disappearance. This immediately implies the need to safeguard oneself against dangers, dangers of some sort or another. It may be danger to one's life, i.e. personal danger or danger to one's possessions and property. One's possessions may range from wife and children to movable and immovable property like houses and estates, motor cars and refrigerators, radio and television sets etc. etc. How many of these can religion insure against damage and loss? Many religious institutions today claim to offer insurance to cover these, not literally of course. And there are people who believe in them. News papers advertise the availability of highly powerful talismans against the evil effects of planets and even terminal diseases. Infinitely chanted oils to ward off demonic influences and evils of sorcery and witchcraft and safeguard children of affluent families who are pursuing studies abroad, are wonderful sources of income to ingeniously organized groups of people.

In the context of such social set-ups where do lay people find the legitimate solace of religion without too much mishandling by unscrupulous intermediaries? As far as Buddhism goes, we feel it is Buddhism's capacity to build in man a sense of inner strength to withstand these challenges which assail him in moments of physical as well as psychic weaknesses. It is not that one buys these with one's religiousness. Religiousness must be a more vital ingredient in one's life. Not a mere decorative embroidery on the fringes. Even the sensitivity to dangers, both external and internal, both physical and mental, can and must be built with the awareness of one's religion.

For the sake of good health and freedom from disease, the preventive side of health care must be studied, learnt and practiced. A stitch in time saves nine, they say. For this, cautious abstinences from and even total rejections of certain areas of activity in life have to be insisted on. Do we ever realize the worth of the

injunctions relating to *kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī* and *surāmeraya ...veramaṇī* in terms of human good health? What a vast segment of human life, individually and collectively, would be made much happier by these injunctions and the abstinences they bring about? It is still worth the while to rethink of the meaning and significance of these ancient

injunctions. Having to reject these injunctions or turn our back on them **in terms of modern social standards** and **look out for laxity in sex life** or the use of alcohol and drugs, amounts to suicidal self-deception. Thus one has to intelligently discover that Buddhism's walls of self-protection are diligently built from within, with a very large measure of self-awareness, self-reliance and self-restraint.

All these items we have discussed so far, we believe, are among the major aspirations of everyone in the human community. The Buddhists are no exception to this. But it has to be clear to every Buddhist and every serious student of Buddhism, that these are to be sought and acquired in a meaningful manner. With its very strong and very pronounced **anthropocentric bias**, Buddhism does not hold that these are God-given gifts. The humans, with a series of self-correction and self-adjustment, are enabled to get these within their reach. The Mangala Sutta very comprehensively details out what one should consistently do in order to achieve success and prosperity, here and now. The earlier quoted statement *Etādisāni katvāna sabbattha-m-aparājitā sabbattha sotthim gacchanti*. [= Having done these diligently, one never loses anywhere. One achieves success everywhere,] must be accurately studied and lived up to. That is the real key to success.

The older ones in society, the parents, teachers and the members of the monk community [or Bhikkhu Sangha] must transmit this idea to the younger and the less initiated. They must be piloted through in life with this kind of guidance. Certainly not with mere eulogies of *deva-pūjā*. And not with *bāra-hāra* at every

street shrine, *kovila* and *devāla*. Our plea is 'Let not the Mangala Sutta be vulgarized by painting it over with a thick coating of **talismanic paint**. Let both those who chant it for others and those who have it chanted for themselves, live at least a part of it in their own lives. It is not the hundred-times chanting that really matters. Only the incorporation of its instructions in one's life. The so-called *japa kirīma* is for the *mantras*, no matter from where they come. It certainly is not for the *parittas*.