

# THE DHAMMAPADA



INTRODUCED &  
TRANSLATED BY

EKNATH  
EASWARAN

A CLASSIC OF INDIAN SPIRITUALITY



T H E D H A M M A P A D A



*As irrigators guide water to their fields,  
as archers aim arrows,  
as carpenters carve wood,  
the wise shape their lives. (145)*



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*Introduced &*

*Translated by*

E K N A T H

E A S W A R A N



Nilgiri Press

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## ii: *Table of Contents*

	<i>Foreword</i>	7
	<i>Introduction</i>	13
1	<i>Twin Verses</i>	101
2	<i>Vigilance</i>	109
3	<i>Mind</i>	111
4	<i>Flowers</i>	117
5	<i>The Immature</i>	119
6	<i>The Wise</i>	126
7	<i>The Saint</i>	129
8	<i>Thousands</i>	135
9	<i>Evil</i>	137
10	<i>Punishment</i>	143
11	<i>Age</i>	147

12 *Self* 153  
13 *The World* 159  
14 *The Awakened One* 163  
15 *Joy* 173  
16 *Pleasure* 179  
17 *Anger* 185  
18 *Impurity* 191  
19 *Established in Dharma* 197  
20 *The Path* 203  
21 *Varied Verses* 209  
22 *The Downward Course* 215  
23 *The Elephant* 221  
24 *Thirst* 227  
25 *The Bhikshu* 239  
26 *The Brahmin* 247  
  
*Glossary* 255  
*Notes* 259  
*Index* 271

||: *The Classics of Indian  
Spirituality*

**IMAGINE A VAST** hall in Anglo-Saxon England, not long after the passing of King Arthur. It is the dead of winter and a fierce snowstorm rages outside, but a great fire fills the space within the hall with warmth and light. Now and then, a sparrow darts in for refuge from the weather. It appears as if from nowhere, flits about joyfully in the light, and then disappears again, and where it comes from and where it goes next in that stormy darkness, we do not know.

Our lives are like that, suggests an old story in Bede's medieval history of England. We spend our days in the familiar world of our five senses, but what lies beyond that, if anything, we have no idea. Those sparrows are hints of something more outside – a vast world, perhaps, waiting to be explored. But most of us are happy to stay where we are. We may even be a bit afraid to venture into the unknown. What would be the point, we wonder. Why should we leave the world we know?

Yet there are always a few who are not content to spend their lives indoors. Simply knowing there is something un-



known beyond their reach makes them acutely restless. They have to see what lies outside – if only, as Mallory said of Everest, “because it’s there.”

This is true of adventurers of every kind, but especially of those who seek to explore not mountains or jungles but consciousness itself: whose real drive, we might say, is not so much to know the unknown as to know the knower. Such men and women can be found in every age and every culture. While the rest of us stay put, they quietly slip out to see what lies beyond.

Then, so far as we can tell, they disappear. We have no idea where they have gone; we can’t even imagine. But every now and then, like friends who have run off to some exotic land, they send back reports: breathless messages describing fantastic adventures, rambling letters about a world beyond ordinary experience, urgent telegrams begging us to come and see. “Look at this view! Isn’t it breathtaking? Wish you could see this. Wish you were here.”

The works in this set of translations – the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Dhammapada – are among the earliest and most universal of messages like these, sent to inform us that there is more to life than the everyday experience of our senses. The Upanishads are the oldest, so varied that we feel some unknown collectors must have tossed into a jumble all the photos, postcards, and letters from this world that they could find, without any regard for source or circumstance.

Thrown together like this, they form a kind of ecstatic slide show – snapshots of towering peaks of consciousness taken at various times by different observers and dispatched with just the barest kind of explanation. But those who have traveled those heights will recognize the views: “Oh, yes, that’s Everest from the northwest – must be late spring. And here we’re south, in the full snows of winter.”

The Dhammapada, too, is a collection – traditionally, sayings of the Buddha, one of the very greatest of these explorers of consciousness. In this case the messages have been sorted, but not by a scheme that makes sense to us today. Instead of being grouped by theme or topic, they are gathered according to some dominant characteristic like a symbol or metaphor – flowers, birds, a river, the sky – that makes them easy to commit to memory. If the Upanishads are like slides, the Dhammapada seems more like a field guide. This is lore picked up by someone who knows every step of the way through these strange lands. He can’t take us there, he explains, but he can show us the way: tell us what to look for, warn about missteps, advise us about detours, tell us what to avoid. Most important, he urges us that it is our destiny as human beings to make this journey ourselves. Everything else is secondary.

And the third of these classics, the Bhagavad Gita, gives us a map and guidebook. It gives a systematic overview of the territory, shows various approaches to the summit with their benefits and pitfalls, offers recommendations, tells us what to

pack and what to leave behind. More than either of the others, it gives the sense of a personal guide. It asks and answers the questions that you or I might ask – questions not about philosophy or mysticism, but about how to live effectively in a world of challenge and change. Of these three, it is the Gita that has been my own personal guidebook, just as it was Mahatma Gandhi's.

These three texts are very personal records of a landscape that is both real and universal. Their voices, passionately human, speak directly to you and me. They describe the topography of consciousness itself, which belongs as much to us today as to these largely anonymous seers thousands of years ago. If the landscape seems dark in the light of sense perception, they tell us, it has an illumination of its own, and once our eyes adjust we can see in what Western mystics call this “divine dark” and verify their descriptions for ourselves.

And this world, they insist, is where we belong. This wider field of consciousness is our native land. We are not cabin-dwellers, born to a life cramped and confined; we are meant to explore, to seek, to push the limits of our potential as human beings. The world of the senses is just a base camp: we are meant to be as much at home in consciousness as in the world of physical reality.

This is a message that thrills men and women in every age and culture. It is for such kindred spirits that these texts were originally composed, and it is for them in our own time that

I undertook these translations, in the conviction that they deserve an audience today as much as ever. If these books speak to even a handful of such readers, they will have served their purpose.



▮: *The Dhammapada*

**IF ALL OF** the New Testament had been lost, it has been said, and only the Sermon on the Mount had managed to survive these two thousand years of history, we would still have all that is necessary for following the teachings of Jesus the Christ. The body of Buddhist scripture is much more voluminous than the Bible, but I would not hesitate to make a similar claim: if everything else were lost, we would need nothing more than the Dhammapada to follow the way of the Buddha.

The Dhammapada has none of the stories, parables, and extended instruction that characterize the main Buddhist scriptures, the sutras. It is a collection of vivid, practical verses, gathered probably from direct disciples who wanted to preserve what they had heard from the Buddha himself. In the oral tradition of the sixth century before Christ, it must have been the equivalent of a handbook: a ready reference of the Buddha's teachings condensed in haunting poetry and arranged by theme – anger, greed, fear, happiness, thought.

Yet there is nothing piecemeal about this anthology. It is a single composition, harmonious and whole, which conveys the living presence of a teacher of genius.

*Dhammapada* means something like “the path of dharma” – of truth, of righteousness, of the central law that all of life is one. The Buddha did not leave a static structure of belief that we can affirm and be done with. His teaching is an ongoing path, a “way of perfection” which anyone can follow to the highest good. The *Dhammapada* is a map for this journey. We can start wherever we are, but as on any road, the scenery – our values, our aspirations, our understanding of life around us – changes as we make progress. These verses can be read and appreciated simply as wise philosophy; as such, they are part of the great literature of the world. But for those who would follow it to the end, the *Dhammapada* is a sure guide to nothing less than the highest goal life can offer: Self-realization.

#### THE BUDDHA’S WORLD

##### *The Legacy*

When Prince Siddhartha was born, in the middle of the sixth century B.C., Indian civilization was already ancient. Perhaps fifteen hundred years had passed since wandering Aryan tribes from Central Asia, entering the Indian subcontinent along the Indus River, had found a civilization already a thousand years old, in which what I would call the

defining features of the Hindu faith – the practice of meditation and the worship of God as Shiva and the Divine Mother – seem to have already been established.

The Aryans brought with them a social order presided over by priests or brahmins, the trustees of ancient hymns, rituals, and deities related to those of other lands, especially Persia, where Aryan tribes had spread. India seems to have dealt with this new religion as it has dealt with cultural imports ever since: it absorbed the new into the old. As a result, in even the earliest of the Indian scriptures – the Rig Veda, whose oldest hymns go back at least to 1500 B.C. – we find Aryan nature-gods integrated with the loftiest conceptions of mysticism. There is no inconsistency in this integration, only a very early recognition that life's supreme reality is described in many ways. "Truth is one," says a hymn of the Rig Veda; "the wise call it by different names."

From the beginning, then, two subcurrents ran through the broad river of Vedic faith. One, followed by the vast majority of people, is the social religion of the Vedas, with brahmins in charge of preserving the ancient scriptures and presiding over a complex set of rituals. But another tradition, at least as ancient, teaches that beyond ritual and the mediation of priests, it is possible through the practice of spiritual disciplines to realize directly the divine ground of life.

This ideal is sanctioned in Vedic religion as the human being's highest vocation. The opportunity is open to any-



one to wrap up social obligations and retire to an ashram in the Himalayas or in the forests flanking the Ganges to learn from an illumined teacher how to realize God. This choice is often misunderstood as world-weariness, and we know that even in those most ancient times India had ascetics who tortured their bodies in the desire to free their spirit. But this is not India's classical tradition, and the typical ashram of the times is a retreat where students would live with an illumined teacher as part of his family, leading a life of outward simplicity in order to concentrate on inner growth.

Sometimes graduates of these forest academies would go on to become teachers themselves. But it was at least as likely that they would return to society, disciplined in body and mind, to make a contribution to some secular field. Some, according to legend, became counselors of kings; one, Janaka, actually was a king. These men and women turned inward for the same reason that scientists and adventurers turn outward: not to run from life, but to master it. They went into the forests of the Ganges to find God as a poet turns to poetry or a musician to music, because they loved life so intensely that nothing would do but to grasp it at the heart. They yearned to *know*: to know what the human being is, what life is, what death means and whether it can be conquered.

Oral records of their discoveries began to be collected around 1000 B.C. or even earlier, in fragments called the Upanishads. Individualistic in their expression, yet com-

pletely universal, these ecstatic documents belong to no particular religion but to all mankind. They are not systematic philosophy; they are not philosophy at all. Each Upanishad contains the record of a *darshana*: literally something seen, a view not of the world of everyday experience but of the deep, still realms beneath the sense-world, accessible in deep meditation:

The eye cannot see it; mind cannot grasp it.  
The deathless Self has neither caste nor race,  
Neither eyes nor ears nor hands nor feet.  
Sages say this Self is infinite in the great  
And in the small, everlasting and changeless,  
The source of life.

As the web issues out of the spider  
And is withdrawn, as plants sprout from the earth,  
As hair grows from the body, even so,  
The sages say, this universe springs from  
The deathless Self, the source of life.

(*Mundaka* 1.1.6-7)

Born in freedom and stamped with the joy of Self-realization, these early testaments of the Vedic sages are clear antecedents of the Buddha's voice. They contain no trace of world-denial, no shadow of fear, no sense of diffidence about our place in an alien universe. Far from deprecating physical existence, they teach that Self-realization means health, vitality, long life, and a harmonious balance of inward and outward

activity. With a triumphant voice, they proclaim that human destiny lies ultimately in human hands for those who master the passions of the mind:

We are what our deep, driving desire is.  
As our deep, driving desire is, so is our will.  
As our will is, so is our deed.  
As our deed is, so is our destiny.  
(*Brihadaranyaka* IV.4.5)

And they insist on *knowing*, not the learning of facts but the direct experience of truth: the one reality underlying life's multiplicities. This is not an intellectual achievement. Knowledge means realization. To know the truth one must make it real, must live it out in thought, word, and action. From that, everything else of value follows:

As by knowing one piece of gold, dear one,  
We come to know all things made out of gold –  
That they differ only in name and form,  
While the stuff of which all are made is gold . . .  
So through that spiritual wisdom, dear one,  
We come to know that all of life is one.  
(*Chandogya* VI.1.5)

The method these sages followed in their pursuit of truth was called *brahmavidya*, the “supreme science,” a discipline in which attention is focused intensely on the contents of consciousness. In practice this means meditation. The modern mind balks at calling meditation scientific, but in these

sages' passion for truth, in their search for reality as something which is the same under all conditions and from all points of view, in their insistence on direct observation and systematic empirical method, we find the essence of the scientific spirit. It is not improper to call brahmavidya a series of experiments – on the mind, by the mind – with predictable, replicable results.

Yet, of course, the sages of the Upanishads took a different track from conventional science. They looked not at the world outside, but at human knowledge of the world outside. They sought invariants in the contents of consciousness and discarded everything impermanent as ultimately unreal, in the way that the sensations of a dream are seen to be unreal when one awakens. Their principle was *neti, neti atma*: “this is not the self; that is not the self.” They peeled away personality like an onion, layer by layer, and found nothing permanent in the mass of perceptions, thoughts, emotions, drives, and memories that we call “I.” Yet when everything individual was stripped away, an intense awareness remained: consciousness itself. The sages called this ultimate ground of personality *atman*, the Self.

The scientific temper of this method is a vital part of the Buddha's background. If, as Aldous Huxley observed, science is “the reduction of multiplicities to unities,” no civilization has been more scientific. From the Rig Veda on, India's scriptures are steeped in the conviction of an all-pervasive order

(*ritam*) in the whole of creation that is reflected in each part. In medieval Europe, it was the realization that there cannot be one set of natural laws governing earth and another set governing the heavens which led to the birth of classical physics. In a similar insight, Vedic India conceived of the natural world – not only physical phenomena but human action and thought – as uniformly governed by universal law.

This law is called *dharma* in Sanskrit, and the Buddha would make it the focus of his way of life. The word comes from *dhri*, which means to bear or to hold, and its root sense is the essence of a thing, the defining quality that “holds it together” as what it is. In its broadest application, *dharma* expresses the central law of life, that all things and events are part of an indivisible whole.

Probably no word is richer in connotations. In the sphere of human activity, *dharma* is behavior that is in harmony with this unity. Sometimes it is justice, righteousness, or fairness; sometimes simply duty, the obligations of religion or society. It also means being true to what is essential in the human being: nobility, honor, forgiveness, truthfulness, loyalty, compassion. An ancient saying declares that *ahimsa paramo dharma*: the essence of *dharma*, the highest law of life, is to do no harm to any living creature.

Like the Buddha, the sages of the Upanishads did not find the world capricious. Nothing in it happens by chance – not because events are predestined, but because everything is

connected by cause and effect. Thoughts are included in this view, for they both cause things to happen and are aroused by things that happen. What we think has consequences for the world around us, for it conditions how we act.

All these consequences – for others, for the world, and for ourselves – are our personal responsibility. Sooner or later, because of the unity of life, they will come back to us. Someone who is always angry, to take a simple example, is bound to provoke anger from others. More subtly, a man whose factory pollutes the environment will eventually have to breathe air and drink water which he has helped to poison.

These are illustrations of what Hinduism and Buddhism call the law of karma. *Karma* means something done, whether as cause or effect. Actions in harmony with dharma bring good karma and add to health and happiness. Selfish actions, at odds with the rest of life, bring unfavorable karma and pain.

In this view, no divine agency is needed to punish or reward us; we punish and reward ourselves. This was not regarded as a tenet of religion but as a law of nature, as universal as the law of gravity. No one has stated it more clearly than St. Paul: “As you sow, so shall you reap. With whatever measure you mete out to others, with the same measure it shall be meted out to you.”

For the Upanishadic sages, however, the books of karma could only be cleared within the natural world. Unpaid karmic debts and unfulfilled desires do not vanish when the physical body dies. They are forces which remain in the uni-

verse to quicken life again at the moment of conception when conditions are right for past karma to be fulfilled. We live and act, and everything we do goes into what we think at the present moment, so that at death the mind is the sum of everything we have done and everything we still desire to do. That sum of forces has karma to reap, and when the right context comes – the right parents, the right society, the right epoch – the bundle of energy that is the germ of personality is born again. We are not just limited physical creatures with a beginning in a particular year and an end after fourscore years and ten. We go back eons, and some of the contents of the deepest unconscious are the dark drives of an evolutionary heritage much older than the human race.

In this sense, the separate personality we identify ourselves with is something artificial. Einstein, speaking as a scientist, drew a similar conclusion in replying to a stranger who had asked for consolation on the death of his son:

A human being is part of the whole, called by us “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

The sages of the Upanishads would find this an entirely acceptable way of describing both their idea of personality and the goal of life: *moksha*, freedom from the delusion of separateness; *yoga*, complete integration of consciousness; *nirvana*, the extinction of the sense of a separate ego. This state is not the extinction of personality but its fulfillment, and it is not achieved after death but in the midst of life.

In its broad outlines, the worldview I have sketched must have been familiar to the vast majority in the Buddha's audience: the kings and princes we read about in the sutras, the merchants and craftsmen and courtesans, and of course the numberless villagers who, then as now, made up most of India. Karma and rebirth were not philosophy to them but living realities. Moral order was taken for granted, and all looked to dharma as a universal standard for behavior.

These ideas form the background of the Buddha's life and became the currency of his message. Like Jesus, he came to teach the truths of life not to a few but to all who would listen, and the words he chose to express those truths were ones that everyone knew.

### *The Buddha's Times*

The sixth century B.C. was a time of creative spiritual upheaval in most of the major civilizations of antiquity. Within a hundred years on either side we have Confu-



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