

Study Guide to MN 61

Ambalatthikārāhulovāda Sutta

Advice to Rāhula at Ambalatthikā

*Monks, a wise person, one of great wisdom, does not
intend harm to self,
intend harm to others,
or intend harm to both self and others.*

*Thinking in this way, such a one intends
benefit for self,
benefit for others,
benefit for both,
benefit for the whole world.*

Thus is one wise and of great wisdom.

Anguttara Nikaya II, p 179

In MN 61 the Buddha offers key teachings in simple terms. Some are so simple that they are easily skimmed over. Nevertheless, many of these teachings are the basis for much of the Buddha's approach to practice and have implications elaborated upon elsewhere.

MN 61 is one of the three Middle Length Discourses addressed to the Buddha's son Rahula. Tradition holds that Rahula was, at the time of the teaching, 7 years old. He had recently become a novice monk under his father. The tradition also claims that the teaching was given to Rahula after he had told a lie. The Buddha's repeated criticism of monks who were not ashamed of deliberately lying certainly reads as a pointed admonishment. A frequently quoted teaching from this reprimand is: "When one is not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie, there is no evil that one would not do" (Itivuttaka 25).

Having made his point, the Buddha then explained to Rahula how one can take responsibility for one's ethical behavior through reflecting on the likely or actual consequence of what one does, says or thinks. The basis for ethics is not rules or commandments but rather the evaluation of whether or not ones' behavior causes harm to someone else, to oneself or to both. Here, as elsewhere in the suttas, the Buddha encourages people to include both self and others in making ethical decisions. Rather than considering ethics only from the point of view of others or of oneself, the well-being of both is considered important. This is not a message of self-sacrificing altruism nor is it a teaching of self-preoccupation. It is a consideration of a higher order that takes into account what is best for all, including oneself.

In offering basic ethical teachings that are suitable for a seven year-old, the Buddha conveys the heart of his teachings on karma. It is based on the understanding that our actions with body, speech and mind are consequential. We have the ability to know and choose which actions to act on and which to refrain from. For attaining

happiness – for example, the happiness of liberation – we need to take responsibility for our behavior which itself creates the causes and conditions for our happiness.

While this may seem obvious, it differs significantly from other theories of action that were prevalent in ancient India. The three most common alternative theories, which the Buddha argued against, held that happiness or unhappiness is 1) invariably pre-determined, 2) controlled by the gods, or 3) indeterminate and random. One of the fundamental problems with these three points of view is that they each lead to inaction or uncertainty about what one can effectively do. The Buddha makes this explicit in the *Numerical Discourses*:

When one falls back on **what was done in the past as being essential** [e.g., decisive] there is no desire, no effort [at the thought], ‘This should be done. This shouldn’t be done.’ When one can’t pin down as a truth or reality what should or shouldn’t be done, one dwells bewildered and unprotected. ...

When one falls back on **a supreme being’s act of creation as being essential** there is no desire, no effort [at the thought], ‘This should be done. This shouldn’t be done.’ When one can’t pin down as a truth or reality what should or shouldn’t be done, one dwells bewildered and unprotected. ...

When one falls back on **lack of cause and lack of condition as being essential** there is no desire, no effort [at the thought], ‘This should be done. This shouldn’t be done.’ When one can’t pin down as a truth or reality what should or shouldn’t be done, one dwells bewildered and unprotected. ...

Anguttara Nikaya III.62
(Handful of Leaves Vol 3. p 25-26)

In admonishing Rahula, the Buddha uses a mirror as an analogy for reflecting on our actions. In Mahayana Buddhism the mirror is often used as an analogy for the mind. Sometimes the pure mirror-like nature of the mind is understood as our ‘true nature’ and our practice is to discover we are this. In MN 61 the mirror is not the mind but rather our actions and their consequences. We see ourselves through our actions. Rather than knowing ourselves by what we essentially **are**, here the instruction is to know ourselves through what we **do**. This is somewhat akin to those Zen teachings that assert that we discover who we are in what we do and that each new action creates a new ‘self.’ If you ask a Zen teacher who they are, they might offer you a cup of tea. In MN 61 the purpose of learning from our actions is not to discover who we are but rather to help us engage in those actions that lead to purification, *i.e.*, to “purify their bodily action, their verbal action, and their mental action” (MN 61.18).

Reflections for MN 61:

What follows are a series of important reflections. I encourage you to give careful consideration to these both on your own and in conversation with others.

Please reflect on your beliefs about the causes of your happiness. Do you feel you have a role or can be effective in shaping your happiness or unhappiness?

In admonishing Rahula, the Buddha stresses the importance of shame (or being ashamed). Do you think there are healthy forms of shame? If so, what role does or might shame have on the Path?

In teaching Rahula how to reflect on his behavior, the Buddha explains how he should act in relation to mistakes he has made. Please consider carefully that what the Buddha is suggesting are approaches to working with personal mistakes. What are right attitudes to working with ethical mistakes?

In section 11 the Buddha says when one has done something that has caused harm, one should confess to “the Teacher or to your wise companions in the holy life.” What are some of the reasons why confession might be important? What role does ‘revealing and laying oneself open’ to sangha or wise companions have in Buddhist practice? to your practice?

Modern versions of the three wrong views about action that were mentioned above might be that our happiness is 1) dependent on others, 2) independent of choice and personal will, and 3) accidental and unfairly distributed. Do you ever act as if any of these views may be true? Can you think of other modern views that the Buddha would consider as wrong view?