

# An Exposition of The Ratana Sutta

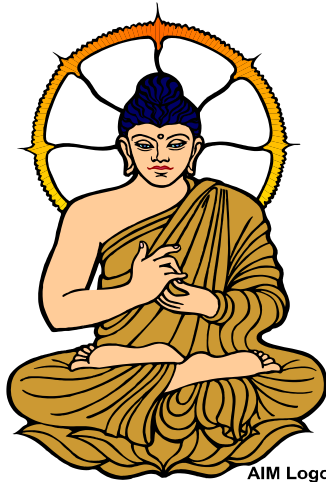


by  
Bhikkhu Pesala



# An Exposition of The Ratana Sutta

by  
Bhikkhu Pesala



AIM Logo

© Latest Edition July 2013

Bhikkhu Pesala

Association for Insight Meditation

You may print copies of this book for your own use. However, all rights are reserved. You may not use this PDF file on your own web site, nor for commercial distribution. If you post an extract on a forum, post a link to the appropriate page. Please do not link directly to the PDF file.

# Contents

An Exposition of the Ratana Sutta.....	1
The Pāli Text.....	1
The Discourse on Precious Jewels.....	3
Explanation of the Discourse.....	6
<b>Verse One:</b> May All Deities Listen Attentively.....	6
<b>Verse Two:</b> Request to Deities to be Heedful.....	6
<b>Verse Three:</b> The Buddha is Incomparable.....	6
<b>Verse Four:</b> Nibbāna is the Supreme Bliss.....	7
<b>Verse Five:</b> The Path Gives Instant Benefits.....	7
<b>Verse Six:</b> Noble Ones Are Worthy of Offerings.....	8
<b>Verse Seven:</b> Arahants Have No Mental Suffering.....	9
<b>Verse Eight:</b> Having Stable Morality.....	9
<b>Verse Nine:</b> Not Reborn an Eighth Time.....	10
<b>Verse Ten:</b> Free from Doubt.....	10
<b>Verse Eleven:</b> Scrupulous Integrity.....	10
<b>Verse Twelve:</b> Dhamma Leads to Arahantship.....	11
<b>Verse Thirteen:</b> The Buddha is Excellent.....	11
<b>Verse Fourteen:</b> The Arahants Are Not Reborn.....	12
<b>Verses 15–17:</b> Salutation to the Triple Gem.....	14
Buddha Images.....	16
The Value of the Triple Gem.....	17

# An Exposition of the Ratana Sutta

The Buddha taught this discourse to Venerable Ānanda when Vesālī was plagued by disease, famine, and evil spirits. Venerable Ānanda walked around inside the walls of Vesālī sprinkling holy water from the Buddha's almsbowl and reciting this Ratana Sutta.

## The Pāli Text

1. *Yānīdha bhūtāni samāgatāni,  
Bhummāni vā yāni antalikkhe,  
Sabbeva bhūtā sumanā bhavantu,  
Athopi sakkacca suṇantu bhāsitaṃ.*
2. *Tasmā hi bhūtā nisāmetha sabbe,  
Mettaṃ karotha mānusiya pajāya,  
Divā ca ratto ca haranti ye baliṃ,  
Tasmā hi ne rakkhatha appamattā.*
3. *Yaṃ kiñci vittaṃ idha vā huraṃ vā,  
Saggesu vā ya ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ,  
Na no samaṃ atthi Tathāgatena,  
Idampi Buddhē ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ,  
Etena saccena suvatthi hotu!*
4. *Khayaṃ virāgaṃ amataṃ paṇītaṃ,  
Yadajjhagā sakyamunī samāhito,  
Na tena dhammena samatthi kiñci,  
Idampi Dhamme ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ,  
Etena saccena suvatthi hotu!*
5. *Yaṃ Buddha seṭṭho parivaṇṇayī suciṃ,  
Samādhimānantarikaññamāhu,  
Samādhinā tena samo na vijjati,  
Idampi Dhamme ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ,  
Etena saccena suvatthi hotu!*
6. *Ye puggalā aṭṭha satam pasatthā,  
Cattāri etāni yugāni honti,  
Te dakkhiṇeyyā sugatassa sāvakā,  
Etesu dinnāni mahapphalāni,  
Idampi Saṅghe ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ,  
Etena saccena suvatthi hotu!*

7. *Ye suppayuttā manasā dalhena,  
Nikkāmino Gotama-sāsanamhi,  
Te pattipattā amataṃ vigayha,  
Laddhā mudhā nibbuti bhuñjamānā,  
Idampi Saṅghe ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ,  
Etena saccena suvatthi hotu!*
8. *Yathindakhīlo paṭhaviṃ sito siyā,  
Catubbhi vāthehi asampakampiyo,  
Tathūpamaṃ sappurisaṃ vadāmi,  
Yo ariya-saccāni avecca passati,  
Idampi Saṅghe ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ,  
Etena saccena suvatthi hotu!*
9. *Ye ariya-saccāni vibhāvayanti,  
Gambhīra-paññena sudesitāni,  
Kiñcāpi te honti bhusappamattā,  
Na te bhavaṃ aṭṭhamaṃ ādiyanti,  
Idampi Saṅghe ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ,  
Etena saccena suvatthi hotu!*
10. *Sahāva 'ssa dassana-sampadāya,  
Tayassu dhammā jahitā bhavanti,  
Sakkāya-diṭṭhi vicikicchitañca,  
Sīlabbataṃ vāpi yadatthi kiñci.  
Catūh' apāyehi ca vippamutto,  
Chaccābhiṭhānāni abhabbo kātum,  
Idampi Saṅghe ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ,  
Etena saccena suvatthi hotu!*
11. *Kiñca pi so kammaṃ karoti pāpakaṃ,  
Kāyena vācā uda cetasā vā,  
Abhabbo so tassa paṭicchādāya,  
Ababbatā diṭṭha-padassa vuttā,  
Idampi Saṅghe ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ,  
Etena saccena suvatthi hotu!*
12. *Vanappagumbe yathā phussitagge,  
Gimhāna-māse paṭhamasmiṃ gimhe,  
Tathūpamaṃ dhamma-varaṃ adesayī,  
Nibbāna-gāmiṃ paramaṃ hitāya,*

*Idampi Buddhē ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ,  
Etena saccena suvatthi hotu!*

13. *Varo varaññū varado varāharo,  
Anuttaro dhamma-vara adesayī,  
Idampi Buddhē ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ,  
Etena saccena suvatthi hotu!*
14. *Khīnaṃ purāṇaṃ navaṃ natthi sambhavaṃ,  
Viratta-cittā āyatike bhavasmiṃ,  
Te khīna-bījā aviruḷhicchandā,  
Nibbanti dhīrā yathāyaṃ padīpo,  
Idampi Saṅghe ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ,  
Etena saccena suvatthi hotu!*
15. *Yānīdha bhūtāni samāgatāni,  
Bhum māni vā yāni va antalikkhe,  
Tathāgataṃ deva-manussa-pūjitaṃ,  
Buddhaṃ namassāma suvatthi hotu!*
16. *Yānīdha bhūtāni samāgatāni,  
Bhum māni vā yāni va antalikkhe,  
Tathāgataṃ deva-manussa-pūjitaṃ,  
Dhammaṃ namassāma suvatthi hotu!*
17. *Yānīdha bhūtāni samāgatāni,  
Bhum māni vā yāni va antalikkhe,  
Tathāgataṃ deva-manussa-pūjitaṃ,  
Saṅghaṃ namassāma suvatthi hotu!*

## The Discourse on Precious Jewels

Ven. Hammalawa Saddhātissa

1. Whatever beings are assembled here, whether terrestrial or celestial, let all such beings be happy; and let them attentively listen to what is said.
2. Therefore, O beings, pay attention; diffuse loving-kindness towards mankind who day and night bring offerings to you. Protect them, therefore, with earnestness.

3. Whatever treasure there is here or in the other world, or whatever precious jewel is in the heavenly realms, yet there is none comparable with the Tathāgata. This precious jewel is in the Buddha. By this truth may there be peace!
4. The sage of the Sakyans of a tranquil mind, realised that cessation which is passionless, immortal and excellent. There is nothing equal to that state. This precious jewel is in the Dhamma. By this truth may there be peace!
5. The supreme Buddha praised pure meditation which gives instantaneous results. There is nothing equal to that meditation. This precious jewel is in the Dhamma. By this truth may there be peace!
6. Eight individuals are praised by the wise. They consist of four pairs. They are the disciples of the Buddha, worthy of offerings. Whatever is offered to them yields abundant fruit. This precious jewel is in the Saṅgha. By this truth may there be peace!
7. Those who are freed from desires are well established in the teaching of Gotama with stable minds. They have attained to that which should be attained, having plunged into immortal nibbāna. They enjoy the Peace obtained without price. This precious jewel is in the Saṅgha. By this truth may there be peace!
8. Just as a city gate-post fixed in the earth is not shaken by the winds from the four directions, even so, do I declare to be a good man he who thoroughly perceives the noble truths. This precious jewel is in the Saṅgha. By this truth may there be peace!
9. Those who clearly comprehend the noble truths well taught by him who is endowed with profound wisdom, however exceedingly heedless they may be, do not take birth for the eighth time. This precious jewel is in the Saṅgha. By this truth may there be peace!



10. Three conditions are forsaken on the acquisition of insight, namely, (i) self-view, (ii) doubt, and (iii) attachment to rites and ceremonies. He is completely free from the four lower realms and is incapable of committing the six heinous crimes. This precious jewel is in the Saṅgha. By this truth may there be peace!
11. Whatever evil deed he or she commits, either by body, speech, or mind, one who has seen the Path is incapable of concealing it. This precious jewel is in the Saṅgha. By this truth may there be peace!
12. As the tops of trees blossom during the first heat of the summer, so the sublime doctrine leading to nibbāna was taught for the highest goal. This precious jewel is in the Saṅgha. By this truth may there be peace!
13. The excellent one, the knower of the excellent, the giver of the excellent and bringer of excellence has expounded the excellent doctrine. This precious jewel is in the Buddha. By this truth may there be peace!
14. With the old extinct, nothing new to be reproduced, the mind detached from future birth — they have destroyed the seeds of existence. Their desires do not spring up again and those wise ones go out even as this lamp. This precious jewel is in the Saṅgha. By this truth may there be peace!
15. Whatever beings are assembled here, whether terrestrial or celestial, let us salute the Buddha. The Tathāgata is honoured by gods and men. May there be peace!
16. Whatever beings are assembled here, whether terrestrial or celestial, let us salute the Dhamma. The Tathāgata is honoured by gods and men. May there be peace!
17. Whatever beings are assembled here, whether terrestrial or celestial, let us salute the Saṅgha. The Tathāgata is honoured by gods and men. May there be peace!

## Explanation of the Discourse

### **Verse One: May All Deities Listen Attentively**

Deities are similar to wealthy people — they are so busy indulging in pleasures that most of them have little time for the ardent practice of the Dhamma. Venerable Moggallāna sometimes visited the celestial realms, to stir up the deities who were being heedless. The discourse therefore begins by requesting the deities to pay attention to the words of the Buddha.

Those deities who are good Buddhists will pay respectful attention when virtuous monks or lay Buddhists recite the holy stanzas. If one begins by practising loving-kindness, beings will be more inclined to pay attention.

### **Verse Two: Request to Deities to be Heedful**

The second verse asks all the deities to radiate loving-kindness towards mankind, and to protect them with earnestness. If people are virtuous, practise loving-kindness, and are respectful towards others, it is only natural that good people will reciprocate in a similar fashion. This verse therefore respectfully requests the deities to have love and compassion for human beings who daily make offerings to them.

In Buddhist countries, people often set up shrines to deities, and make offerings of food, flowers, or incense morning and evening. Modern town-dwelling folk may not understand the value of this practice, but if they read the Buddha's discourses they will realise how often the deities are mentioned. The deities used to visit the Buddha every night to discuss the Dhamma, but they do not like to approach most human beings, because ordinary human beings seem noisy, dirty, and gross to them. A shrine should be in a suitable place and kept clean. After bathing, pious Buddhists make offerings to the Buddha, practise meditation, and recite some discourses and verses. The deities will always protect pious people who honour the Buddha in this way.

### **Verse Three: The Buddha is Incomparable**

The third verse states that there is no deity or human being comparable to the Buddha. Whatever gives joy and delight is regarded as a precious treasure. Whatever is exceedingly rare and

beautiful is a jewel. In Burma, men refer to a good wife as “A genuine ruby.” A genuine ruby is very hard to find among so many other stones. It does not lose its lustre, even if dropped in the dirt; it is hard-wearing and does not get scratched easily; it is not easily destroyed even by fire. A good wife who puts up with an ill-tempered husband is a genuine ruby, and equally precious.

No-one has as much patience as the Buddha, who showed unlimited compassion, even when abused and mistreated, by teaching the sublime Dhamma that could save wicked people from hell. He tolerated evil-minded monks like Sunakkhatta and Devadatta, and did everything in his power to reform them.

### **Verse Four: Nibbāna is the Supreme Bliss**

This verse shows the special quality of nibbāna. Because it is not born, nibbāna is not subject to impermanence, decay, and death. Being unconditioned, it is far superior to any other kind of pleasure or bliss.

Everyone tries their best to find happiness in all kinds of sensual pleasures. One might think that a millionaire would have the greatest happiness possible, but if one were to wake up a millionaire who was sleeping soundly, so that he could enjoy pleasures again, he might be angry. For him at that moment, sleeping soundly is far superior to enjoying sensual pleasures. Sound sleep is the highest bliss that can be enjoyed by ordinary people. The Noble Ones can enjoy nibbāna, which is far superior. While enjoying nibbāna, they are not asleep — they are fully conscious, but the mind is perfectly at rest, like the mind of the sleeping millionaire who is not even dreaming.

The Sage of the Sakyans means the Buddha Gotama.

### **Verse Five: The Path Gives Instant Benefits**

Here, the special qualities of the Noble Eightfold Path are shown. One who strives hard in insight meditation must suffer physically and mentally to abandon the five hindrances and gain deep concentration. One may gain and lose concentration many times, and experience mental anguish due to the stubbornness of the untrained mind. However, on attaining the Path, all those struggles are in the past, and the ardent meditator immediately experiences the bliss of

Fruition. The first time a meditator attains nibbāna, the Path consciousness is only momentary, and only two or three moments of Fruition consciousness arise, so the experience is very brief and subtle. Some may not know what the experience was. Many may mistake some other refined delight experienced in meditation for the Path and its Fruition.

The point is that if one practises the Path, the benefits follow at once. Even before attaining nibbāna, the ardent meditator can enjoy many benefits such as non-remorse, joy, confidence, and contentment. One does not have to wait until after death for the results — they follow immediately in proportion to the effort that one puts into the practice. It is like picking wild fruits — one can eat as much as one wishes, and carry some home to eat later. If one knows where to find them, wild fruits are very delicious, and also completely free!

### **Verse Six: Noble Ones Are Worthy of Offerings**

There are four stages of the Path — Stream-winning, Once-returning, Non-returning, and Arahantship. These four paths also have four fruits. Thus there are four pairs of persons or eight individuals. The benefit of offerings made to individuals increases according to their spiritual development. It is noteworthy that the Discourse on the Analysis of Offerings<sup>1</sup> makes no distinction between monks and nuns, or between those gone forth and householders. The benefit of gifts to individuals depends solely on their moral purity and spiritual powers — confidence, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. If anyone is trying hard to meditate, which means they are striving to remove mental defilements, then they are worthy of offerings, and gifts to them bear abundant fruit. If they have attained special insights, then the fruits of offerings to them are special too.

To be worthy of offerings, a monk must be free from craving. If he is avaricious, donors will not find delight in giving to him. The training rules prohibit a monk from asking for anything from anyone unless invited to accept.

“He is not called a bhikkhu because he begs from others.  
By following the entire training he becomes a bhikkhu,  
and not by such begging.” (*Dhp v 266*)

---

<sup>1</sup> Dakkhiṇāvibhaṅga Sutta, Sutta 142, M.iii.253.

## **Verse Seven: Arahants Have No Mental Suffering**

This verse emphasises the special qualities of the Arahant. Being fully accomplished in morality, concentration, and wisdom the Arahant can enjoy the priceless bliss of nibbāna. Even Stream-winners and Once-returners have to suffer due to attachment to sensual pleasures. Non-returners have no lust or anger, but they still experience mental suffering such as restlessness. The suffering of Arahants is limited to physical hardship only. They feel cold and heat, hunger and thirst, bodily discomfort and physical pain, but they do not suffer mentally. In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta the Buddha said that his body is worn out and is kept going only with difficulty, and the only time his body is at ease is when he abides in the signless concentration of mind.

To avoid physical discomfort and to dwell at ease, the Arahants meditate whenever there is nothing else to be done, such as Saṅgha business, training pupils, or teaching Dhamma.

If they have no desire, why do the Arahants bother to eat? Why don't they just fast to death and get free from suffering as soon as possible? That would amount to aversion to the daily hardships of life such as searching for food, clothing, and shelter. The Arahants are free from aversion and laziness, so they do what they must to maintain life, but have no attachment to life at all.

## **Verse Eight: Having Stable Morality**

Here, the Stream-winner is compared to a city gate-post. A huge post of stone or hardwood sunk deeply into the ground would not topple or break even if struck by a heavily-laden bullock cart, so how could the wind move it? Though he or she still has something to learn, a Stream-winner has rightly understood the Four Noble Truths so has attained stability in the Buddha's teaching. The confidence of a Stream-winner in the Triple Gem never wavers, so they never look for other teachers. Their morality is stable too — a Stream-winner will never violate the precepts even on pain of death.

Because they still have some attachment to sensual pleasures, they may suffer sorrow and grief just like other people, but they will always be devout Buddhists.

### **Verse Nine: Not Reborn an Eighth Time**

This is a special quality of Stream-winners. One who has understood the truth taught by the one endowed with profound wisdom (the Buddha) can never be totally heedless again. At most, they will take rebirth seven more times before attaining Arahantship. They are so well established in the practice of the Path that they inevitably progress from day to day, and from life to life.

### **Verse Ten: Free from Doubt**

Furthermore, the Stream-winner has abandoned three things: self-view, doubt, and attachment to rites and ceremonies. Due to stable morality, a Stream-winner cannot be reborn in the four lower realms, and is incapable of committing any of the six heinous crimes.<sup>1</sup>

Self-view means egoism — the belief in the existence of a so-called person or being, a self or a soul, me or you. The insight of the first path totally eradicates this deluded way of perceiving the mental and physical processes, which are ever-changing, as a stable entity.

Doubt means scepticism about the Dhamma taught by the Buddha. Having realised nibbāna, the Stream-winner is fully convinced of the Buddha's enlightenment, the truth of the Dhamma, and the special virtues of the Noble Ones.

Attachment to rites and ceremonies means taking refuge in rituals instead of practising morality, concentration, and wisdom. Since a Stream-winner knows the right path of practice to get free from suffering, he or she will not look for any other kind of refuge from suffering. They will not bathe in 'holy' rivers or follow pseudo-religious practices that have nothing to do with purifying the mind, but they will be keen meditators.

The four states of misery are: animal rebirth, hungry ghosts, jealous gods, and hell. A Stream-winner is only reborn as a human being, deva, or brahma in any future existences until the attainment of *parinibbāna*.

### **Verse Eleven: Scrupulous Integrity**

Another special quality of a Stream-winner is transparent honesty and scrupulous integrity. Although they are not yet free from greed,

---

<sup>1</sup> Killing one's mother, killing one's father, killing an Arahant, drawing the blood of a Tathāgata, causing a schism in the Saṅgha, or abandoning the Buddha's teaching for another religion.

hatred, and delusion, Stream-winners are completely free from immorality. A monk who is a Stream-winner may sometimes fall into offences due to heedlessness, but when reminded that such an action is an offence against a training rule laid down by the Buddha, or realising this by himself on reflection, he does not conceal it, but makes amends in the prescribed way. One who wishes to attain Stream-winning should be equally scrupulous, seeing fear in the slightest fault.

**For example:** to eat after midday is an offence for a bhikkhu. Each mouthful taken is an offence to be confessed (*pācittiya*). If he thinks it is before midday when it is not, it is still an offence. If it is before midday, but he thinks it is after midday, or he is doubtful, it is an offence of wrong-doing (*dukkata*). A Stream-winner would not take a single morsel of food if he thought it was after midday, as to do so would be shameless. Due to unmindfulness he might do so, but afterwards he would confess his offence. Stream-winners have a keen desire to follow the training rules and readily confess their offences if they do fall into any — they are not disobedient.

### Verse Twelve: Dhamma Leads to Arahantship

Although a Stream-winner is free from the lower realms, he or she should not be complacent. Although the terrible suffering of rebirth in the lower realms has been destroyed, any kind of life is inextricably bound up with suffering. Even deities suffer from envy and unfulfilled desires. The Sakkapañha Sutta mentions a certain celestial minstrel (*gandhabba*) who composed songs in praise of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha, and thus gained permission for Sakka to question the Buddha. As a reward, Sakka allowed him to get the female deity he longed for. His song tells of his unrequited love, so even celestial beings suffer from much the same mental anguish as human beings do.

### Verse Thirteen: The Buddha is Excellent

This verse praises the excellence of the Buddha who has left us his excellent teaching out of compassion. Having struggled for aeons to gain the perfection of wisdom, he enables others to gain the same liberation from suffering much more easily and quickly than he did.

As an explorer finds an oasis in the desert, and afterwards with great compassion guides others along that hazardous path directly

to the oasis, so that they can enjoy the cool shade and life-giving water it provides, not content with enjoying the oasis by himself, the Buddha laid down signposts and helped anyone he met to find the excellent path to nibbāna.

### Verse Fourteen: The Arahants Are Not Reborn

All living beings are strongly attached to life, and take delight in it as long as happiness lasts. Even when terrible suffering comes, they think that existence is better than non-existence, and are very much afraid of death. They are always doing kamma by body, speech, and mind — mostly with a view to enjoying pleasure and happiness. Due to these volitional actions, rebirth is inevitable for them. Their wholesome kamma will lead to happiness, but their unwholesome kamma will lead to suffering.

As for the the Arahants and the Buddhas, they have utterly put an end to kamma that would lead to rebirth. Any kamma they did before gaining Arahantship will give its results in their final existence. They cling to nothing whatsoever, so they are not born again. Since they are not born again, they never again have to undergo the suffering of birth, aging, disease, and death.

When asked, “Does the Tathāgata exist after death” the Buddha replied, “The question does not apply.” When asked, “Does the Tathāgata not exist after death” the Buddha replied, “The question does not apply.”

If a candle flame goes out and we ask, “Where did it go — did it go to the East, or to the West? Did it go up into the sky, or down into the earth.” The answer is that the question does not apply. The flame did not go anywhere, it just went out.

Nibbāna is not like heaven, nor is it the annihilation of a being. It is the annihilation of the suffering caused by craving and ignorance. Belief in a continuous being or person, a self or a soul, is the reason why some people ask this question, which has no direct answer. If one rightly understands that the so-called self is just an illusion, then one won’t need to ask, “What happens to the Buddha and the Arahants after their *parinibbāna*?”

Various erroneous doctrines have arisen since the Buddha’s time. Some schools of Buddhism posit a special realm inhabited by Buddhas and Bodhisattas. Allegedly, they emanate physical forms



into this world of form to teach the Dhamma out of compassion for humanity. The Dalai Lama is said to be the emanation form of the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion — Chenrezi (Avalokateśvara). Such teachings are incompatible with the Buddha's teaching on not-self and rebirth.

These ideas are very similar to the ideas of God in other religions. They only go to prove how strong is the clinging of living beings to the idea of a self or a soul, a person or a being. However, this idea is just a delusion arising from misperceptions of permanence in what is impermanent. Such ideas are readily accepted by the ignorant who have neither scriptural learning nor deep experiences in meditation. Ignorance is perpetuated from one generation to the next. The cycle of ignorance and craving leading to suffering is the wheel of Dependent Origination, or *saṃsāra*, which, being circular, has no beginning and no end.

The cessation of suffering can be realised by eradicating ignorance and craving. The Stream-winners are sure to attain the end of suffering within a limited number of lives, because the root cause of self-view has been eradicated by them, and it is only a matter of time before any remaining craving and ignorance are rooted out.

### **The Unborn**

Thus have I heard: At one time the Blessed One was dwelling at Sāvattī in the Jeta Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. Then on one occasion the Blessed One taught, instructed, roused, and gladdened the monks with talk on *nibbāna*. Having made the minds of the monks pliable and ready to listen to the Dhamma, the Blessed One uttered the following solemn statement:

“There is, monks, the unborn, unbecome, uncreated, and unconditioned. If there were not the unborn, unbecome, uncreated, and unconditioned, it would not be possible to point out the born, become, created, and conditioned. Because, monks, there is the unborn, unbecome, unmade, and unconditioned, therefore the refuge from the born, become, created, and conditioned can be pointed out.”

*(Udāna)*

### Verses 15–17: Salutation to the Triple Gem

The Ratana Sutta concludes by inviting all beings present — terrestrial and celestial — to pay homage to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha. “The Saṅgha” means the Noble Ones (*ariyaśaṅgha*), whether monks, nuns, or lay disciples. The Commentary, says that these last three verses were recited by Sakka, the king of Tāvātimsa.

When Buddhists pay homage to bhikkhus, novices, or nuns, they always bow three times. When they do this, they should reflect: “I pay homage to the Omniscient Buddha, I pay homage to the excellent Dhamma, and I pay homage to the Noble Ones.” The bhikkhus, novices, or nuns may or may not be Noble Ones. They are often just ordinary monastics with no special attainments. However, because they are wearing the robes permitted by the Buddha, and are ordained according to the Vinaya rules laid down by the Buddha, they are representatives of the true Buddha, the true Dhamma, and the true Saṅgha. A devotee can therefore get great benefit if his or her mind is focused on the Triple Gem.

Even an old or badly damaged stone statue of the Buddha, or a photograph of an image should be treated with respect because it serves as a reminder of the Triple Gem, which is definitely worthy of homage. We pay homage to what it represents — the Triple Gem — not the image or statue, which is only stone, wood, or paper.

If non-Buddhists fail to show respect to an image of the Buddha, or even if they show disrespect by destroying it, Buddhists should not get upset. Any unwholesome kamma was done only by the perpetrators, and only they will get the results. The statue is just stone. What it represents to us is not damaged in the least by the actions of others. If Buddhists do get upset and angry on seeing such disrespect shown to the Triple Gem, they will make unwholesome kamma. It is because they have not rightly understood about the true Buddha, the true Dhamma, and the true Saṅgha, but are attached to a piece of stone, or at least to a misconception that they hold regarding the sacredness of that piece of stone. Similarly, lay Buddhists should dismiss unwholesome fault-finding thoughts regarding the imperfect morality of monks, novices, or nuns. Such unskillful thoughts would greatly diminish the effectiveness of paying homage. One should purify the mind while performing meritorious deeds. All beings are the owners of their kamma and will inherit its results. If the mind is

defiled and distracted at the time of offering gifts or paying homage, the kamma will be much less effective.

The recipients should also purify their minds at the time of accepting gifts or homage. The gifts and homage are offered to the Noble Saṅgha, not to any individual. If a monastic fails to reflect wisely, he or she is incurring a debt that will have to be paid off later. Having misused the offerings of the faithful, shameless monks will have to repay the debt for many lifetimes. When making use of the gifts offered by the faithful, monks and nuns should reflect wisely, and work tirelessly for the benefit of society by studying, preserving, teaching, explaining, and practising the Buddha's teaching.

It is largely due to the efforts of the Saṅgha that the Buddha's teachings have lasted as long as they have. Each generation of monks and nuns has a duty to revive, purify, and reinvigorate these ancient teachings so that they will remain pure for the benefit of future generations.

The Vinaya rules laid down by the Buddha have been rightly described as the vitality of the Buddha's dispensation (*Vinayo nāma sāsanaṃ āyu*).<sup>1</sup> As long as the Vinaya rules are respected by the Saṅgha, then the Buddha's teaching will remain pure. Without the monastic Saṅgha, there will be no Vinaya discipline, and the Buddha's teachings will soon disappear from the world.

Nowadays, many Buddhist parents are reluctant to let their sons join the Saṅgha. They want them to be doctors, but it is far more important to heal the mind than the body.

---

<sup>1</sup> Said by Mahākassapa at the beginning of the First Buddhist Council, in stating his reasons for asking Venerable Upāli to recite the Vinaya rules first, before going on to question Venerable Ānanda about the Dhamma. (*Vinayapiṭaka Aṭṭhakathā, Pārājikakandaṃ*).

## Buddha Images

“Images and pictures of the Buddha are just imitations of the physique of the Buddha.

“Images, pictures, and pagodas conceal the real Buddha; sermons conceal the real Dhamma; shameless monks conceal the real Saṅgha.

“Burmese sculptors make Buddha’s images in Burmese style; likewise Chinese and Indian sculptors carve in their own styles. The real intention is to make people think of the Buddha and adore him even more.



Brass Buddha  
*Burmese Style*

“The laity will respect the Buddha’s dispensation only if the monks respect it, and if all Buddhists respect it, non-Buddhists will respect it.

“Foreigners and modern young intellectuals will hold in contempt Buddhist monks who do not behave properly and live loosely. Devotees will also lose confidence in them. The monks will suffer from disgrace, and when they die they will go to hell.

“The female quail risks her life to guard her eggs. The mythical samari bird guards its feathers with its life. We Buddhist monks should maintain our moral precepts at the risk of our lives.

“You, monks! If you can teach, and if you are weak in morality, you will be like a tree that does not bear sweet fruit. If you are good at preaching but cannot properly keep the precepts, you will be like the flowers with no fragrance.

“Monks, if you receive alms from others and live the life of an average good person, you are not doing your duty satisfactorily.”

The Sayādaw<sup>1</sup> was responsible for training thousands of young monks in the Dhamma and Vinaya. He admonished them as above and maintained strict discipline in his monastery. Any monks guilty of wandering off into town without permission were sent away from his monastery.

My own preceptor, the late Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw, was also strict, and regularly admonished his disciples to behave well. During his life-time no bhikkhus were permitted to accept money in his meditation centre. Any monks who were found to be accepting money were sent away.

<sup>1</sup> Mahāgandhayon Sayādaw, a famous teacher of the Dhamma from Mandalay, Burma. Long after his demise, his study monastery is still a highly respected centre of learning.

## **The Value of the Triple Gem**

Gems are very precious due to their great rarity. In 2010, a rare pink diamond was sold at Sotheby's for £29 million. Anyone could live quite comfortably for the whole life with that much wealth.

If you understand about the value of the true Buddha, the true Dhamma, and the true Saṅgha, then you can live comfortably for the whole life. Wholesome volition (*kusala kamma*), arises in the mind, and no matter where you are the mind goes with you. Merely by thinking in a skilful way and reflecting on the above-mentioned special qualities of the Triple Gem, one has a way of accumulating boundless wholesome kamma.

Therefore, memorize this Ratana Sutta, and recite it regularly in Pāli while reflecting on the meaning as explained in this short booklet. Even if you are living in a place where there are no monks or nuns to invite for alms, you can keep this precious gem discourse in your heart to reflect on at any time.

No external robbers can steal this gem from you, but we wary of the internal robbers — the mental defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion. Only these internal robbers can steal your morality, serenity, and wisdom.

