

## Orientation

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The reason that the 'Blessings of Life' from the Buddha's Mangala Sutta have been chosen as subject matter for teaching again and again at Wat Phra Dhammakaya is that

1. they form a body of knowledge of Buddhism that is very easy to apply in everyday life.
2. They representation a graduation of practice from easy practices to advanced practices.
3. Each blessing of the thirty eight contains sufficient detail to allow it to be easily understood and practised by the student in his everyday life.

Some might ask why the Mangala Sutta and not other famous Buddhist teachings has been selected for such treatment, and in fact other Buddhist teachings have been tried. When other teachings were tried, the results were not very encouraging, because for each grouping of Dhamma tried, usually they are numerical Dhammas consisting of only a few headings. Especially the younger generation who have come to study such abbreviated forms of Dhamma have found that with their lack of Dhamma study background, they are unable to make much sense of the subject matter. Thus it has been found that studying the subject matter of the Mangala Sutta is advantageous because it finely divides Dhamma practice into thirty-eight easy-to-comprehend steps which summarize all of the practices contained in the forty-five volumes of the Buddhist Scriptures.

In the time of the Buddha, the depth of background of those studying the Dhamma was very varied. Some had studied so many Dhamma-related subjects that all they needed to hear from the Buddha were a few words of wisdom and they were able to understand and apply those teachings immediately or become enlightened. Some even attained arahantship by the end of the sermon. Such people must have had a very high level of Dhamma understanding. All such people needed from the Buddha were a few sentences of Dhamma. Examples of such people were the five first disciples to whom the Buddha taught the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta. After hearing just this sermon Kondañña was able to become a Sotapanna. The rest of the disciples, understood Dhamma according to their personal abilities. A few days later, the Buddha taught the Anattalakkhana Sutta, and all five of the disciples were able to become enlightened at the level of the arahant. For some people the Buddha didn't actually teach aloud, he just gave a sermon in his mind (such as the teaching to a Brahmin who had long been an adept meditator himself. The Brahmin has made the wish in his mind, that if the Buddha was really as gifted as everyone said he was, may the Buddha know his mind and teach him Dhamma by telepathy. The Buddha knew the wish of the Brahmin and taught him by telepathy, and at the end of the sermon, the Brahmin was able to reach an end of defilements and become an arahant.)

Some groups of people were not so well pre-disposed towards the Dhamma. For such people, the Buddha might have to teach on the same subject repeatedly for five or ten consecutive times before they were able to understand. For those who even less well pre-disposed, the Buddha had to admit them to the monastic order and teach them the same teaching daily for many years until they could understand what he was teaching them. Those who were even less fortunate, heard the teachings of the Buddha for the whole of their lives and could still make nothing of them. At best, the teachings became engrained in their minds, making it easier for them to learn the Dhamma in future lifetimes.

The Mangala Sutta has become very popular as a structure for teaching Buddhism to the public, from the experience of many Buddhist teaching monks and many lecturers on Buddhism, because it is subject matter that is neither too hard nor too difficult. The Great Abbot of Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen (Phramonkolthepmuni) used the Mangala Sutta as the blueprint of his teachings -- teaching one unit on each consecutive quarter-moon day until he came to the end of the thirty-eight. He would then start teaching from the beginning afresh. H.H. The Supreme Patriarch Chuan Uttayi (who died in a car accident), also used the Thirty-Eight Blessings as the blueprint of his lectures to monks, novices and the general public. He even made a textbook on the subject. The abbot of Wat Phrasri Mahathat, Bangkok H.E. Somdej Phramaha Viravongse, who was famous for his teachings, used the Mangala Sutta as the basis for all of his teachings. The Ven. Chaokuhn Upali (Cand Siricando) of Wat Bovornives/Wat Thepsirind (?) both taught and made a textbook of the Mangala Sutta. Even in the distant history of Thailand, in the reign of King Mengrai Maharaja there was a monk called Phra Sirimangalacharn who wrote a textbook of the Mangala Sutta in the Pali language which is still used to the present day. That the Mangala Sutta has contributed so much to the teaching of Buddhism down the ages only goes to show:

1. the Mangala Sutta is well suited to the average level of understanding of the general public. It moves gradually from the simple to the complex;
2. much of the basic Buddhist knowledge known by the public has its origins in the Mangala Sutta, although they might not realize it. Thus it is easy to build on this foundation of knowledge.

Thus the Mangala Sutta as it appears here is in the age-old tradition of respected Buddhist teaching monks and lecturers, but for sure, the ways in which commentaries are given upon the material will change with the times. Sometimes in the old textbooks will give illustrative examples of transport such as horses, buffalo carts or caravans. However, for modern people, sometimes we cannot imagine how people travelled in those days. These days, examples of travel by cars or aeroplanes or rockets allow people to imagine more easily. Thus in the treatment of the Mangala Sutta that is to follow, although the examples given may have changed, the subject matter is original.

Why do we have to study the Dhamma?

If you are still unable to answer the question for yourself about why you have to study the Dhamma, you may end up becoming too lazy to sustain your interest. The main reason is that as men we are curious.

Even if we have enough food to eat and the ability to earn our living properly, he is still unable to find fulfilment in life. If life was only about feeding yourself it would be very simple -- but I am sure it is the experience of all of you here that the challenges in life are more than this. If supporting yourself was all there is to life then certainly millionnaires would be the happiest people on earth. However millionnaires and multi-millionnaires with more than enough money to support themselves all their lives are still experiencing suffering. Even kings who rule over the whole country still experience suffering in life. This only goes to show that food in your belly and a university degree are still not enough to give us satisfaction in life. The reason is that wealth is only worldly wealth, and the knowledge is only worldly knowledge. It can only bring physical comfort. There is still nothing to nurture or nourish the mind. If the physical hunger is satisfied but the hunger of the mind is left unfed then there will be trouble to follow. If your stomach is empty, all you need to do is find some food to eat. However if your mind gets hungry, it is more complex. Supposing your mind is left hungry and develops craving (eg. for honour) then it is the start of a vicious circle. If your mind is hungry and develops hatred (another sign of a dissatisfied mind) then suffering will follow especially if you follow up your hatred with acts of vengeance. Also when you overestimate yourself, it makes the people around you suffer. Thus you can see that whenever the mind is left hungering for inner experience, you will suffer even if you have food on your plate at every meal. For all our qualifications and diplomas, none of them can guarantee us against hunger of the mind. None of them can guarantee us a happy life or guarantee that we will not end up in jail. By contrast, by studying Dhamma, we can guarantee that we will not be put in jail -- especially the Dhamma contained in the Mangala Sutta.

#### The Origin of the Mangala Sutta

The Mangala Sutta has quite a spectacular origin. The sermon originated in the human realm, but the Buddha did not preach to humans. The sermon was given to angels. Irrespective of period in history, men need to hear the Dhamma. Sometimes those expert in Dhamma can be found. Sometimes, those with the knowledge are not so expert. India of 2,500 BC was no different. People had a big interest to study the Dhamma. They would go and study in the various spiritual colleges of the day (such as those of Takkasila) or in the evening they would go and listen to the sermons of spiritual teachers on the night of the full moon. Sometimes such meetings would take place at the city gate. Sometimes, they would take place in the meeting halls of the palace. Sometimes they would hire those knowledgeable about religion or history to lecture. Sometimes they would simply give a soapbox for those who had particular points of view. Thus don't think that the people of old were ignorant or uneducated. They were always searching for new knowledge.

One day during one of the public lectures, someone raised the question, 'What is a blessing in our life?' The person has asked 'What sort of blessing could possibly allow us to live without obstacles'. Supposing one wanted wealth, honour, praise and happiness, how could one insure that one received just that? There was such a debate ensuing from this question, that everybody seemed to have a different point of view. To generalize, however, people divided themselves into three main groups:

1. The first group believed that the thing to make one's life a blessing was to see something that was 'pleasing'.
2. The second group believed that the thing to make one's life a blessing was to hear something that was 'pleasing'.
3. The third group believed that the thing to make one's life a blessing was the mood in the mind which arose whenever you saw or heard something that was 'pleasing'.

Each group disagreed with the others because it is obvious that an image pleasant to one person may not be pleasant to another. A sound pleasant to one person might not be pleasant to another. Something that creates a pleasant mood today might cause an unpleasant mood tomorrow. Thus there is nothing to make anything discussed a 'blessing' without doubt. The debate went on and on without any sign of coming to an end. It is just like people in the present day can still not agree as to what is truly a 'lucky charm'. What is lucky about putting sharks teeth on a necklace around your neck, for instance? Hearing the human world in debate, the angel world could not help but start to debate the same question for itself. The angels could not resolve the question and so the Brahma-world debated further without being able to come to a solution. Only the Brahmas of the Five Suddhavasa levels (those who had already attained enlightenment at the level of sotapanna, sagatagami or anagami in the time of a previous Buddha) who knew what a 'blessing' really was, but were unable to explain it fully to others. They advised that in another twelve years, a Buddha would arise in the world who could answer the question conclusively. The humans and angels and brahmas agreed to wait twelve years in order to find a solution to their question.

One night in the Jetavana Grove near to the town of Savatthi, all the angels and brahmas assembled together to take audience with the Buddha. A representative of the angels asked the question of the nature of blessings to the Buddha and the Buddha's reply is what is now known as the Mangala Sutta - thirty blessings:

#### THE THIRTY EIGHT BLESSINGS OF LIFE

Pali

Translation

Asevana ca balanam, banditananca sevana, puja ca pujaniyanam, etam mangalam uttamam

1. Not Associating with Fools
2. Associating with the Wise
3. Paying Respect to those worthy of respect

Patirupadesavaso ca, pubbe ca katapuññata, attasammapanidhi ca, etam mangalam uttamam

4. Amenable Location
5. Having done good deeds in the past
6. Setting yourself up properly in life

Bahusaccañ ca sippañ ca vinayo ca sukhitito, subhasita ca va vaca, etam mangalam uttamam

7. Being learned

8. Being artistic
9. Being self-disciplined
10. Being of pleasant speech

Mata pitutanam, puttadarassa sangaho, anakula ca kammanta, etam mangalam uttamam

11. Supporting one's parents
12. Cherishing husband/wife
13. Cherishing one's children
14. Not leaving one's work undone

Danañ ca, dhammacariya ca, ñatakanañ ca sangaho, anavajani kammani, etam mangalam uttamam

15. Generosity
16. Dhamma practice
17. Supporting one's extended family
18. Blameless action

Arati virati papa, majjapana ca saññamo, appamado ca dhammesu, etam mangalam uttamam

19. Avoidance of all evil
20. Abstainance from alcohol
21. Non-recklessness in things concerning the Dhamma

Garavo ca nivato ca santutthi ca kataññuta, kalena dhammasavanam, etam mangalam uttamam

22. Respectfulness
23. Humility
24. Contentment
25. Gratitude
26. Listening to the Dhamma regularly

Khanti ca sovacassata, samananañ ca dassanam, kalena dhammasaccacca, etam mangalam uttamam

27. Patience
28. Sensitivity to self-improvement
29. The sight of a true monk
30. Regular discussion of the Dhamma

Tapo ca brahmacariyañca, ariyasaccañca dassanam, nibbanasaccikiriya ca, etam mangalam uttamam

31. Austerity
32. Chastity
33. Seeing the Noble Truths
34. Attaining Nirvana

Phuttassa lokadhammehi, cittam yassa na kampati, sokam virajam khemam, etam mangalam uttamam ti.

35. Mind invulnerable to temptation
36. Sorrowlessness
37. Freedom from Mental Defilements
38. Highest Happiness

This is the content of the Mangala Sutta taught by the Buddha to the assembly of angels in the course of that night. The Buddha taught only the headings of the subject matter required and because they were

angels they could already understand -- because in order to have become angels, they had each had to have done quite a lot of good in their past (or at least fear and shame of evil). As a result of the sermon many of the assembly attained arahantship, anagami, sagatagami, sotapana, gotrabhu or at the very least the first path (pathama magga). As for the general public, like the reader of this orientation, just knowing about the thirty-eight blessings doesn't seem to have had any of the effects enjoyed by the assembly of angels on that night 2,500 years ago. The reason is that people of our day and age require more in the way of explanation. For this reason, we have furthered the explanation by giving particular themes to the ten groupings of blessings which comprise the thirty-eight:

Group I.  
Content

- Turning your back on Evil  
(Development of Discretion)
1. Not Associating with Fools
  2. Associating with the Wise
  3. Paying Respect to those worthy of respect

The first group which concerns the acquisition of discretion concerns our understanding of what is wrong and what is right. Even if someone is knowledgeable, if their discretion is faulty, their future is unlikely to be bright. On the contrary those with good discretion but who lack education, at least they will not become a burden on society. It is the basis of Right View (Samma Ditthi).

Group II.  
Content

- Turning Towards Goodness
4. Amenable Location
  5. Having done good deeds in the past
  6. Setting yourself up properly in life

The second group concerns consolidating upon the goodness of the discretion you already have through the environment which we inhabit, from the habits we have built up for ourselves in the past and by setting a proper aim in life. This is the style of the Buddha to teach virtue in a way that becomes successively more complex.

Group III.  
Content

- Making Yourself Useful  
(to society)
7. Being learned
  8. Being artistic
  9. Being self-disciplined
  10. Being of pleasant speech

The third group concerns how we can make a contribution to society by our skilfulness, so that we ourselves do not become a burden on society and can at the same time be a refuge to ourselves in terms of earning our living.

Group IV.  
Content

Harmony in the Family

11. Supporting one's parents
12. Cherishing husband/wife
13. Cherishing one's children
14. Not leaving one's work undone

The fourth group progresses from being able to help ourselves to being able to help other people as well. The first people who we must help are those to whom we are indebted: our parents. If we have new people to whom we owe our efforts towards virtue, such as our children and our spouse. Furthermore, we have to be able to divide our time so that neither our responsibilities in the work and in the home are neglected.

Group V.  
Content

Becoming a Pillar of Society

15. Generosity
16. Dhamma practice
17. Supporting one's extended family
18. Blameless action

The fifth group builds on the strength of virtue we have built up for ourselves in the home, expanding the scope of our virtue wider into society with generosity, public works. If you have already got your life under control, you will be able to do something for the benefit of society with some sort of efficiency. Those who try to help social works when they have not yet got their own personal attributes under control, may create disasters rather than helping others. Those who want to give advice to others but who are unable to speak politely, may make enemies instead of improving the quality of society. Thus never overlook the blessings that have gone before any level of training we have attained.

Definitions: The Word 'Mangala'

Some may still wonder about the meaning of the word 'mangala' that we hear again and again interchangeably with the word 'blessing'. Some people wear a piece of thread round their wrist and they think it is a blessing. In fact, the word 'mangala' translates as 'the cause of prosperity, progress and happiness'. If you want to know the definition, you could say that the progress towards happiness that a 'mangala' will bring is four-fold:

1. progress through acquired wealth (worldly treasure, heavenly treasure and the treasure of Nirvana).
2. progress through wisdom, which is the means by which obstacles in life and evil are abated.
3. progress through virtue through the channels of body, speech and mind, at the basic, intermediate and advanced levels
4. progress through the three benefits: benefit in this lifetime, the next lifetime and in the furthestmost of lifetimes.

Just not associating with fools will bring us wealth. Because our reputation is not spoiled, our wisdom is not spoiled and may be improved, virtue of all sorts will start to flow in our direction. This is the result even of following the first blessing. What more will be the benefit of practising all of the blessings in their entirety. The benefits will be not only to ourself, but to society and to the world as well.

You notice that wisdom is dedicated to destroying curses or obstacles on our lives. Concerning these obstacles or 'mara' (demons as they are sometimes personified), when we are born in human form there we are born along with obstacles in life. The technical term for such obstacles is Mara. When we are born these obstacles will follow us making trouble for us like shadows in our lives. Such obstacles will impede our progress and prosperity in life. If we don't know about them or if we can't keep up with their tricks then they will ruin our lives. There are five different types of obstacles:

1. Kilesamara: these are the impurities that remain in our mind. Just as our body is weakened by illness, in the same way, the mind is weakened by impurities, or as we see them expressed, bad habits. Just like illnesses in the world there are many different sorts of impurities in the mind. These illnesses of the mind can be broken down into three categories. The first is greed wanting to get something (wanting to cheat people or steal from them given the opportunity). The second is hatred wanting to destroy others when they do something you don't agree with (the thought of harming other people) which if left uncontrolled will become vengefulness. The third is delusion: seeing right things as wrong, wrong things as right -- like generosity which everyone knows is good and encourages people to help one another, but some people are overcome by delusion and therefore say that generosity is bad because it encourages people to be lazy. Such a person overcome by delusion might say 'Why keep the Precepts? They only make people gormless'. Anyone whose mind is full of such impurities will be completely overcome by Mara. Of course it is hard to deal with because it is in our own mind. What does it look like? If you stand in front of the mirror and see what you look like when your eyes light up with interest for something you'd like to get, that is what greed personified looks like. What does hatred look like? A red and dried up face with quivering lips -- you can see it for yourself by looking in the mirror any time you lose your temper. When you are deluded, it depends on what sort of delusion it means. We all have these impurities in our minds and if we aren't aware of them and careful of them then we will will suffer. Even if you are the president or a cabinet minister but your mind is overcome by greed, then you can end up in prison

because of corruption. If you were president or a cabinet minister who had an uncontrollable temper, then you would go ordering executions or dismissals and in the end they will start an uprising to bring you down. Supposing you are a president who is overcome by ignorance then you will get ensnared in gambling or alcoholism until there is nothing left of your reputation. These things are hidden away in our minds right from the time we are born. Some babies are peaceful. Others bawl and cry so much that there is no-one who wants to take care of them. These are babies suffering from the impurity of hatred since the time of birth. The babies that are greed-ridden from birth will just eat and eat and eat. Babies overcome by ignorance will just sleep the whole time as if they have no awareness of what is going on around them, or else are always being taken advantage of. We have them from birth -- but if we are prudent, they will not increase with the passing years.

2. Khandhamara: This concerns the health of our body and mind. Some people need to wear spectacles because our eyesight is not so good. Worse than this some people are born lame. Worse than that some babies are born as conjoined twins and the first thing the doctor has to do is to operate on them to take them apart. As we get older when you get up you groan, when you sit down you groan, because you have so many aches and pains. The older you get the worse it is. These are all what we mean by Khandhamara. When you're young you look pretty and fit, but as you get older you get long in the tooth and wrinkles line your face. Your eyes get deeper in their sockets. Your back is bent.

3. Abhisankaramara: These concern the evil things that we have done in the past. They catch up with us in the end. Supposing you used to slaughter animals, at the end of your life you will find that your body is in very bad condition. Supposing you used to be a gangster, but later you gave up and became an honest person again. In such a case, even though you have gone straight, there will still be no-one who will trust you. Supposing you used to be unfaithful to your wife. Later on you gave up all those extramarital affairs, but even so, there is no way you can get your reputation back again. Before you used to be an alcoholic. Later you gave up alcohol but it was too late because your liver was already hardened and your stomach ulcerated, you are vulnerable to diabetes and the vultures are following you! These are the abhisankara mara and you can't blame anyone but yourself because you did it all to yourself in the past.

Some things are shadows that catch up with us from the things that we did in previous lifetimes. A person who has drunk alcohol for many previous lifetimes may be born mentally handicapped this lifetime. This would also be referred to as an abhisankaramara. Others who drank alcohol in previous lifetimes but less so, may be born mute because they were drunk at the time they died. If you were an adulterer in a previous lifetime mixed up with other evils will be plagued with cancer in this lifetime. If in a previous lifetime, you overworked slaves or beasts of burden will be born stuck together like conjoined twins. As a child the author used to stick blades of grass up the behinds of scorpions and later in life ended up with all sorts of trouble with going to the toilet such as haemorrhoids. Smoking mice or crickets out of their burrows has made the author have a running nose continuously.

4. Devaputtamara: These are the shadows we can actually see personified. When mosquitos bite you as you meditate, that is the work of devaputtamara -- or when dogs come and howl and fight next to your window just when you want peace and quiet for your meditation -- or when a drunk is shouting and singing next door or the family next door is quarreling or the teenagers are revving up their motorbikes with the silencers off, just when you want to do your chanting. Or maybe it is someone in your workplace who is a constant troublemaker. Even we ourselves can sometimes be devaputtamara to ourselves when we make a fool of ourselves. These sort of mara are the sort we read about the Buddha having to overcome. If you meditate further you will be able to see them for yourself.

5. Majjumara: This means death. Death is waiting at every moment to carry us away. Of all the people in the audience, we have no idea who will be the first to go. Sometimes you see someone in the morning, by noon they have died. Sometimes you were only just talking to them at noon and by the afternoon they are dead. Sometimes you might even be eating a meal together and your friend may choke on a fishbone and die. Once there were a husband and wife asleep in a barge under a bridge, in the middle of a canal. A car came skidding across the bridge and went into the canal sinking the barge. Both the husband and wife died -- even though they were asleep in a boat, they were still run-over by a car. Usually we think that the old people will die before the young ones but sometimes people die young. Who would think that the parents would be the ones to organise the funeral for their children? Who would think that grandparents would have to bury their own grandchildren?

We are always on the brink of death at every moment. Who knows how much insecticide is on the vegetables we eat? Every mouthful is bringing us closer to our deaths. Thus try to learn as much meditation as you can before majjumara come to claim us.

So there are five sorts of shadows that seek to upset the good things that we do in our lives. Our goodness is a constant fight against these shadows. They will try to impede our goodness at every step. The ancients said that if we realized 100% of the working of these shadows we lose half the battle but if we know any less, we lose the whole battle. Only by meditation and the study of the 38 Blessings can you hope to keep up with the working of the shadow side.

This is the reason why we have to study the Dhamma.