

# The Blessings of Piṇḍapāta

*by*

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## The Bodhisatta's Piṇḍapāta

... Then our Lord,  
After the manner of a Rishi, hailed  
The rising orb, and went—ablutions made—  
Down by the winding path unto the town;  
And in the fashion of a Rishi passed  
From street to street, with begging-bowl in hand,  
Gathering the little pittance of his needs.  
Soon was it filled, for all the townsmen cried,  
“Take of our store, great sir!” and “Take of ours!”  
Marking his godlike face and eyes enwrapt;  
And mothers, when they saw our Lord go by,  
Would bid their children fall and kiss his feet,  
And lift his robe's hem to their brows, or run  
To fill his jar, and fetch him milk and cakes.

... But he  
Passed onward with the bowl and yellow robe,  
By mild speech paying all those gifts of hearts,  
Wending his way back to the solitudes  
To sit upon his hill with holy men,  
And hear and ask of wisdom and its roads.

## Lord Buddha's Piṇḍapāta

One slow approaching with his head close shorn,  
A yellow cloth over his shoulder cast,  
Girt as the hermits are, and in his hand  
An earthen bowl, shaped melonwise, the which  
Meekly at each hut-door he held aspace,  
Taking the granted dole with gentle thanks  
And all as gently passing where none gave.  
Two followed him wearing the yellow robe,  
But he who bore the bowl so lordly seemed,  
So reverend, and with such a passage moved,  
With so commanding presence filled the air.  
With such sweet eyes of holiness smote all,  
That, as they reached him alms the givers gazed  
Awestruck upon his face, and some bent down  
In worship, and some ran to fetch fresh gifts,  
Grieved to be poor; till slowly group by group,  
Children and men and women drew behind  
Into his steps, whispering with covered lips,  
"Who is he? who? when looked a Rishi thus?"

— Edwin Arnold  
*Light of Asia*

# The Blessings of Piṇḍapāta

**T**O THOSE who live in lands where the teachings of the Lord Buddha have been long established, the sight of a *bhikkhu* (Buddhist monk) collecting food in the early morning, is a common one. But where the teachings are newly arrived, or where bhikkhus are few, the practice of giving food to wandering monks is known only by pictures or from written accounts.

Neither of these convey the real atmosphere of this giving and receiving to those interested in the Buddhist Way and yet live in countries where the Teaching is not the traditional form of religion. Even many Buddhists living in Northern Buddhist lands may know little of *piṇḍapāta*;<sup>1</sup> for the practice of alms-gathering by bhikkhus there has, for various reasons which we need not here investigate, been largely discontinued and the traditional practice now survives only in Southeast Asian countries practicing the Theravāda Buddhist tradition.

Though this too is also a written account of alms-giving and collecting, it is written from experience and will try to be as evocative of the atmosphere of the piṇḍapāta as possible, and as many factors basic to the Buddhist way of life are involved in this simple act, it is hoped that this may prove useful to all those Buddhists who are far separated from these Buddhist lands.

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<sup>1</sup> The Pāli word *piṇḍapāta*, the common term for the Buddhist monk's alms-food gathering, means literally "the food-morsel's fall (into the alms-bowl)."

Apart from his three robes, a bhikkhu's most prized possession (and he only possesses eight articles<sup>2</sup>) is his bowl (*patta*). He takes great care of it so that it may last long: after eating he wipes it carefully each day to prevent it rusting; always places it on a stand so that it may not fall and break, and often carries it in a sling for it is heavy when full of food and may be dropped by tired hands. In doing so he carries out the Lord Buddha's injunction to practice mindfulness with regard to his bowl, which has been given him by others and without which he may not collect food.

Practice varies in different countries and *vihāras* (monasteries). In those *vihāras* where meditation is practiced, the bhikkhus will have arisen early, sitting long in the cool darkness of the meditation hall. In the country, the only sounds at this time are the night insects, a frog or two, perhaps a forward cockerel long anticipating the dawn and a cool wind in the trees which may blow away the ever-present mosquitoes. The quietness is at last ended as the assembled monks prostrate themselves before the Buddha-image and clear rings out the homage to the Enlightened One:

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa...*

Two hours or so will have passed in this way before it is light enough to gather food. Not only must the bhikkhus allow the laywomen (*upāsikā*) time to cook food, they also have to consider the dangers of going out while it is yet dark. In countries where snakes, centipedes and scorpions abound, it is wise to be able to see the ground under one's feet; and apart from this quite important fact there are the fears and suspicions of others to consider, as one rather amusing incident in the Majjhima Nikāya shows. A bhikkhu wandering for food while it was still dark frightened a woman who saw him in the lightning flash. She mistook him for a demon and cried out "How terrible! A demon is after me!" (see *Middle Length Sayings* No. 66).

Only after having robed himself correctly does the bhikkhu start upon his food-collecting round. Both shoulders are covered at this time for he is

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<sup>2</sup> They are: upper robe, under-garment, double robe, girdle, alms-bowl, razor, needle, water strainer.

going “among the houses” and must have his body covered from the neck down to below the knees. He may go with a senior bhikkhu, in which case the latter walks in front and he follows, or a novice (*sāmaṇera*) may accompany him. Sometimes the *sāmaṇera* or a young boy following him may collect the liquid curries, soups, etc., in a tiffin-carrier.

So he sets out, observing good conduct in many ways. Perhaps he remembers at this time the earnest injunction of the Dhammapada:

Better it were to swallow an iron-ball,  
Red-hot as the blaze of a fire,  
Than to eat the alms of the people  
As an immoral and uncontrolled man.

— Dhp 308<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes one sees bhikkhus following gently and quietly after an elder monk (*thera*), perhaps carrying his bowl for him until the first house is reached upon the alms-round. The monk does not speak unless spoken to, silence being considered a part of the training during one’s round. Nor does he look here and there but keeps his eyes directed to the ground in front of him; by so doing he practices restraint of the eye (*cakkhusaṃvara*). Lastly, whether his round takes ten minutes or two hours, he does not rush along as though anxious to get over it and be done with it. The well-trained bhikkhu walks with mindfulness, steadily and dignified. We remember that it was the noble bearing and restraint of the Venerable Assaji, one of Lord Buddha’s first five disciples, that deeply impressed Upatissa, who shortly after become known as Venerable Sāriputta, the foremost among Lord Buddha’s disciples.

If a bhikkhu practices meditation, he will strive to keep his subject of meditation in mind while both going and coming. It is related that the Venerable Sāriputta developed access concentration in the practice of loving-kindness (*mettā-bhāvanā*) while walking for food-collection. As some bhikkhus are engaged in the practice of the study (*gantha dhura*), rather than meditation, they frequently take with them a passage of the

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<sup>3</sup> All quotations from the Dhammapada in this essay are from the translation by Buddharakkhitta Thera (Maha Bodhi Society, Bangalore, India).

Pāli scriptures written upon a small piece of paper and mentally recite this while walking.



Now that we have gathered so many facts, what is the picture of piṇḍapāta like?

Imagine the time about six in the morning. It is still cool but there is light and bhikkhus are robing themselves in the *sālā* (a hall, often without walls). If they practice the Vinaya strictly they will go out wearing all three of their robes—none should be left behind in the monastery lest they be stolen, so precious are the robes. At this same time monastery boys are scuttling about on last-minute preparations which ought to have been made on the previous day. Then when everyone is ready, they set out, in groups or singly. If the *vihāra* is in the country the little groups of monks can be seen like an orange ripple spreading out into the green countryside. Soon they are lost to sight as the roads or paths they walk upon, wind between trees, over canals, through fields, around hills or among villages.

On the morning which we describe, the sun shines brightly, at first a great red ball glowing upon the horizon and all is easy going under foot. Other days may be different, with bhikkhus slithering over muddy tracks, sinking deeply into black ooze, and huddling beneath umbrellas which sometimes keep off some of the torrential monsoon rains.

As, however, this day is bright, let us follow one of these bhikkhus and observe what happens upon his round. He walks as we have described, holding his bowl in its sling drawn under one hem of his upper robe, and he walks until it is apparent to him that in some house which he is approaching a lay-supporter wishes to offer some food. How does he know this? Outside that house there may be a little table on which food (and perhaps little bunches of flowers, incense sticks, and candles as additional offerings), is placed; or lay-supporters may have invited him to take food from their house every day. Or perhaps he just perceives a lay-person coming out of the house with a tray of offerings. If he passes such a house, he may hear (in Thailand) the word “*nimon*” called out to invite him to stop there (Pāli: *nimantana* = invitation).



Any of these things we may observe. We shall also see that he stops to take food from *everyone* who wishes to give.<sup>4</sup> A very poor person may invite him and reverently spoon out some coarse rice into his bowl; at a wealthy house the donor may serve perhaps fifty or more monks every morning and they may receive the finest rice, curries in little plastic bags, and sweets wrapped in banana leaves—it is all the same to him and, without discriminating, it all goes into the same bowl.

Lord Buddha out of his great compassion once accepted from a poor child, who had nothing else to offer, a handful of dust; from this one learns that it is not *what* is given that is important but rather what is *at the heart of the giving*.

But before we proceed, we shall notice a very curious thing. Here is man, without any other means of getting food (for a good bhikkhu has no money), and yet he makes no effort to attract the attention of anyone. Quite the contrary, he undertakes to train himself in a rule of conduct which forbids him to make any sound while he goes “among the houses.” If he comes to a house where a regular supporter of his lives or where he knows that food is to be offered, he just stands in silence, neither does he cough, nor stamp his feet, and unlike many other ascetic orders originating in India, he may not carry any musical instrument or sing as they do, to attract attention. This is a time for cultivating patience (*khanti*), a virtue which in the Buddhist training finds its highest expression in the perfection of patience (*khanti-pāramitā*). He may wait for many minutes

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<sup>4</sup> This is a continuation of Lord Buddha’s practice; for he accepted out of compassion for the donors any food that they wished to give — apart from the flesh of forbidden animals (including man, dog, tiger, and bear) and apart from meat or fish which is seen, heard, or suspected to have been killed specially for monks. There is considerable disagreement between the different Buddhist traditions as to whether the Buddha was or was not a vegetarian and whether bhikkhus were to be so or not, but what is evident is that they were allowed to *accept* any sorts of food apart from those mentioned above.

Lord Buddha himself ignored the artificial barriers of caste distinction when he walked for piṇḍapāta. He took — and his monks still take — food from all, regardless of their social status. All men have the right to practice giving (*dāna*) if they wish to do so and to reap the merits deriving therefrom.

before anyone sees him, or he may decide that no one is giving him anything that day and go his way. It happens sometimes that a bhikkhu, who patiently waits, gets nothing at all. It even happened at least once, to Lord Buddha and a little story from modern times will emphasize this.

There was a young bhikkhu newly come to Bangkok some years ago. He knew no one, he had no supporters on the first morning. He went out from the monastery where he was staying and walked through the streets to gather food—with hundreds of other bhikkhus from the monasteries around. He received nothing. He went back to his *kuti* (dwelling) and practiced meditation. The second morning he went out again received nothing and again spent the day in meditation perhaps consoling himself with the words of the Buddha:

Hunger is the worst disease,  
Compounded existence is the worst distress,  
Knowing this as it really is  
The wise realize Nibbāna, the highest bliss.

— Dhp 203

The third day, feeling a little weak, he passed silently through the streets and at one house he was given a banana. And that was all. He came back to his monastery and saw there a starving dog. Opening his bowl he gave half the banana to the dog. But bananas are not fare for dogs—even starving ones—and having sniffed it, it limped disdainfully away. The young bhikkhu reached out his hand to take that rejected half back into his bowl, Then he paused remembering that when a bhikkhu has given something to someone, it must be returned into his hands by a layman—and there was no layman in sight. The bhikkhu closed his bowl and went into his *kuti* where he ate his half of the banana washing it down with a good draught of water. The next day his patience and compassion were rewarded and thereafter someone offered him food every day.

When Māra closed peoples' hearts against giving food to him, Lord Buddha spoke the following famous verse from the Dhammapada showing his power to obtain spiritual food from meditation:

Happy, indeed, we live,  
We who possess nothing,  
Feeders on joy shall we be,  
Even as gods of the radiant realm.

— Dhp 200

The bhikkhu of whom we have spoken also practiced meditation, and later become a famous teacher and a founder of a new school of meditation in Bangkok. He has but recently passed away.

To come back, after this little digression, to our bhikkhu on piṇḍapāta. We shall notice perhaps with surprise that he is treated with great respect by the lay-people. Perhaps only yesterday he was a layman himself, yet today, shorn, barefoot, in orange robes, and bowl in hand, he is revered by those who serve him. People passing him may stop, crouch down, and raise their hands to their foreheads in reverence, others may walk past him the hands reverentially raised, while laymen and laywomen who wish to give him food squat down, raise their hands in worship before offering to him whatever they have prepared.

Seeing this, one might ask why they did it and why do they regard him so highly? The skeptical man of this materialistic age might indeed ask what all this fuss is about. He might say, "Here is this beggar, who does no work, contributes no material gain to society and yet people treat him as though he was a god walking in their midst." In saying this, he would be right, for Buddhist monks in these countries are beggars in the sense that they depend for their sustenance on others; moreover, the word by which they are known (*bhikkhu*) is derived from the root "*bhik*" whence "*bhikkhati*" = to beg for food. They would also be correct in their *limited* assessment of his worth to society as he does not indeed increase the society's material wealth.

Against such a materialistic approach born of conceit, an ancient verse might be quoted and then two relevant considerations regarding this charge:

For one ever eager to honor and respect elder,  
These four blessings accrue:  
Long life, beauty, happiness, and power.

— Dhp 109

(“Elders” here means not only elder relations but refers to *theras*—i.e., senior Buddhist monks).

The first consideration must be to stress again that a bhikkhu does not beg as do ordinary beggars but passes on silently *collecting offered food*; and secondly, it is a narrow system of thought indeed that assesses a man’s worth by material gain alone. The Bhikkhu is treated with reverence simply because he offers to others an example by his own pure conduct. He shows the way to deliverance, and if all cannot follow his example completely and lay off the cares of the world, then there can be many who may profit from seeing his life and listening to his advice. He is thus highly regarded as one who is striving for deliverance from suffering, for that supreme bliss which is Nibbāna (*nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ*). To attain this, it is emphasized all through the Buddhist tradition that renunciation (*nekkhamma*) is essential. Thus he is worshipped as an example of renunciation: one who has given up worldly pleasures and comforts, given up family attachments, and one who tries to make the greatest renunciation—that of the craving-and-ignorance complex. Indeed Lord Buddha’s words in the Dhammapada have a deep truth in them:

Not therefore is he a bhikkhu  
Merely because he begs from others.  
Not by adopting the outward form  
Does one truly become a bhikkhu.  
He who wholly subdues evil,  
Both small and great,  
Is called a monk (bhikkhu)  
Because he has overcome all evil.

— Dhp 266, 267

Such are some of the paths which thought might take as we witness a householder give food to him. Following the scene before us we see that the lay-supporter has raised the bowl of food to be given, to her forehead and remains thus for half-a-minute or so. While doing this, she is making some fervent wish or vow that the good merit (*puñña*) which accrues to her by this beneficent act shall result in some particular blessing—health, wealth, family, or those who think further, the attainment of heavenly

states, or higher still, the end of rebirth—the unsurpassed peace of Nibbāna.

The food is placed in the bowl by the supporter and while this is taking place, the bhikkhu does not look to see *who* is giving him food. We notice that, with senses well-controlled, he keeps his eyes fixed upon the open bowl and is not inclined to speak to lay people unless they ask him something. In this way his mind is not disturbed by the sight of the members of the opposite sex or any other desire-arousing object. The same applies to Buddhist nuns (*chee*, in Thailand) when they go out for the collection, though very few of them do so. The writer observed in Bangkok a few nuns who, wearing the dark cloth indicating a meditative life, walk on *piṇḍapāta* with great dignity and evident sincerity. They, of course, are concerned to avoid the sight of men. This is one practical application of the step of Buddhist training called restraint of senses (*indriya-saṃvara*).

The food having been placed in his bowl, the lay-supporter may, as the monk is turning to go on his way, reverence him again (as the symbol of renunciation of which he is an example). On his part the bhikkhu feels no elation at reverence, nor distress if such salutation is not performed, for in the Buddhist teaching reverence is a skillful act (*kusala kamma*) and profits him who performs it.

Further, as we are within earshot, we may be surprised by another fact: the bhikkhu utters no thanks for his food.<sup>5</sup> He goes as silently as he arrives and from what we see it appears indeed as though the lay-supporters feel more disposed to thank him for having taken the food from their hands.

As we follow our bhikkhu, this matter may give us further food for thought—until he reaches another house where we can again observe what takes place. Why then does the bhikkhu offer no thanks for what he has received? The answer to this lies in an understanding of the Buddhist teaching regarding merit (*puñña*). Merit is acquired by the performance of skillful action (*kusala kamma*). An example of such an action which is easy for all to practice is “giving” (*dāna*). Indeed, this too is not only a

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<sup>5</sup> In Ceylon, sometimes, the words *sukhi hotu* — “May you be happy” — are spoken in a low voice.

perfection in the highest ranges of Buddhist practice but is the first among all the ten perfections: the perfection of giving (*dāna-pāramitā*). So deeply is giving felt to be an essential for the beginning of the holy life, that it stands first also in the triad of practices so often recommended for the Buddhist laity (giving, *dāna*; morality, *sīla*; meditation, *bhāvana*), and the bhikkhu practices it by giving to other bhikkhus and to lay-people the gift of Teaching (*dhammadāna*), which is the highest (Dhp 354).

“To give” opens the heart and is manifestly opposed to the worldly way “to get.” The latter is linked to attachment, while the former is generosity and close to renunciation. Thus thanks for giving lie in the very act itself and the householder is happy that the bhikkhu has given him the opportunity to give.

The merit which one “gets” from giving is really not a “possession” which ensures a good birth in the future, etc., but a change in heart, a raising in the level of skillful consciousness so that one performs and rejoices in performing skillful acts. This, of course, does have its effect (but of this more below, as our bhikkhu has now arrived at another house).

A little family group stands outside the house: an old lady, a young lady, perhaps her daughter, and two small boys, one of whom is only just old enough to toddle. They cry out joyfully and loud enough for all the neighborhood to hear, “The bhikkhu has come.” The mother of the house balances a tray on her knees as she crouches down, her daughter reverences likewise, while the small boys each have to be restrained from running towards the bhikkhu in order to give him something—so great is their desire to do so. The bhikkhu opens his bowl, and bends down so that the elder of the little boys can give a little bowl of rice. This having been successfully engineered into the bowl, the bhikkhu smiles. Now the smaller boy reaches up to place curry in a plastic bag into the bowl, even this is successful and he manages this without falling over which indeed he came close to doing. Then without prompting he raises two podgy hands in the direction of his forehead and toddles unsteadily back to the girl. The elder one, however, is rather boisterous and has forgotten this bit of training. Then that monk says to him for his good, “*Wai phra*”—“Salute the bhikkhu”—and the boy laughingly, gently, dutifully raises his hands. The people of the house, who have invited him to take food from them every day, then inquire from him when there will be a preaching (*desanā*)

at the vihāra and where the teacher (*ācariya*) is now. Having learned such-like matters, which take but a minute for the bhikkhu to relate, they invite him, as he goes on his way, to come again on the morrow—and the little boys call out again and again, “Come again! Come again!”

The bhikkhu goes on his way, the sun rises higher and it begins to be a little warm. His next donor (*dāyaka*) is nearby and he walks slowly to give her time to come from her little house. We see him suddenly step rather wide and not until we are up to that place do we see why he did so. Across the road there march in milling millions, an army of ants and, quite apart from the undesirability of being bitten by this species, the bhikkhus must go barefoot for *piṇḍapāta*—their way of training instructs them to practice harmlessness (*ahiṃsā*). That is, never to take life intentionally and to be as careful (= mindfulness, *satī*) as possible so as not to kill, even without intention. In the Dhammapada we read one of Lord Buddha’s beautiful verses:

Just as a bee gathers honey from a flower  
Without injuring its color or fragrance,  
Even so let the sage move in the world  
(To collect alms).

— Dhp 49

An old, old woman, bent with age and hard work totters out from her little cabin to invite him to receive. It is true that she need not exert herself in this way for she has a younger woman living with her, but she desires, as her life grows shorter and death comes nearer, to give to a bhikkhu every day and so pile up as much merit as she may in the short time left to her. She lives by the side of a little canal and makes a perilous living by rotting down fish in water and salt and so producing the ubiquitous “fish-water,” which is used as sauce and source of salt, by many Thais. Leaning on a stick she brings her thin, toil-worn hands shakily upwards while her face, bronzed by the sun and wrinkled in a thousand places, reflects a serene devotion. She carries an old and rusty tin out of which she ladles some of her fish-water. As silently as he opened his bowl to receive her offering so silently, he closes it, as she turns, now happy, towards her door. Lord Buddha has said:

If a bhikkhu does not despise  
What he has received,  
Even though it be little,  
Him who is pure in livelihood  
And unremitting in effort,  
Even the gods praise.

— Dhp 366

We follow again as he goes on his way to the right of the road. There is at this point, a low area of marshy swamp in which grow tall sedges. It is rather surprising therefore to see the bhikkhu apparently step into this swamp and yet go forward freely. The mystery is soon resolved as we see a single-plank gang-way in front of us which will carry the wary walker some two hundred yards across to further side. The bhikkhu has already gone far along the planks, carefully picking his way, and so there is nothing else to do but to follow him. Gingerly we set out, the six-inch wide plank swaying and bending with our weight; it seems very likely that at any moment we may be precipitated into the ooze beneath. Here is indeed, a time for mindfulness! We manage the hazard well-enough—it is perhaps more a matter of good luck than judgment—and when at last we raise our eyes from the gang-way, the bhikkhu is almost out of sight. However, we manage to catch up with him just in time to see that he entered the courtyard gate of a big house. Evidently he is invited to take food here each day; indeed, he has already been invited to sit down for a few minutes. We watch the monk and his supporters through the open gate.

The compound lying inside this gate seems to be a very large one and at least three good sized houses are visible interspersed by lawns, trees, courtyards and such decorative features as some hundreds of orchids growing hung up in little pots, or great glazed blue-and-white Chinese water-jars and in them water lilies flowering. The bhikkhu sits in a little summer-house and before him is placed a table upon which are three trays with little bowls of rice and various fruits, with unknown foods done up in banana-leaves.

Meanwhile a crowd of bhikkhus has gathered. We did not notice them come but now they stand silently, waiting. A young man carries a stout table and places it outside the gate where the other bhikkhus are standing



and comes back shortly afterwards staggering under the weight of a huge bowl of steaming rice. An elderly lady in the traditional dress follows him carrying a large tray stacked high with oranges and banana-leaf packets.

A bhikkhu is standing near us and so we ask him quietly whose house this is. "Oh," he says, "this house belongs to one of the noble families closely related to the king. Every day they give food to about eighty monks."

We watch this general alms-giving in progress. Each bhikkhu approaches the table when the one before has already left. Everything is very orderly and each bhikkhu is obviously very careful to avoid jumping his turn. Young bhikkhus and sāmaṇeras are seen to invite elder monks to take their food first; courtesy and care are observed by all. The rice, spooned out into bowl after bowl, grows less and the numbers of waiting monks dwindle; but the lady householder seems happier and happier with every spoonful she gives. The monks silently go—old theras (elder monks) of many years standing go slowly, while little sāmaṇeras, scarcely four feet high or twelve years old, make off at a good speed.

Our attention now reverts to "our" bhikkhu. He has been seated the while and offered a glass of coffee. A lady sits at a respectful distance upon the summer-house floor while her small daughter wanders about. She has been asking him some problem regarding the teaching and he has briefly replied. She gets up and invites him saying "*nimon*". As it is her daughter's birthday, the lady holds the tray of offerings while the little girl places the rice and various foods into his bowl. Thus the small girl has earned great merit upon this day. Indeed, it is common in Buddhist lands to give on the day of one's birth; and whatever the giving may be, the birthday is thought an excellent occasion for merit-making. Those who cannot afford, or somehow just do not give on other days, usually make a point of offering to a monk or monks piṇḍapāta on the day of their own or their children's birth.

The elder lady having finished her giving at the gate, now comes and salutes the bhikkhu. She provides him with food from another tray. The young man, her gardener, offers yet another, while just as the bhikkhu is preparing to depart, a cry of "*nimon*" halts him as another member of this many-branched family comes up with his offering.

With a bowl now become heavy but we hope a little refreshed by the coffee, the bhikkhu goes on his way, the elder lady of the house inviting him to come again on the morrow.

The last house on his round obviously also belongs to an affluent family. He waits, as they have promised food. Locked gate and wide lawns separate the family from the roadside and they do not see him as easily as his other patrons. At last someone spots him and sings out, "the monk has come." The householders here do not come to the door but send who are possibly their son and daughter with food. They are both near to grown-up and perhaps with less understanding of their teaching than they ought to have. At any rate, they are rather careless: the boy while opening their big gates drops a banana or two on the ground, which they wipe before offering, while the girl, tipping rice into the bowl in a lackadaisical fashion manages to empty half of it on the ground. They chatter while doing this and then prance off. It seems that they do this as though it was all rather a drudge.

The bhikkhu carefully removes the rice grains from his robes and from his bowl-sling, so that they do not become soiled, and starts back on his long walk to the monastery. He passes down the whole road of rich men's houses but there is nothing. He does not care, for he has more than enough to keep him going, enough "medicine" to allay the disease of hunger for another day. Still we note that those who give most (and if we went with him every day, we should note those that give most often) are, if not poor people, at least those in the middle ranges of income. Riches, alas, do not usually lead to great generosity! It is the poor and those moderately well-off who give generously. Too many of the rich are too much sunk into the supposed comforts of this world to think overmuch of giving. Lord Buddha has taught them with the following word of warning:

Riches ruin the fool,  
But not if one is in the quest of the beyond  
By craving for riches  
The witless man ruins himself and ruins others.

— Dhp 355

But those who know the sting of poverty, know also a way to rid themselves of this sting. By *giving* however little it is, they may attain to greater wealth in future than they possess now—and greater happiness, too. One of the factors which governs the lack or possession of wealth is what one had done with money, when one had it. If one misuses it for others' pain, squanders it all upon fleeting pleasures, or only amasses a great collection of status symbols about oneself—then in a future life one is very liable to meet with poverty and misery which this entails. The results (*vipāka*) of action (*kamma*) are, so Buddhism teaches, very just indeed.

Those who give, however, are assured of receiving, so that all that must be decided is how and what should one give. Besides occasional giving (such as the construction of a rest-house, bridge, school or if one is rich, a new wing to the hospital and so forth), there are gifts made to the Sangha (order of Buddhist monks). According to a well-known passage in the Pāli scriptures, the bhikkhus (especially if they are emancipated sages—ariya) are “*anuttaram puññākkhettaṃ lokassā'ti*”—“The supreme field (in which to sow the seed) of merit in the world.” All this is summed up as follows:

In this world it is good to serve mother,  
Good is it to serve father,  
Good is to serve the monks,  
And good is it to serve the ariyan sages.

— Dhp 332

Now again *occasionally* bhikkhus require robes, dwellings or medicines, but *every day* they walk out for food-collecting. Therefore, this is a great opportunity to gain merit which should not be missed; for all, whether poor or rich, can do with more merit! There is indeed nothing like merits made in this way for ensuring a happy life, a peaceful death, and a blissful life hereafter. Lord Buddha has said:

When a man after a long absence,  
Returns home safe from afar,  
His relatives, friends and well-wishers,  
Welcome him on his arrival.  
Likewise his own good deeds

Will welcome the doer of the good,  
Who had gone from this world to the next,  
As kinsmen welcome a dear one's arrival.

— Dhp 219, 220

This is obviously one reason why people give to the bhikkhu who passes their doors—and it is a very important reason. The skeptic might butt in, objecting that the motive for that giving is very selfish—to make oneself happy in future. But then he must be told that it is possible in Buddhism (where *kamma-vipāka* is not a rigid personal cause-and-effect), by means of goodwill (*mettā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*), to make over one's merits for the good of others. Thus a mother might make merit by giving food, etc., for her children's happiness, or recovery from sickness. Or a king may make merit, turning this over to the welfare of his people. And expressions of utterly selfless—indeed universal—benevolence are by no means rare among the merit-dedications of quite ordinary folk, while the unlimited compassion of the wisdom beings (*bodhi-satta*—those who work towards becoming a Buddha) is expressed in many sublime engravings and writings. With the merit which such a one piles up, he vows to lighten beings innumerable and to deliver all from the woes of continued existence.

However, few aspire so high; their reasons for giving are correspondingly less exalted, though nevertheless they may be deeply religious. For instance, many laypeople give out of great devotion (*saddhā*) to their religion. Sometimes, too, a particularly esteemed bhikkhu may be the object of this great devotion. Then there are gifts to relatives who are now bhikkhus, for in the country, a bhikkhu may live in his own village temple and pass his former house and relatives often. Naturally, they give to him. Then there are those who give out of habit or from convention. One sometimes comes across cases of this; such giving being no longer accompanied by the warmth of devotion tends to become mechanical. It is quite easy to understand that in this case the merit from giving is decidedly less. Lastly comes a category of giving which hardly applies to our present subject: grudging giving. From this and from giving for commercial advantage—purely selfish, this—come the least amount of merit.

The attitude of “Why should I give something?”—which really means “What do I get out of it?”—is hardly found in Buddhist lands. Where the Buddhist Teaching has distinctly taught that deliberate actions are liable to give rise to results, even those who have little knowledge of the heights of Buddhist philosophy, will readily understand that the results of giving is happiness.

The writer was once asked if people who give much and often, but nevertheless came across disasters and grief in their lives, would lose faith and thereafter cease to give. But the Buddhist reaction is not thus. Disasters and grief do not arise causelessly, nor yet from one cause (the “wrath of god” for instance), but they are often attributed more soundly, it would seem, to misdeeds committed in the past—if not in this life then in the individual’s past existences. Hence a Buddhist thinks that such misdeeds can only come to fruition if conditions are suitable, which is more likely to be when one has but little a storehouse of merit. Therefore, to cure this lamentable circumstance, the answer is to give more and give more often, rather than neglecting to give. This connection between knowledge and generosity is illumined by a verse in the Dhammapada:

Verily misers fare not to heavenly realms,  
Nor, indeed, do fools ever praise liberality;  
But the wise man rejoices in giving,  
And by that alone does he become happy hereafter.

— Dhp 177

And again on this subject, we find:

Should a person do good,  
Let him do it again and again;  
Let him find pleasure therein,  
For, blissful is the accumulation of good.

— Dhp 118



And so we have now followed the bhikkhu back to his monastery. He is, perhaps, a little foot-sore and, if his bowl is full (and it easily fills up, for

generally people are marvelously generous), his shoulder may ache; and his hands and arms also if he uses no sling for the bowl.

Memories arise at this point of having seen in some book a writer complaining of the size of a bhikkhu's bowl—as though to imply that they were greedy! This is far from the truth. Firstly a bhikkhu's bowl has to be reasonably large to accommodate all the food that people wish to give him. We should not forget that lay-supporters wish to make their merit each day and that a very small bowl would mean that he would have to refuse their offerings. Secondly, a bowl may be really large if the bhikkhu to whom it belongs goes wandering on foot staying in caves, mountain fastness or forest. His bowl is then his suitcase and in it must be packed the very few items which he can easily take along with him.

Back to the monastery, the food that all have collected is shared by all, and the bhikkhu himself makes a little merit by offering something choice from his bowl to his teacher, usually an elder monk (thera), and also by seeing that those who have collected little food that day—and such is the fate of many sāmaṇeras (novices)—have sufficient fare. He practices thus one method of promoting loving-kindness (*mettā*) among his fellow-monks—that is, “the sharing of the contents of even an alms bowl.”

In the monasteries where meditation is practiced it is common (in Thailand), to undertake also the ascetic practices (*dhutaṅgas*). In such monasteries, therefore, the monks take only one meal, at about eight in the morning, immediately after returning from *piṇḍapāta*. Their alms-food is shared with the monastery-boys and anyone else who cares to eat. No one need starve, or be without a meal in a Buddhist country—one has only to go to a monastery (before midday), and some sort of food will be available.

As for the monks—bhikkhus or sāmaṇera—if they have undertaken the dhutaṅgas they mix all their food together, determining just how much will be suitable for them, and then apply the meditation on the loathsomeness of food, which prevents the arising of greed. (See *The Path of Purification*, Chapter XI, p. 372.)

It is eaten in silence so as to maintain this concentration. And when fingers have scooped enough of this medicine into the mouth, monastery-boys will be happy with remaining delicacies, while the mixture still unconsumed will feed the animals which have taken refuge in the vihāra

grounds away from the harshness of worldlings. Thus none of this precious food is wasted. In all ways there are benefits to be seen for all—for the donors who give there is merit, for the bhikkhus who take there is support, and for many other beings there is good food.

This little description of *piṇḍapāta* and its virtues may be fittingly brought to an end with another verse expressing wherein lies the taste of truth:

Having tasted the sweetness,  
Of solitude and peace (Nibbāna),  
Woeless and stainless he becomes,  
Imbibing the flavor of dhamma's bliss.

— Dhp 205

May all beings, wheresoever they be, taste of this truth.

# Postscript

**I**F THE preceding account sounds somewhat idyllic, readers should realize that it is because the writer has happened to describe a combination of fortunate experiences: in fine weather, where houses are abundant, where more prosperous people dwell, where these donors are not too distant from the vihāra, where land is flat and paths are good, and so forth.

The reverse of such conditions will make the bhikkhu's alms-round more difficult, as does the pouring rain during the monsoon season. More hazards still would confront the bhikkhu who sets out to get his food in a non-Buddhist country (such as India). As in Lord Buddha's days, he would experience some difficulties. But this, although interesting, is another story.



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