

Mangala Sutta

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Today I'm going to be talking about a piece of Buddhist scripture; a Sutta. I'm particularly grateful to be able to give this talk, because this sutta is one of my favourites.

The Sutta that I'm going to talk about is the Mangala Sutta, which is known as the discourse on blessings. Now the reason that the Mangala sutta is one of my favourites is that it underscores what is, to me, one of the most core things about Buddhism.

You see, it's easy to think of Buddhism as this strange, romantic, mystical religion, and even easier to think of the Buddhist scriptures as these secret, mystical documents which have complicated and scary things in them (in a mysterious mountaintop monastery kind of way). But in my understanding, the suttas aren't mysterious at all; they are (for the most part) just a set of records of what the Buddha said.

The Buddha really liked simple things, and the suttas in the Buddhist canon are mostly a set of really simple, easy to understand things that the Buddha said (there are exceptions but most of the ones I've read are simple).

So the Mangala Sutta is simple and easy to understand and easy to integrate into your life.

So why the Mangala Sutta in particular? Well, where I come from (Sri Lanka) there are 3 suttas which are a big deal. They're called the *Thun sutta*, which means the three suttas¹. The three suttas are the Mangala Sutta, the Karaniya metta sutta (also known as the Metta sutta, or loving kindness sutta) and the rathana sutta. The suttas are a big deal, in that they tend to be recited aloud when alms are given to the monkhood, or at a funeral, or at just about any other religious function.

But why are the monks of Sri Lanka so happy to recite these suttas at a drop of a hat? Well, the metta sutta and the mangala sutta are beautiful and meaningful and relevant, but the last sutta, the rathana sutta, is just impressive sounding. So for all I know, the suttas might just be the ones that can most easily cause shock and awe in the not-buddhist-enough.

But anyway, let me get back to the Mangala Sutta.

I know you all know the meaning of the word 'omen', but I really wonder if you've ever had the experience of looking for omens. I've never really seen people take any notice of such things in the US, but back home, omens are a seriously big deal.

For instance, if you are about to go out on an errand, and just as you are about to step out of the door, a gecko goes "chaaark"², it is considered a very bad omen indeed. So most rural Sri Lankans would just turn around and sit down and ask for a cup of tea with which to wait out the bad luck.

Now back in ancient India, during the time of the Buddha, omens were a big deal, and eventually, there were these three big schools of thought. One was that the most important omens are those that are seen. The next was that said omens were the ones that were heard. The last (and perhaps the most intriguing) was that the most important omens were the ones that were smelled.

So eventually, the story goes, a deity gets tired of all of this and walks up to the Buddha and asks him to figure out which omens were the most important.

¹ Surprise, surprise

² Geckos really do make this sound in Sri Lanka

And the Buddha's answer is remembered as the Mangala Sutta.

Now, before I share the answer with you, a note on translation. The sutta is known as the discourse on blessings, but the word *Mangala* can mean 'good fortune' or 'good omens' too.

So the Sutta has 10 sets of blessings, and I am going to list them out.

Note - the last two sets of blessings are for ordained people.

1. The first is not associating with foolish people, but instead associating with wise people, and respecting those worthy of respect. In college, the first part would probably mean hanging out with the people who not only have fun but also get good grades.
2. The second is living in a good place, having meritorious deeds in your past, and having right resolve. This would mean living in a civilized place surrounded by decent people, and having right resolve is abandoning immorality for morality, selfishness for generosity, etc.
3. To have much learning and experience and a diverse skill set, be well disciplined, and of pleasant habits and speech
4. To support and love your parents, your children, and support the Sangha, and to have a peaceful occupation
5. To be generous in giving, and to act according to the dhamma (righteously?), to be generous to one's relatives and to act in a way that is blameless
6. To loathe evil and abstain from it, to refrain from intoxicants, and to steadfastly follow the dhamma
7. to be respectful and humble, contented and grateful (for what one already has) to listen to the dhamma on due occasions
8. To be patient and obedient, to associate with monks, to discuss religion on due occasions
9. To have self-restraint and live a holy and chaste life, to strive to perceive the noble truths and realise enlightenment
10. To be undaunted by one's material fortunes, and to have a mind that has no sorrow, no defilements, no fear

Now the sutta ends by saying the following: Those who abide thus, ever remain invincible in established happiness. These are the greatest blessings.

So I hope that after hearing about the mangala sutta, the scriptures seem a bit less mystical and a bit less daunting. At the same time, I hope you see what I feel is the most important lesson here - to have good fortune is less about being lucky and more about making a conscious decision to change things and integrate a few simple ideas into your life. The ideas the Buddha mentions in the sutta are simple ones, and they don't require any special investment other than your time.