

Study and Discussion Questions for *Early Buddhist Discourses*

Chapter Sixteen: Discourse to the Layman Sigāla (*Sigālovāda Sutta*)

Study Questions

- 1) Why did Sigāla pay homage to the four directions, the nadir and the zenith?
- 2) What are the key differences between Sigāla's practice of paying homage and that described by the Buddha in reference to the noble disciple?
- 3) What are the four defilements of action the noble disciple abandons?
- 4) What are the four bases for evil actions?
- 5) What are the six ways one might dissipate one's wealth? Refer to some of the dangers associated with each of these.
- 6) What are the four types of non-friend who only appear to be friends? What are some of the key reasons why such a non-friend is truly no friend?
- 7) What are the four types of true friend? What are some of the key reasons why such friends are true friends?
- 8) How does the Buddha correlate each of the four directions, the nadir and the zenith, with persons to whom one should minister or pay homage?
- 9) What are the five ways that a child should minister to parents? A student should minister to teachers? A person should minister to recluses and Brahmins?

Discussion Questions

- 1) This discourse is widely considered as an authoritative source of guidance for Buddhist laypersons. Should there be one set of moral principles and practices for the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* and another set for lay-followers?
- 2) The Buddha claimed explicitly that *nibbāna* is within the reach of laypersons, although the Buddha also made clear that the domestic life poses many obstacles to religious progress. But if laypersons and monastics alike can achieve enlightenment, what distinguishes the two paths? Why did the Buddha speak so disparagingly of domestic life?
- 3) Given the obvious obstacles to religious progress posed by domestic life (the demands of family, job, etc.), can a layperson be a serious Buddhist? If *arahantship* is achieved only through the intense mental training and profound insight that uproots the mental defilements that lead to unwholesome actions (and to suffering), should not anyone taking the Buddhist path leave the domestic life?
- 4) What meta-ethical theory does the Buddha draw upon in his ethical teachings to laypersons?
- 5) For a Buddhist layperson, friendship is among the virtues most exalted by the Buddha. What are the attributes of a true friend?
- 6) Is friendship crucial to living a meaningful life? Does friendship have spiritual or religious meaning? Does friendship play an important role in other philosophical or religious traditions?

- 7) How should a contemporary Buddhist take the Buddhist's statements that a householder should avoid festivals, dancing, and singing? Are these activities—that are so much a part of everyday life today—truly dangerous?
- 8) Why did the Buddha change the meaning of paying homage to the six directions from a rite of prayer to the mystical powers represented by the directions to a rather comprehensive list of ethical and social responsibilities (to parents, teachers, spouse and children, friends, servants, and religious teachers)?
- 9) For those who minister to the persons represented by the six directions, the Buddha describes a response—reciprocal actions—returned to the one who ministers by those ministered to. What is the Buddha suggesting about the social and ethical relationships among laypersons?