

**karanīyam atthakusalena  
yan tam santam padam abhisamecca:  
sakko ujū ca sūjū ca  
suvaco c' assa mudu anati mānī**

**This is what's done by one skilled in what's good,  
Who reaches toward that most peaceful state:  
One would be capable, and straight—quite straight;  
Well-spoken, gentle, without too much pride.**

## VERSE 1

### **karanīyam:**

Understanding the sense of this first word is so important, since it sets the tone for the entire poem. As a future passive participle it would translate literally as “to be done,” suggesting a description of the way things would be under certain conditions that may come to pass. So often it is put into English in an admonishing or reproving manner, such as “this should be done” or “this must be done.” Unfortunately, this tone of voice brings with it a sense of right and wrong, of being in compliance with or deviating from a norm or an injunction, which is not at all what I think the verse is saying. Buddhist ethics generally is about understanding cause and effect, rather than with obeying or disobeying rules. All that follows in the *Mettā Sutta* is a series of descriptions of how a wise and skillful person, or a person who wishes to progress toward the goal, would hold themselves in the world. It is not a list of do's and don'ts.

### **atthakusalena:**

The word **attha** has a range of meanings, from “good,” “welfare,” or “well-being” to “purpose,” “meaning,” or “goal.” In fact it embraces all of these, and suggests that goodness or well being is a meaningful goal that can be attained. It is not something that occurs by chance, nor is it the gift of a benevolent being. Rather it is a skill that can be learned, practiced and perfected. The word **kusala** carries this sense of skillfulness, and the compound is to be understood as “skill in regard to the good.” **Kusala** can also mean “good” or “wholesome” in its own right, because of the inextricable relationship of the two ideas in Buddhist thought. It is taken for granted that all beings aspire toward their own welfare, and this sutta is intended to help people achieve it by learning what wholesome qualities of character to skillfully develop.

### **tam santam padam:**

These three words all end in a similar manner, and are thus part of the same phrase. **Tam** means “the” or “that,” **santam** is “calm,” “peace” or “peaceful,” and **padam** literally means “foot”, generally means “place” or “location,” and figuratively means “state” or “condition.” We can thus take it as “that peaceful state” or “that state of peace.” You will notice that some translators capitalize these words, indicating that they take them to be referring to **nibbāna**, the final emancipation of mind toward which the Buddhist path is directed. This is probably the case, since it is a common enough allusion to **nibbāna**, but it may also be construed to refer more generally to a state of calm well being in which the fires of passion are diminished, if not extinguished.

### **abhisamecca:**

This verb is built up in three layers, the root (**i**) meaning of “to go” preceded by two prefixes which give the verb some added direction and nuance. The first, **abhi**, suggests “unto” or “toward,” while the prefix **sam** intimates conjunction or completeness and yields a sense of “with” or “together.” It would be too simplistic to just add these three elements into “to go toward together” or “to go unto completion,” for the whole is always more than the sum of its parts in Pali lexigraphy. But such an analysis does often help get a sense of the nuances of meaning in a verb. We see it translated a lot as “attain,” but some translators take this more figuratively and render “grasp” (Woodward), “understand” (Basham), or “become aware” (Aronson). More important is to discern whether the author is describing the behavior of one who has already achieved the peaceful state, or is describing what one needs to do in order to attain it for themselves. The first word of the stanza suggests the latter is the case, but I think the poem often turns on its ability to embrace both possibilities with creative ambiguity.

### **sakko ujū ca sūjū ca suvaco c’assa mudu anati mānī:**

The second part of the verse is pretty straightforward, being a list of six positive virtues, and does not benefit too much from analysis. It may be worth pointing out that **sūjū** is the same word as **ujū** but with the prefix **su-** acting as an amplifying or a beautifying element (which it also does to **-vaca**, “speech”). However we put it into English, what we are literally saying is “straight” (**uju**) and “very straight” or “perfectly straight” (**ujū**). Most translators take this in the sense it also has in English of “upright” or “honest.” It is also useful to notice that the verb in this section (**assa**), as an optative form of “he is,” further adds to the sense introduced by the first word **karaniya** of conditionality: “he would be” is probably better than “he should be.” The last word is also layered: “pride” (**mana**) is amplified by the prefix **ati-** (over-, very-) to yield “arrogant” or “conceited,” and this is then reversed by the negative prefix **an-** to arrive at “not overly proud” or simply “humble.”

## **REFLECTIONS**

- 1) What different responses do these different phrases evoke in you: “You should do this...;” “You must do this...;” “This is to be done if...?” Does the change of idiom make a difference to your openness to the message that follows?
- 2) How do you generally regard the presence of well-being or goodness in your life? Is it something that one gets if one is lucky? Does it come and go according to factors beyond your control? Is the sutta’s suggestion that it is a skill to be learned something you can relate to, or does it sound unrealistic?
- 3) What can you recollect or point to in your own experience that might correspond in some way to a “state of peace” or a “condition of calm?” What do such moments feel like? What causes and conditions are generally present when you experience them? What might it take to encourage and develop these conditions in your life?
- 4) Reflect upon each of the six virtues or qualities mentioned in the last lines. Can you get a good sense of what each one means and feels like as distinct from the others? In what ways do these qualities overlap with one another; in what ways are they clearly distinct?