

# The Questions of Sakka

A Discourse by  
Venerable Mahāsī Sayādaw



An Abridged Translation by  
U Aye Maung



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*Mahāsī Translation Committee, Rangoon*

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## Editor's Foreword

A number of the late Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw's discourses have been translated into English, and most of these have been reprinted before in Malaysia, but this new edition has been prepared for distribution in English speaking countries. Although many changes have been made to the original translation, they are only grammatical ones. The content of the Venerable Sayādaw's discourse has been fully preserved and is now much easier to read than it was. I am indebted to Christine Fitzmaurice-Glendining for her meticulous work in correcting the grammar. She also checked the final proofs. If any errors have unwittingly been introduced into the translation then that responsibility is mine alone.

The Venerable Sayādaw's discourses were addressed to meditators practising intensively at his meditation centre in Rangoon, so they contain many Pali words that, though familiar to those who have heard regular discourses, may be unfamiliar to others. In preparing this edition of the *Sakkapañha Sutta* I have replaced the Pali words with a translation wherever possible. However, since this book deals with advanced topics such as mental absorption (*jhāna*) and insight knowledge (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*), the use of Pali terms is sometimes preferable.

In the footnotes, references are to the page numbers of the **Pali texts** of the Pali Text Society, which in the translations are given [in square brackets] at the top of the page or sometimes in the body of the text. However, in the case of the *Dhammapada* or *Sutta Nipāta*, references are simply given to verse numbers.

The *Sakkapañha Sutta* is the twenty-first discourse of the *Dīghanikāya*, the long discourses.

I have again updated this edition, this time for convenient reading online as in PDF format. If you find any errors, [please inform me via my forums](#).

## Preface

This is the abridged translation of Venerable Mahāsī Sayādaw's discourse on the *Sakkapañña Sutta*. The discourse was given in December 1977 at the request of U Pwin Kaung, the President of the Buddha Sāsanānuggaha Organisation, on the occasion of the annual gathering of Buddhist devotees from all over Burma, who came to pay their respects to the Sayādaw and to hear his teaching.

The President requested the Venerable Sayādaw to give a Buddhist discourse that would be universally applicable, so Mahāsī Sayādaw chose to give a series of talks on the *Sakkapañña Sutta*, which was the subject of a manuscript that he had been preparing for publication. This discourse tells us about the Buddha's dialogue with Sakka, the king of the gods, and of his penetrating analysis into the causes of conflicts, frustrations and suffering that beset all living beings. The Sayādaw rightly describes the discourse as the Buddha's teaching on world peace, and indeed it has an important message for people all over the world.

The Venerable Sayādaw's discourse on the *sutta* is very informative and illuminating. Many of his observations are essential to the proper understanding and practice of the *Dhamma*. Thus, according to the Sayādaw, the introduction to a *sutta* is not as important as its central teaching. It serves to establish the authenticity of the discourse but, as in the case of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, its absence does not necessarily cast doubt on the origin of a Buddhist teaching. Such practices as the melodious recitation of scriptures, which is customary among some Buddhist preachers, and the mass slaughter of animals for food at pagoda festivals are to be deprecated because they run counter to the Buddha's teaching. No less incompatible with the spirit of the *Dhamma* is the fondness for lengthy prayers. This probably stems from the tendency to rely on external help rather than on making the effort to attain one's objective.

As well as these passing remarks on matters of general interest to Buddhists, the Sayādaw's discourse on the essence of the Buddha's teaching in the *Sakkapañña Sutta* is superb. It is based on rational observations, anecdotes and the teachings in the texts and commentaries. The Sayādaw's clarification of wholesome sorrow, wholesome depression, *etc.*, will inspire meditators who are discouraged by lack of spiritual progress. His other explanations will also enlighten those who do not have much knowledge of the *Dhamma* or much experience of insight meditation.

The importance of the *Sakkapañña Sutta* as expounded by Mahāsī Sayādaw is not confined to Buddhists, nor for that matter to a particular segment of the world's population. It concerns the whole of humanity and also all other beings in the universe, and those who practise it diligently may rest well assured of an end to suffering.

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# A Discourse on the Sakkapañha Sutta

## Substance of the Discourse

In Buddhist literature, Sakka is the name given to the king of the gods (*devas*) and *pañha* means question. So the *Sakkapañha Sutta* is the discourse on the welfare of living beings that the Buddha gave to the king of the gods in response to his questions.

Sakka asked the Buddha as follows, “Lord, there are *devas*, human beings, *asuras*, *nāgas*, *gandhabbas* and many other living beings. These beings wish to be free from quarrels, armed conflicts, animosity and unhappiness. Yet they are not free from these evils of life. What is the fetter (*saṃyojana*) that makes them unable to fulfil their wishes?”

Here the *devas* referred to are probably the Catumahārāja and Tāvatiṃsa *devas* for these *devas* were well known to Sakka. We know that the Asura *devas* were originally the enemies of the Tāvatiṃsa *devas*, as their battles are mentioned in the *Dhajagga* and other *suttas*. Formerly they lived in Tāvatiṃsa heaven but, while they were drunk, they were hustled down to the foot of Mount Meru by Sakka. The *nāgas* are a species of serpent who can work wonders with their psychic powers. The *gandhabbas* are a kind of Catumahārāja *deva* who excel in dancing, playing music and the other cultural activities of the celestial world. Then there are *yakkhas* (a kind of demonic god), animals and so forth.

The gods, humans and other beings of the sensual world have their hearts in the right place. They want to be free from hatred, not wishing to bear grudges nor to ill-treat others, nor to be ill-treated or robbed themselves. They do not want to become the enemies of other people. In short, all living beings long for security, peace, freedom and happiness. Yet they are all beset with danger, misery and suffering. What is the fetter that causes this situation? Today we hear the universal clamour for world peace and for the welfare of humanity, but these hopes for a happy world are still far from being realised. This naturally raises the question about the cause of our frustration.

In his reply, the Buddha described envy (*issā*) and meanness (*macchhariya*) as the two fetters that lead to the unhappy plight of humanity.

*Issā* is envy that generates ill-will towards those who excel us. *Macchhariya* is meanness that makes us reluctant to see others become as prosperous as ourselves. These two fetters of envy and meanness frustrate us and cause quarrels, enmity, danger and misery. Those who envy a man because of his

prosperity, influence or status will be unhappy, however much they may talk about their desire for inner peace. Their unhappiness stems from the evil designs they harbour against the object of their envy. Naturally, those whom one envies become one's enemies, and vice versa. Many people suffer from envy, and doubtless this envy will subject them to suffering beyond redemption throughout the cycle of existence.

Again, despite one's desire to avoid conflict, meanness leads to it. One chafes at any person acquiring or using one's property. One resents any intimacy between one's beloved and another person; this is obvious in the case of married couples. Officials are unhappy when they face the prospect of their jurisdiction passing on to others. So meanness leads to enmity, danger, anxiety and misery.

To sum up the Buddha's reply, the root causes of envy and meanness are the sense objects, which one either likes or dislikes, and discursive thinking about them. The remedy is to observe all phenomena arising from the six senses, to avoid unwholesome thoughts, and to entertain only wholesome thoughts.

This, then, is the substance of the discourse. Now a few words about the introduction to the discourse.

### **Introduction to the Discourse**

The introduction to a discourse tells us where, why, to whom and by whom the discourse was given. Thus it serves to establish the authenticity of the Buddha's teaching. Without it, the origin of a discourse is open to question, as in the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, which has no such introduction.

The *Abhidhamma* was preached by the Buddha in Tāvatiṃsa heaven. At that time the Buddha went daily to the Himalayan forest, leaving his proxy, the *Nimmita* Buddha, to carry on his regular teaching. The Buddha gave Venerable Sāriputta a summary of the *Abhidhamma* that he had taught for the day, and the chief disciple in turn preached it to five hundred monks. So the *Abhidhamma* is ascribed to Venerable Sāriputta but, as the commentary says, since he heard it from the Lord, it is the teaching of the Buddha. The *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* has no introductory statement such as, "*Evaṃ me sutam*:" Thus have I heard:" so, according to the commentary, some did not accept it as the true teaching of the Buddha.

So that posterity might have no doubt about the authenticity of the Buddha's teachings, most of those included in the canon at the First Buddhist Council have introductions based on the questions and answers of the leading

elders of the assembly. The exceptions are the *Dhammapada* and a few other discourses.

The introduction to the *Sakkapañha Sutta* is superb as it makes the discourse impressive and highlights the substance of the Buddha's teaching. To record such an important event, Venerable Mahākassapa asked Venerable Ānanda where, to whom and why the discourse was preached, and Venerable Ānanda answered as follows.

Once the Buddha was dwelling in a cave that lay to the east of the city of Rājagaha in the country of Māgadha. At that time Sakka sought to see the Buddha. He had seen the Lord on the eve of His supreme enlightenment and at another time in Jetavana Monastery at Sāvatti, but as he was then not yet spiritually mature, the Buddha did not grant him an interview. Now Sakka had decided to see the Lord, accompanied by his retinue of *devas*, because he hoped to hear a discourse that the Lord might teach to someone among his followers who was worthy of liberation. However, it was largely his fear of death that aroused his strong desire to see the Buddha. For, being aware that the end of his life was approaching, he was anxious for something to rely on for his salvation.

When a *deva* is about to pass away, five signs appear: 1) The flowers on his head wither, 2) His garments become dirty and worn out, 3) Though *devas* never normally sweat, he sweats from the armpits, 4) His youthful appearance gives way to signs of old age. 5) Finally, in the last week of his existence, he becomes weary of life. Having seen these five signs, Sakka reflected on his imminent death and became very depressed. To get over his depression, he decided to visit the Lord and listen to the Dhamma. Consequently, he appeared instantly near the Buddha's residence, with his retinue of *devas*.

According to the commentary on the *Visuddhimagga*, it took Sakka and his followers no longer than it takes to stretch or bend a hand for them to get from Tāvatiṃsa heaven to Māgadha. As the famous commentary says, "Phenomena that arise in one place pass away just there, they do not pass on to another place." The meditator who watches the bending and stretching according to the *Satipatṭhāna* method is aware of the passing away of phenomena several times in an instant. Just as psycho-physical phenomena arise and pass away instantly, so too, the *devas* reached Māgadha within a split second through the successive flux of mind and matter. This was due to the divine power (*kammajiddha*) that gives *devas* a speed far greater than that of modern rockets or spaceships.

Sakka wanted the Buddha's permission for his visit, so he told Pañcasikha *deva* to go and find out first whether the Lord was well disposed to welcome him. In Sakka's statement the word '*pasadeyyāsi*' occurs, which literally means 'to make one cheerful'. According to the commentary, it means gratifying a person and seeking his consent. It is a Pāli expression that Indians of the time used in speaking politely. It is somewhat like the saying of the jackal to the elephant in the Sanskrit work *Hitopadesa*. The jackal said, "My Lord! Kindly make your eyes clear", which means, as the expositor says, "Kindly help me or do me the favour."

So in compliance with Sakka's request, Pañcasikha went to the Buddha's residence. Standing respectfully at a suitable distance from the Lord, he played his harp and sang songs about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Saṅgha and the Arahants. The Buddha would not have approved of the *deva*'s way of honouring him with songs and music any more than he would have approved of some modern Burmese Buddhist practices, such as the melodious recitation of Pāli scriptures, the holding of pagoda festivals on a big scale, the killing of lots of animals for food for celebrations and so forth — practices that do a disservice to the Buddhist religion. However, the Buddha said nothing as he knew that many people would benefit from his dialogue with Sakka. Some of Pañcasikha's songs were sensual in character, for they describe his infatuation with a beautiful goddess, which had made him almost crazy. His frustration shows that the *deva* world does not guarantee the fulfilment of all one's desires and that the life of a *deva* is not always a bed of roses. His songs also contain references to the Buddha, the Arahant, and to the good deeds he had done on earth. He speaks of the bodhisatta who is always mindful, absorbed in *jhāna* and bent on nibbāna.

Here *jhāna* means watching. The object that one watches may be the object of concentration, or it may be the nature of the mind and body such as impermanence, *etc.* After giving up self-mortification, the bodhisatta resorted to breathing exercises and attained *jhāna*. These *jhānic* attainments centre on a single object of attention and may last for a couple of hours. It was through the power of *jhāna* that the bodhisatta gained the knowledge of previous existences (*pubbenivāsañāna*), while sitting under the *Bodhi* tree in the early part of the night. At midnight he attained the divine eye (*dibbacakkhu*), which enabled him to see the passing away and coming into existence of all beings in the universe. In the last part of the night the bodhisatta reflected on dependent origination and attained insight into the arising and dissolution of mind and matter while seeing, hearing, *etc.* This constant mindfulness of the nature of existence is a mark of mature wisdom, but it does not seem to

have been well known to Pañcasikha *deva*. He knew only that the bodhisatta reflected constantly and that he was intent on attaining the Deathless (*amata*) or nibbāna. The word *amata* comes from the Sanskrit *amrita*, which means deathlessness, and so *amata* refers to the deathless or nibbāna.

Questioned by the Buddha as to the origin of his songs, Pañcasikha said that he had composed them for serenading his beloved goddess. She was so delighted with his songs about the Buddha that she had allowed him to spend a day with her, a favour that she did not grant him again. Distraught and frustrated over his unrequited love, the *deva* gave vent to his feelings in his songs. Here the *deva* was no different from the ordinary person who is so overwhelmed with desire that he cannot think rationally.

Once, the disciple of a famous Sayādaw left the Holy Order after an affair with a woman. The Sayādaw's followers blamed the couple but he admonished them thus: "You should not blame them. They have fallen into this predicament under the pressure of their craving. So you should blame their craving." This is indeed a realistic teaching.

When the *deva* paid respect to the Buddha on behalf of his master, the Lord wished Sakka happiness in both body and mind. The Buddha expressed this wish because all living beings want happiness and that is the way that he blessed those who worshipped him. When Sakka expressed his adoration of the Buddha through the *deva* he was not uttering a prayer, but, by the Pāli words "*abhivadeti abhivandati vandati*" we are to understand that he expected to be assured of happiness. In other words, he hoped that the Buddha would say, "May you be happy!"

The Buddha blessed other devotees in the same way. This makes us question the modern practice of giving profuse blessings as a reward for mere devotion. The devotee prays for many things but his prayer is often at odds with the effusive blessing of the officiating monk. In fact, it is not necessary for the devotee to say anything further after expressing his reverence for the three gems (*tiratana*). Not that there are some things for which you should not pray, but there should be no incongruity between the prayer and the blessing. Since the monk usually mentions all the benefits accruing to one who does a good deed, all that he or she has to do is to express the desire to have them. In paying respect to the Buddha, Sakka did not pray for anything, but he was assured of the due benefits as mentioned in the words, "*Abhivādanasīlissa, niccaṃ vuddhāpacāyino, cattāro dhammā vaddhanti, āyu vaṇṇo sukhaṃ balaṃ.*"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dh.p. v.109. "For one who always respects and honours those who are older and more virtuous, four benefits: longevity, beauty, happiness and strength, will increase." (Editor's note).

So it is well for devotees to pray for longevity, health and security, and the monk should bless them accordingly. He should not act as if he were decreeing the fulfilment of their wishes but only as someone contributing to it.

When Sakka and his followers came to pay respect to the Buddha, Sakka said that despite his ardent desire to see the Lord, he had been unable to do so because of his preoccupation with the affairs of the *devas*. He told the Lord how his experience accorded with what he had heard previously. It was said that the *deva* population increased when the Buddha appeared and he had found that this was true. After the Buddha's preaching of the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, some observed the five precepts, some gave alms, and most of them attained the *deva* world after death. At the very least, those who had faith in the Buddha were assured of rebirth in the *deva* world. This was the view that the Buddha did not reject when it was expressed by a *brahmā*.

Faith in the Buddha means faith in the Dhamma and the Saṅgha, and as such it ensures protection from rebirth in the lower worlds. Moreover, even alms-giving to worthy disciples of the Buddha carries more kammic weight than any other act of generosity. Thus a *deva* who, as a lay follower of the Buddha in his previous existence, had given a spoonful of rice to an Arahant, was more powerful than another *deva* who, while on earth, had fed lots of people for many years as an act of charity.

Out of about a hundred million people in the central Gangetic valley, the original home of Buddhism, about eighty million people might have been Buddhists. Except for the Arahants and those at the *Anāgāmi* stage, most of those Buddhists might have attained the *deva* world. This probably accounts for the increase in the *deva* population of those days.

Sakka went on to narrate the story of Gopaka. A princess in the city of Sāvatti named Gopika was full of faith in the Buddha, and observed the five precepts strictly. She loathed womanhood, preferring to be a man, and so after her death she became the son of Sakka and was called Gopaka.

One day Gopaka saw three *gandhabbas* who came to entertain Sakka. He found out that they were formerly three monks whom he had supported. He wondered why they were now reborn as low-class *devas* despite their previous lives, whereas he himself, an ordinary woman in his past existence, had become the son of Sakka by virtue of faith and morality. The three *gandhabbas* then recalled their past lives and realised that their rebirth in the lower order of *devas* was due to their craving for the world of *gandhabbas*. Two of the *devas* practised meditation and attained the *Anāgāmi* stage in a

moment. The other *deva*, however, was unable to overcome his sensual attachment and so remained stuck in his lowly life.

Here, renewal of existence as a *gandhabba*, resulting from attachment to a former life of the same kind, is especially noteworthy. People are likely to be reborn in their native place and environment, which have a special influence over them. The three monks mentioned above are no exception in this respect. King Bimbisāra, who adored the Buddha and gave alms to the Saṅgha liberally for thirty-seven years, became a subordinate of a *Catumahārāja deva* after his death. He could have attained a higher *deva* world but for his attachment in previous lives, which leaves no doubt about the need to overcome attachment to one's native place.

The two *devas* attained *jhāna* because they reflected on their recent practice of the Dhamma, and through insight meditation they reached the *Anāgāmi* stage of the holy path. You need not be disheartened by lack of success in meditation, for persistent effort will lead to rebirth in heaven. There you are assured of unusual spiritual experiences if you remember and continue to practise the Dhamma. For, as a discourse in the *Aṅguttaranikāya* says, the physical body of a *deva* is pure and radiant and the Dhamma becomes clearly manifest to one who has practised in his previous life. It may take some time to recollect, but recollection is instantly followed by attainment of insight knowledge. Some may forget it because of heavenly pleasure, but as *devas* they are physically and mentally alert, and so, once they turn their attention to the Dhamma through reflection or discourses, they understand and attain insight in a short time. If meditators who strive for spiritual experience do not have it in this life, they will certainly have it in the *deva* world.

As the *deva* world teems with sensual pleasure, those who have attained the *Anāgāmi* stage cannot stay there and so they pass on to the *brahmā* world instantly. For Sakka, the transformation of the two *devas* into *brahmās* right before his eyes was very impressive. When he heard Gopaka's explanation, he wished to share their spiritual experience. Moreover, the signs of his imminent death fuelled his desire for the life of a *brahmā*. If he heard the Dhamma, he might have a better future life even if he did not attain any insight. Hearing the Dhamma is indeed the best thing a *deva* can do on his deathbed.

## Sakka's Question and the Buddha's Answer

As getting permission before asking questions is customary for a highly cultured individual, Sakka first sought the Buddha's permission before asking the following:

“Lord! All living beings wish to be free from anger and ill-will. They do not want to quarrel or to be ill-treated, but pray instead for happiness, security, peace and freedom. Yet they are not free from danger and suffering. What is the cause of this situation?”

The Buddha answered, “O King of *devas*! All living beings long for happiness, security, peace and freedom. Yet they are not free from hatred, conflicts, danger and suffering. This unhappy condition is due to the fetters of envy (*issā*) and meanness (*macchariya*).”

The characteristic of envy is aversion to the prosperity and welfare of others, which makes one malicious and destructive. These evil desires occasion suffering right now and also in the future for the person who harbours them, leading also to suffering for those who are envied. All over the world much suffering is caused by envy. The envious person hates to see happy or prosperous people. So the characteristic of envy is resentment of other people’s welfare, its function is to make the envious person miserable, and its manifestation is to shut one’s eyes to another person’s prosperity.

One who is dominated by envy does not want to see another person prosperous, successful, good-looking, educated or promoted to a high official position. Envy is an evil that does not benefit in any way the person who harbours it. It provides fertile soil for bad kamma and makes one miserable. A powerful man will seek to ruin the person whom he envies, and by so doing, he turns the other into his enemy who may pay him back in kind. Even if there is no danger of retaliation, he will surely suffer in an after life.

The *Cūḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta*<sup>1</sup> sums up the kammic consequences of envy as powerlessness and a lack of influence. Some men and women do not want to hear anything about the good fortunes of another person — his wealth, intelligence, good health, eloquence and popularity, and so they say or do things that are detrimental to the other person’s interest. Propaganda in modern times is motivated by envy. The envy-ridden person suffers in hell for many years and after his release from there, if he is reborn in the human world, he becomes a low-class man with little influence and an insignificant reputation.

On the other hand, a man of goodwill rejoices at the good fortune of others. He is happy when he sees or hears of another’s prosperity and helps to promote others’ welfare as much as possible, thus cultivating much good kamma. He attains the *deva* world after death where he enjoys a happy life, and on return to the human world he is powerful and has many followers.

<sup>1</sup> M.iii. p.204.



So those who wish to prosper in this life and in the hereafter should overcome envy and cultivate sympathetic joy (*muditā*). In other words, they should rejoice at the welfare of other people.

### Meanness (*macchhariya*)

*Macchhariya* is meanness to the point of keeping one's possessions secret. Its manifestation is not wanting others to share the object of one's attachment, and it is characterised by extreme possessiveness. It is of five kinds as it relates to: 1) dwellings, 2) friends and associates, 3) material things, 4) commendable attributes, and 5) learning.

The first kind of meanness is to be found among some monks who do not want to see other monks of good moral character dwelling in their monastery. A monk may not want his lay followers to give alms to other monks. Such envious monks, because of their ill-will, have to undergo many kinds of suffering after death.

*Vaṇṇa-macchhariya* is the desire to possess exclusively a special quality, such as physical beauty, while resenting the same quality in others, and it may lead to ugliness.

Again, *dhamma-macchhariya* means to begrudge a person his learning or to keep back any knowledge from him. This *macchhariya* may make its victim a moron or an idiot in after lives. Thus meanness over the good fortune of other people makes a man unhappy, poor, friendless, and subject to great suffering after death.

*Āvāsa-macchhariya* largely concerns the bhikkhus. It is the tendency to regard a communal monastery as one's private residence. For lay people it is the tendency to have a similar attitude regarding public religious buildings such as temples, meditation centres and so forth.

*Kula-macchhariya* dominates those monks who do not want their lay followers to have close relations with other monks. Some monks forbid their disciples to see other monks or to hear their discourses. As for lay people, it is *macchhariya* to insist on the undivided and exclusive loyalty of one's relatives.

*Lābha-macchhariya* is the desire in some monks to have a monopoly of alms and to deny them to other good monks. As an example of the saṃsāric suffering rooted in this evil, there is the story of Losakatissa.

In the lifetime of Kassapa Buddha there lived a certain monk who was dependent on a lay disciple for the necessities of life. One day another monk came and stayed at his monastery. Fearing that his disciple's reverence for the new arrival might become a threat to his security, the resident monk tried

to get rid of his guest. When the disciple invited both of them to take meals at his house, he went there alone. On his return he dumped by the wayside the food offered for the visiting monk. On his death he suffered for aeons in hell and from there he passed on to the animal world where he suffered extreme hunger for many lifetimes.

In his last existence he was reborn in a fisherman's village in the country of Kosala. From the time of his conception, misfortunes befell the villagers and his parents. At last, the pangs of hunger made his mother so desperate that she abandoned the child while he was out begging. Venerable Sāriputta saw the starving child. Moved with pity, the elder took him to his monastery where, some years later, he became a bhikkhu. He was called Venerable Losakatissa because he was so unlucky that he never got a substantial meal even at a great feast. All he got was barely enough to sustain life.

This kammic evil dogged him even when he attained Arahantship. Shortly before his death, Venerable Sāriputta took him into Sāvatti to see to it that he had a proper meal on the last day of his life. It is said that there was no one to offer food to the elder so he sent his companion to a rest-house. Only then did the disciples offer the food, some of which he sent to Venerable Losakatissa, but the men who were supposed to take it to him ate it on the way there. So he had to bring more food himself and hold the bowl while Venerable Losakatissa ate the food. In this way Venerable Losakatissa had his last meal and passed away on that very day.

This story leaves no doubt about the frightful kammic consequences of meanness. Many kinds of meanness afflict lay people, as for example, *lābha-macchariya* in those who seek to monopolize a lucrative business; *vaṇṇa-macchariya* in those who do not recognise the good attributes of others; and *dhamma-macchariya* in those who do not wish to share their knowledge with anyone else.

The Buddha's statement attributing mankind's unhappiness to envy and meanness was directly relevant to Sakka. For, in view of his approaching end, he was unhappy at the prospect of his wives falling into the hands of his successor, and at the thought of the latter outshining him. So from experience he realised the truth of the Buddha's answer and asked another question.

### **Love and Hatred**

"Lord, what is the cause of envy and meanness? What must we remove to be free from them?"

The Buddha answered, “O King of *devas!* Envy and meanness are caused by the objects of love and hatred. If there were no such objects there would be no envy and meanness.”

As the Buddha pointed out, the way to end suffering is to remove its cause, and the cause of mankind’s unhappiness is love and hatred. It is like the treatment of a disease by a competent physician who seeks its cause and eliminates it.

The objects of love are the living and non-living things that please us, such as men, women, sights, sounds, *etc.*, and the objects of hatred are those things that displease us. We envy someone we dislike who owns valuable objects. Ill-will plagues us when we do not want others to have the objects to which we are attached. So envy and meanness have their roots in hated and cherished persons and objects. It is usually someone we hate who is the object of our envy. However, if the person who excels us happens to be our loved one, it is a cause not for envy but for joy. A boy who outshines his parents does not arouse envy in them — on the contrary they will pride themselves on his superior qualities.

The man who is mean wants to deny others the kind of wealth that he has, the use of his possessions and the opportunity to associate with his friends. So jealous men and women frown on their spouses when they have close relationships with members of the opposite sex or even engage in friendly conversation. In short, *macchhariya* is the inclination to be excessively possessive, and to oppose any close contact between other people and the things one cherishes, and so it is rooted in love and hatred.

## **Desire is the Cause of Love and Hatred**

Sakka then asked the Buddha about the cause of love and hatred. The Buddha said that desire was the cause of love and hatred. Here, the desire the Buddha referred to is not wholesome desire but the desire associated with pleasure and craving (*taṇhā chanda*).

Desire is of five kinds:

1. The insatiable desire to seek sensual objects. This desire is the driving force behind men’s ceaseless activities until the moment of death in each existence.

2. The insatiable desire to get sensual objects. When one desire is fulfilled, another arises and so in this way the acquisitive drive never ends. No wonder that even millionaires crave for more wealth and money instead of being content with what they have.

3. The insatiable desire to consume various sensual objects and material goods. People who like shows, songs, *etc.*, never tire of enjoying them.

4. The insatiable desire to store gold, silver, *etc.*, or to hoard money in any form to be used in case of an emergency.

5. The desire that some people have to give money to their followers, employees, *etc.*

These five kinds of desire lead to love and hatred. Those objects and living beings that help to fulfil our desires cause love to arise, while those that obstruct our desires cause hatred.

Sakka then asked the Buddha about the origin of desire. The Buddha answered that desire is caused by discursive thinking (*vitakka*). According to the commentary, *vitakka* means thinking and deciding. This *vitakka* is of two kinds: one is based on desire while the other has its origin in views. In other words, you think and decide when you regard a sense-object, or a person or another living being as pleasant and desirable. Thus, if you are not mindful at the moment of seeing, hearing, *etc.*, you think and decide. This mental action leads to craving and attachment.

Then Sakka asked the Buddha about the cause of discursive thinking. The Buddha replied that discursive thinking is due to perception, which tends to expand or diffuse (*papañca-sañña*). There are three such kinds of perception: craving (*taṇhā*), conceit (*māna*) and wrong-view (*diṭṭhi*). Like a small photograph that can be enlarged, every mental image or thought lends itself to expansion. An unmindful person usually falls prey to one of these agents of expansion. He expands every sense-object that he perceives and remembers because of his attachment, conceit or wrong-view.

## The Conquest of Craving

At the moment of seeing one sees only visible form, but then reflection brings into play craving, conceit and wrong-view. Craving makes the form appear pleasant and amplifies it. The same happens with conceit and wrong-view.<sup>1</sup> So later, every recollection of the moment of seeing leads to thinking and decision, which in turn causes desire. Again, desire leads to love and hatred that make a man prey to envy and ill-will. These cause the frustration and suffering of humanity.

In response to Sakka's request, the Buddha explained the practice for overcoming craving, conceit and wrong-view. According to him, there are

<sup>1</sup> In the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* one finds the standard phrase, "This is mine, I am this, this is my self." "This is mine" is deciding based on craving, "I am this" is deciding based on conceit, and "This is my self" is deciding based on views. (Editor's note).

two kinds of pleasant feeling and two kinds of unpleasant feeling: the pleasant or unpleasant feeling that we should harbour and the pleasant or unpleasant feeling that we should avoid. Then there is neutral feeling that we have when we are neither happy nor unhappy. This is also of two kinds.

Pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling is to be harboured if it leads to wholesome states of consciousness; it should be avoided if it leads to unwholesome states of consciousness. The commentary describes this teaching as insight practice on the noble path.

The Pāli text of the Buddha's teaching may be translated as follows:

“Sakka, I teach two kinds of pleasant feeling: the pleasant feeling that is to be harboured and the pleasant feeling that is to be avoided. If you know that a pleasant feeling helps to develop unwholesome states of consciousness and to hamper wholesome ones, you should not harbour such a feeling. If you know that a pleasant feeling helps to develop wholesome states of consciousness and to hamper unwholesome ones, you should harbour such a feeling. The pleasant feeling is of two kinds: one, which is bound up with thinking and reflection<sup>1</sup> and the other, which is unconnected with these mental activities. Of these two the pleasant feeling that has nothing to do with thinking and reflection is far superior.”

## **Pleasant Feeling and Unwholesome Thoughts**

Pleasant feelings that lead to unwholesome thoughts are rooted in sensual things. Most people are preoccupied with such things as sex and food. If they get what they want, they rejoice. However, their joy leads to more desire, and so for many people their so-called happiness is founded on desire. If this desire is not fulfilled they are frustrated and unhappy. This means the emergence of unwholesome thoughts, which bring the agents of expansion, namely craving, conceit and wrong-view, into play. The pleasant feelings that we should avoid are mentioned in the *Sālāyatanavibhaṅga Sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*. The discourse likens sense-objects to human dwellings because they keep people in confinement. People derive pleasure from contact with them or from memories of that contact. There are six kinds of pleasant feelings rooted in the six sense-objects and their respective sense-organs.

The way to avoid pleasant, but unwholesome, feelings is to be mindful at the moment of seeing, *etc.* If sensual thoughts cause pleasure, the meditator must note and reject them. However, a beginner cannot follow and note all the mental processes, so he starts with the object of contact and becomes

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<sup>1</sup> *Vitakka* and *Vicāra* are translated as thought-conception and discursive thinking in Nyanatiloka's 'Buddhist Dictionary.'

aware of one of the primary elements: solidity, cohesion, temperature and motion (*paṭhavī, āpo, tejo, vāyo*).

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* the Buddha says, “When walking he [the meditator] knows, ‘I am walking’ (*Gacchanto vā gacchāmi’ti pajānāti*).” This saying refers to clear awareness of rigidity and motion (*vāyo*), but as he notes walking, the meditator is also aware of the hardness and softness (*paṭhavī*), the warmth and coldness (*tejo*) and the heaviness and dampness (*āpo*) in the feet and the body. Though the element of *āpo* is intangible it can be known through contact with the other elements that are bound up with it.

Meditators at our meditation centre in Rangoon begin with contact and motion in the abdomen, which are the easiest and most obvious to note while sitting. The tenseness and motion in the abdomen are the marks of the *vāyo* element. They practise noting (in their own language) the rising and falling of the abdomen. This practice has helped many meditators to attain insights and make significant progress on the holy path.

In the beginning, the meditator constantly watches the abdominal rising and falling. He notes any mental event that occurs while engaged in such concentration. A feeling of joy may arise but it disappears when it is noted and usually does not intrude if the meditator keeps on watching the rising and falling. When the Buddha speaks of unwholesome joy, this means that we should focus on mind and matter in order to head off sensual joy, and that if such joy arises we should note it and reject it at once.

## Wholesome Joy

Then there is wholesome joy, which the Buddha describes in the same discourse as follows. Having realised the impermanence and dissolution of matter, the meditator knows that all matter that he has seen before and is seeing now is subject to impermanence (*anicca*) and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*). This insight knowledge causes joy, and such joy may be described as the pleasant feeling that is rooted in liberation from sensual desire.

This is part of the teaching in the discourse. The commentary adds that the meditator is joyful because he attains insight into impermanence, *etc.*, as a result of his mindfulness of the six sense-objects. Such joy is wholesome and desirable.

The commentary describes four kinds of wholesome joy:

1. the joy due to renunciation of worldly affairs,
2. the joy associated with insight practice,
3. the joy based on contemplation of the Buddha, *etc.*, and
4. the joy resulting from absorption in the first *jhāna*, *etc.*

Some people are joyful when they think of their renunciation of worldly affairs, their ordination as bhikkhus and the practice of the monastic discipline, concentration and so forth. Feelings of joy also arise when they hear a discourse on the Dhamma or when they go to a meditation centre for the practice of insight meditation. This joy is wholesome since it is dissociated from secular life.

The joy dependent on insight may be the joy that arises while one is being mindful. In particular the highest joy is the joy associated with the emergence of insight into the arising and passing away of phenomena (*udayabbayañāṇa*).

The joy that we have when we contemplate the Buddha, *etc.*, is obvious. The commentaries say that concentration on the joy derived from the six contemplations on the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Saṅgha, on one's morality, on one's generosity, and on heavenly beings, can bring about knowledge and fruition of the path. Even Arahantship may be attained if the meditator notes and reflects on the dissolution and cessation of joy (*pīti*) that is born of these six contemplations. *Pīti* means joy and obviously the joy derived from the six contemplations is wholesome. So, too, is the joy based on the three *jhānas* or their access concentration (*upacāra samādhi*).

Of the four kinds of renunciation, joining the Saṅgha means freedom from marital responsibilities. One who practices insight meditation (*vipassanā*) is also aloof from attachment and all sensual objects. So the commentary on the *Itiuttaka* describes ordination, the first *jhāna*, nibbāna, *vipassanā* and all wholesome *dhammas* as renunciation (*nekkhamma*).

The joy that is marked by thinking and reflection is of two kinds: happiness (*sukha*) that is associated with access-concentration (*upacāra samādhi*) and happiness associated with the first *jhāna*. Then, as mentioned before, there are various types of mundane joy: joy over one's ordination, joy that results from insight practice, the joy of contemplating the Buddha, *etc.* Again, we have four kinds of supramundane joy associated with the four paths of the first *jhāna*.

Superior to these types of joy are those that have nothing to do with thinking and reflection (*vitakka-vicāra*). This is the attribute of the second *jhāna*; which is marked by joy (*pīti*), bliss (*sukha*) and one-pointedness of mind (*ekaggatā*); and the attribute of the third *jhāna*, which is also marked by joy and one-pointedness. Such *jhānic* joy is mundane joy. The joy derived from the four supramundane paths and from the second and third *jhānas* is free from thinking and reflection and is therefore wholesome. These second and third *jhānic* joys are far superior to the first *jhānic* joy or the joy associated with wholesome thoughts in the sensual sphere; and so too is the joy of insight resulting from attentiveness to the second and third *jhānic* joy.

A discussion of these joys that are with or without thinking and reflection, is beyond the comprehension of those who have little knowledge of the scriptures. It can be understood thoroughly only by those who have attained *jhāna*.

According to the commentary, when Sakka asked the Buddha how to overcome desire, conceit and wrong-view (*taṇhā, māna, diṭṭhi*), he was asking the Buddha about the practice of insight on the noble path. The Buddha stressed wholesome pleasure, wholesome displeasure and wholesome indifference as the remedy. It may be hard for unenlightened people to understand this but the Buddha's answer is relevant to the question.

For the *devas*, mind is more obvious than matter, and among the elements of mind, feeling is more obvious than the others. So the Buddha told Sakka to contemplate his feelings (*vedanā*). In many of the Buddha's teachings on insight meditation, contemplating matter takes precedence over contemplating consciousness. This is also true of the *Sakkapañha Sutta* but here no mention is made of matter since it is implicit in the contemplation of feeling.

### Insight Meditation

The object of insight practice is to note all psycho-physical phenomena that arise from contact with sense-objects. It involves the effort to observe empirically all phenomena as they really are, together with their characteristics such as impermanence, *etc.* At first the meditator cannot focus on every mental and physical process and so he should begin with a few obvious events. When he walks he should note 'walking' and so on. By watching every bodily action he usually becomes aware of the element of motion and other primary elements. This accords with the teaching of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*: "When walking he [the meditator] knows, 'I am walking' (*Gacchanto vā gacchāmi 'ti pajānāti*)."

The meditator tends to be slack if he focuses on just one posture, for example, sitting. So, to keep him alert, we instruct him to focus on the rising and falling of the abdomen. With the development of concentration, he becomes aware of the element of motion (*vāyo*) whenever he focuses on the rising and falling. Later on the distinction between the rising and consciousness; between the falling and consciousness; between the lifting of the foot and consciousness and so forth, becomes clear to him. This discriminative insight into mind and matter is called *nāmarūpaparicchedañāna*.

With the further development of concentration, the meditator knows that he bends his hand because of the desire to bend it, that he sees because he has eyes and there is an object to be seen, that he knows because of an object to be known;



that he does not know because of his unmindfulness; that he likes a thing because of his ignorance; that he seeks to fulfil his desire because of his attachment; that good or bad results follow from his actions and so on. This is *paccayapariggahañāṇa* or insight into the primacy of the law of cause and effect.

This is followed by *sammasanañāṇa*, which means insight into the impermanent, unsatisfactory and impersonal characteristics of all phenomena — an insight born of reflection on their arising and passing away.

Then the meditator knows that everything arises and vanishes rapidly. His perception is so keen that nothing escapes his attention. He tends to see lights and to be overly ecstatic and joyful. This pleasant feeling arises together with the extraordinary insight into the flux of mind and matter (*udayabbayañāṇa*). It surpasses all other kinds of joy and is described as a mental state that we should welcome. The *Dhammapada* speaks of the surpassing joy and ecstasy arising in the meditator who contemplates the Dhamma rightly, *i.e.* the impermanence of mind and matter. This state of consciousness is called the Deathless (*amata*) because it is the forerunner of nibbāna, which the meditator will surely attain if he strives for it with faith, will and diligence.

Rapture and joy are called *pamojja* and *pīti* in Pāli. *Pamojja* is the rapture that occurs with the emergence of insight into the impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self characteristics of all phenomena (*sammasanañāṇa*). *Pīti* means the extreme joy that accompanies *udayabbayañāṇa* — the perception of the rapid arising and dissolution of phenomena. It develops while the meditator is mindful of the rising and falling of the abdomen, or of the sensations in the body, or while his attention is focused on his bodily movements. He rarely suffers unbearable pain. If pain does occur sometimes, it vanishes instantly as soon as he notes it. Then he feels extremely elated and this elation continues to be intense as long as he is mindful of the rapidity with which each phenomenon arises and passes away.

As with the first three *jhānas*, the meditator feels very happy when he attains *udayabbayañāṇa*. At this stage he describes his happiness as an ineffable experience that surpasses all similar states of consciousness. In the *Sakkapañha Sutta* it is called *sevittabbasomanassa*, that is, the pleasant feeling that we should seek.

## Unpleasant Feelings to be Sought or Avoided

The discourse mentions two kinds of unpleasant feeling: the unpleasant feeling that leads to unwholesome kamma (acts, words or thoughts) and the unpleasant feeling that leads to wholesome kamma. The former is to be

avoided whilst the latter is to be welcomed. Unpleasant feelings that result in wholesome kamma are commendable, being conducive to the practice of *jhāna*, the holy path and its fruition, but they should not be deliberately sought.

The *Salāyatanavibhaṅga Sutta* tells us what kind of sorrow we should welcome and what kind of sorrow we should avoid. We usually grieve over the lack of pleasant, desirable sense-objects in the present or over our failure to have acquired these objects in the past. We are unhappy when we have to face dangers and unpleasant objects, when we worry over the possibility of future suffering and danger, or when we think of our past suffering. Such unpleasant feelings do us no good and produce only pain and unwholesome thoughts.

Those who harbour unpleasant feelings cannot contemplate the Buddha image with zeal and concentration because they are so distracted. A calm mind is essential if contemplation of the Buddha is to be worthwhile. Without it there will be only unwholesome thoughts. These feelings are also a hindrance to good deeds so we should try to overcome them. Yet some people seem to welcome suffering and may not like you if you tell them not to grieve over the loss of their loved ones. On the contrary, they may thank you when you say something to justify their grief.

We should keep in mind the law of kamma — the Buddha's teaching that everything happens according to one's actions — and bear our misfortunes calmly. The best remedy in a crisis is the practice of tranquillity or insight meditation. If sorrow, grief or depression afflicts us during our meditation, such unwholesome states of consciousness must be noted and removed. The Buddha describes the *Satipaṭṭhāna* method as the only way to get over grief and to end all suffering. So long as we remain mindful, as explained in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* teaching, we need never feel depressed, and if depression arises, it passes away as soon as we focus our attention on it.

There are many things in life that make us unhappy: frustrated desires, lack of success, loss of property and so forth. Brooding over our misfortunes leads to depression but we should overcome it through mindfulness. Our method is to watch constantly the abdominal rising and falling, the fact of sitting, *etc.*

The practice of mindfulness was crucial to Sakka, for in the face of his imminent death, which would surely bring about the loss of heavenly bliss and sensual pleasure, he was very depressed. So the Buddha's teaching was realistic and very opportune.

I will now give a translation of the Pāli text in the *Salāyatanavibhaṅga Sutta* about the unpleasant feeling that we should welcome.

“After having observed and realised the impermanence of visual forms, their dissolution and passing away, the meditator gains a true insight into the nature of things as they are, that is, into their impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality. As a result, the desire for the goal of the noble path, the noble and peerless freedom, arises in him. He looks forward to the day when he will attain the abode of *Ariyas* who have won such freedom. This longing for *Ariyan* liberation causes pain and sorrow, and this unpleasant feeling is called *nekkhamassita-domanassa*, that is pain or sorrow (*domanassa*) due to the desire for renunciation.”

Those who observe the psycho-physical phenomena as they arise from the six senses realise their impermanence, *etc.*, and with only a theoretical understanding of the *Ariyan dhamma*, they may keep on meditating in the hope of attaining the goal. However if their hope does not materialise in due course they will get dejected. This mental pain is caused by the desire for renunciation.

This needs some explanation. The meditator who lacks experience in tranquillity, absorption or concentration begins with contemplating mind and matter arising from the six sense-organs. However, it is not easy for a beginner to follow this process thoroughly. He would be well advised to begin with the four primary elements as suggested in the *Visuddhimagga* or with the element of motion in the rising and falling of the abdomen, a method that we teach at our meditation centre.

While he is mindful of the rising and falling, he should note any thought (intention, desire, *etc.*) sensation (heat, pain, *etc.*) or contact with sense-objects (seeing, hearing, *etc.*) that occurs. However, when concentration is weak, the true nature of mind and matter is not apparent. With the development of concentration the mind becomes calm, pure and free from hindrances. Every thought or feeling is noted and removed. The meditator has then reached the stage known as purification of mind (*cittavisuddhi*). Later on he grasps the distinction between mind, which knows, and matter, which is known. This is the discriminating insight into mind and matter (*nāmarūpaparicchedañāṇa*) and purification of view (*ditthivisuddhi*). The meditator gains the further insight that distinguishes between cause and effect (*paccayapariggahañāṇa*) leaving him free from all doubts (*kaṅkhāvitarāṇavisuddhi*).

The meditator now clearly comprehends that every phenomenon is subject to impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self (*sammasaṇāṇa*), and he quickly perceives the instant dissolution of everything that arises (*udayab-bayañāṇa*). At this stage the desire to be liberated arises and he longs to attain a certain stage on the holy path within a limited period of time. If his hope

is not fulfilled he is sad and disappointed, a prey to doubt and despair, but since this feeling may serve as an incentive to further effort, it is a blessing in disguise — though it should not be sought deliberately.

Of course the best thing for the meditator to do is to make uninterrupted progress from the outset, so that his insights and experiences will bring him great pleasure. So the discourse places the emphasis on the joy rather than the sorrow to be derived from renunciation. Nevertheless, for the meditator who fails to achieve success within the desired time, depression is inevitable.

At our meditation centre we explain the successive stages of insight to a few qualified meditators to help them evaluate their experiences. We confine the teaching to a select few because it serves no purpose in the case of those who have no experience in meditation. It is beneficial only to experienced meditators insofar as it serves as a spur to further effort. Those who hope to hear our teachings without having gained sufficient insights become dejected when their wish is unfulfilled. This dejection will do them good since it encourages them to exert more effort and so leads them to experiences in accordance with our teachings, which they can then joyfully evaluate.

Some meditators are disheartened because of their weak concentration at the outset, but as a result they redouble their efforts and attain unusual insights. So the meditator may benefit from his despair at this stage. According to the commentary, we should welcome despair that arises out of our frustrated desires for renunciation, meditation, reflection (*anussati*) and *jhāna*. We should turn to good account the despair or sorrow over our inability to become a bhikkhu, to practise meditation, to hear the Dhamma, or even to visit a pagoda. As an example of this wholesome sorrow, there is the story of a Buddhist woman in Sri Lanka.

The woman's parents went to a pagoda, leaving their daughter at home because she was expecting a baby. As the pagoda was not far away she saw it illuminated and heard the Dhamma recited by the monks. Her heart sank at the thought of the bad kamma that prevented her from going with her parents, but then she rejoiced over the good kamma of the pilgrims there. Her rejoicing turned into ecstasy (*ubbega-pīti*), and suddenly she rose into the air and found herself on the platform of the pagoda. Thus the woman's wholesome sorrow helped to bring about miraculously the fulfilment of her wholesome desire.

The commentary on the *Sakkapañha Sutta* cites the story of Venerable Mahāsiva as an illustration of wholesome sorrow that leads to Arahantship.

Venerable Mahāsiva was a great teacher who had many disciples, and those who practised insight meditation under his guidance became Arahants. Seeing

that his teacher had not yet attained the supreme goal, one of these Arahants once asked him for a lesson in the Dhamma. Venerable Mahāsiva replied that he had no time to teach the lesson, being engaged the whole day in answering the questions of his disciples, removing their doubts and so forth.

Then the bhikkhu said, “Venerable sir, you should at least have the time to contemplate the Dhamma in the mornings. As matters stand, you will not even have the time to die. You are the mainstay for other people yet you have no support yourself. So, I do not want your lesson.” Saying this, he rose into the air and went.

This made Venerable Mahāsiva realise that the bhikkhu had not come to learn the Dhamma but to warn him against complacency. Disillusioned, he left the monastery and retired to a secluded place, where he practised insight meditation strenuously. However, despite his persistent and painstaking efforts, he failed to gain any unusual insights, and even after many years was still far from his goal. At last, when he had become extremely depressed and began shedding tears, a goddess appeared and started crying too. The elder asked her why she was crying and she replied that she expected to attain insights by crying.

This brought the elder to his senses. Pulling himself together, he practised mindfulness, and having passed through the successive stages of illumination on the holy path, he finally attained Arahantship. After all, under favourable circumstances, a meditator can attain insight in a short time. The elder’s initial failure, despite his strenuous efforts, might have been due to discursive thinking stemming from his extensive learning.

Thus the disillusionment that prompted Venerable Mahāsiva to make further effort on the path is the kind of wholesome sorrow that we should welcome. The *Sakkapañña Sutta* mentions two kinds of wholesome sorrow: one with discursive thinking and the other without it, but in reality every sorrow is bound up with thinking, and we speak only metaphorically of the sorrow that is without thinking.

In short, sorrow is unwholesome if it originates in sensual desire or worldly affairs, and so we should avoid the kind of thoughts that lead to it. If sorrow arises spontaneously, we must not harbour it, but should fix the mind on other objects, and it will vanish of its own accord. On the other hand, sorrow is wholesome when it arises from our frustrated efforts to promote our spiritual life, such as our attempt to join the Holy Order, to attain insights and so forth. We should welcome such sorrow for it may spur us on to greater effort and lead to progress on the holy path. It should not, however, be sought deliberately. The best thing is to experience wholesome joy in the search for enlightenment.

## Wholesome and Unwholesome Indifference

*Upekkhā* means indifferent feeling, which is neither joy nor sorrow. It arises more often than the other feelings, joy and sorrow being occasional states of consciousness, but it is apparent only when concentration is powerful. Again, indifference is of two kinds: wholesome indifference that leads to good deeds and unwholesome indifference that leads to bad deeds. The *Salāyatanavibhaṅga Sutta* mentions six types of indifference that arise from the six senses.

The unwholesome indifference that arises from the senses in ignorant and confused persons, is called *gehasita-upekkhā*. We feel joy at the sight of a pleasant object and sorrow at the sight of an unpleasant object, but we have indifferent feelings, which are neither good nor bad, when we see very familiar people or objects. For example, we feel neither pleasure nor displeasure when we see a tree or a stone.

Unwholesome indifference is found among common people (*puthujjana*), unlike *Ariyas* or even refined people (*kalyāṇa puthujjana*), who are aware of impermanence, *etc.* This state of consciousness arises in ignorant commoners, and here we mean those ignorant people who do not know the real nature of sense-objects, because of their lack of mindfulness. As a result they remain unaware of impermanence and are wedded to the illusion that all phenomena are permanent and good.

The commentary gives further details about the ignorant person who is subject to unwholesome indifference. He is not an *Ariya* at the stream-winner stage (*sotāpanna*), which marks the conquest of the defilements that lead to the lower worlds; or at the once-returner stage (*sakadāgāmi*), which ensures freedom from gross sensual desire and ill-will; or at the non-returner stage (*anāgāmi*), which means the total elimination of these two defilements. Not having done away with any one of the defilements, the commoner who suffers from unwholesome indifference is not one of these three types of *Ariya*.

He is also not a person who has neutralised the effect of kamma. It is only the Arahant who can overcome kammic effects such as rebirth-consciousness, *etc.* These two negative attributes, namely, being still prone to defilements and being still subject to the law of kamma, show that unwholesome indifference arises only in non-*ariyan puthujjana*. By *puthujjana* the commentary means the ordinary person who is devoid of insight and knowledge.

He is described as a person who does not see the evils of delusion (*moha*). Owing to his lack of mindfulness he does not understand the truth, believing instead in the illusion of a permanent ego. This illusion leads him to

pleasurable desire, to attachment and to the effort for self-fulfilment. This effort in turn gives rise to good or bad kamma, resulting in rebirth, which brings old age, sickness, death and all other sufferings.

The ordinary person does not see these evils of illusion nor does he have knowledge. Knowledge is of two kinds: knowledge of the Buddha's teaching through hearing discourses, *etc.*, and empirical knowledge gained through meditation and insight on the path. Both kinds of knowledge are foreign to him, so he has the indifference that is born out of illusion. The sense-objects cause neither joy nor pain in him but he nevertheless remains steeped in the world of the senses. Hence the term *gehasita-upekkhā* is used where *geha* means the house of the senses. In other words, the ordinary person does not outgrow the phenomenal or the sensual world, and so remains blind to its real nature: its impermanence and other characteristics.

The commentary on the *Sakkapañha Sutta* explains wholesome indifference at length on the basis of what is said in the *Salāyatanavibhaṅga Sutta*. Wholesome indifference, or renunciation-oriented indifference, is called *nekkhammasita-upekkhā* and is of six kinds, depending on the six senses. The meditator who is mindful of the passing away of all sense-objects realises that every phenomenon is subject to impermanence, suffering and dissolution. This insight into the reality of the universe leads him to a feeling of equanimity, which helps him to outgrow the sensual world and to free himself from attachments. He is then indifferent to both pleasant and unpleasant sense-objects.

For the meditator who is mindful and has developed concentration, everything arises only to pass away instantly. The discourses usually stress this fact with reference to visual objects in the first place, but in practice it is initially apparent with regard to the objects of contact and thought. If any thought arises while being attentive to the rising and falling of the abdomen, it vanishes the instant the mind is fixed on it. With the development of concentration the meditator becomes aware of the rising and of the falling separately, and later on his awareness extends to the repeated disappearance of each of them. At this stage of insight into dissolution (*bhaṅgañāṇa*) he sees the abdomen, hands, *etc.*, not as solid things but as phenomena that vanish ceaselessly and instantaneously.

The ceaseless dissolution of phenomena becomes more apparent with the development of *bhaṅgañāṇa* so that the meditator finally realises the law of impermanence. Knowing thus the nature of mind and matter as it really is, he feels neither joy nor sorrow, but simply remains aware of the sense-objects. This fleeting awareness leads to a feeling of indifference, which is more

predominant when knowledge of dissolution and knowledge of equanimity with regard to formations (*sañkhārupekkhāñāṇa*) flash across the mind.

At these stages on the path the meditator is neither pleased nor displeased with the sight of pleasant or unpleasant objects. He is above attachments with regard to sights, sounds, *etc.*, and his indifference is beyond the sensual world. In fact this is the goal of insight meditation practice, which is freedom.

The meditator should seek this wholesome, insight-oriented equanimity. It is first experienced at the advanced stage of rising and passing away, and is most pronounced at the stage of equanimity with regard to formations (*sañkhārupekkhāñāṇa*). According to the discourse, it is of two kinds, namely equanimity with discursive thinking and equanimity without such thinking. In reality all equanimity that occurs during contemplation involves discursive thinking. However, the equanimity that arises while watching the sensual and first *jhānic* consciousness is called equanimity with discursive thinking, whilst that which occurs while absorbed in the second *jhānic* state is called equanimity without discursive thinking. Of the two kinds of equanimity, the one without discursive thinking is superior.

### The Rebirth of Sakka

The main aim of insight meditation is to seek and cultivate the equanimity that is associated with the knowledge of equanimity with regard to formations. To this end we should avoid sensuous joy, and should seek wholesome joy in good deeds and contemplation. Likewise we should welcome wholesome sorrow arising from the frustration of our efforts on the holy path, and we should avoid unwholesome sorrow. Similarly, we should avoid the unwholesome equanimity of the sensual world and seek the wholesome equanimity of the holy path.

Here the emphasis is on the positive aspect of the practice. In other words, we should concentrate on wholesome joy, wholesome sorrow and wholesome equanimity, because the cultivation of these wholesome states of consciousness means the elimination of their negative, *i.e.* unwholesome, counterparts.

We should also eliminate wholesome sorrow through wholesome joy. This means that if we are depressed because of our failure to make much progress on the holy path, we must overcome this depression by exerting more effort to attain insight. Likewise, wholesome joy must be rejected through wholesome equanimity, as this wholesome equanimity through insight is the pinnacle of the holy life. However, the joy attained in insight meditation is not to be wholly rejected because this joy forms the basis for the first three *jhānic* paths and their fruitions. Moreover, the meditator who does not attain *jhāna* cannot attain the



fourth *jhānic* path, which is the path with equanimity. He can attain only the first three *jhānas* with joy. He usually attains the path and its fruition through the stage of adaptation knowledge (*anulomañāṇa*) with joy. Hence the Buddha's emphasis on *vipassanā upekkhā* as the highest state of consciousness.

Thus *saṅkhārupekkhā* insight with joy or with equanimity is only one step removed from the holy path and its fruition. If the meditator does not become complacent with this insight, he usually attains the path in four or five days. So equanimity with renunciation-joy should be sought since it is conducive to the holy life at the level of the path of insight.

A meditator should subordinate wholesome sorrow to wholesome joy, and even wholesome joy to wholesome equanimity, until attaining the knowledge of equanimity with regard to formations. This means the attainment of the four stages of the holy path, and the extinction of desire, conceit and wrong-view. Summarising this, the Buddha said to Sakka, "O King of *devas*! The bhikkhu who avoids unwholesome *dhammas* and seeks wholesome *dhammas* is committed to the middle way of the good life that leads to nibbāna, the extinction of all defilements."

While following the Buddha's discourse, Sakka contemplated his states of consciousness, cultivated wholesome joy and wholesome equanimity, developed insight knowledge and became a *sotāpanna*. This was followed by his demise and rebirth as a new Sakka. He attained only the first stage of the holy path as his spiritual potential was limited.

The rebirth of Sakka shows that a dying *deva* can benefit by hearing the Dhamma. Through mindfulness of wholesome emotions the meditator can make good progress on the holy path, and the most common of these emotions is wholesome joy. In Sri Lanka, Venerable Phussadeva became an Arahant after contemplating the joy that arose in him at the sight of the Buddha image. The queen of King Asoka also attained the stream-winner stage after contemplating the joy that welled up in her when she heard a bird, whose singing sounded like the voice of the Buddha. According to the commentaries, the meditator may even attain Arahantship while contemplating wholesome joy, or he may attain the holy path and its fruition through the contemplation of generosity or morality, and the impermanence of the wholesome joy that results from his recollection of them.

Having attained the first stage, Sakka became wholly free from doubt and the illusion of an ego-entity. The freedom that he now enjoyed was superior to any that he had experienced in the past, in that it was the freedom of a stream-winner, whereas formerly his freedom had been based on knowledge and thinking.

## The Virtue of Monastic Restraint

Sakka asked the Buddha about the relationship between morality and the holy life. “Lord, what is the moral practice that protects one from the lower worlds or from unwholesome deeds, words or thoughts?”

The Buddha said that there are two kinds of deeds: wholesome deeds and unwholesome deeds. He classified speech and livelihood in the same way. Any action, speech or means of livelihood that contributes to good kamma is wholesome, and any that contributes to bad kamma is unwholesome. Unwholesome actions are killing, stealing and indulging in sexual misconduct. Abstinence from these actions constitutes wholesome action. These are the precepts for lay disciples, but there are many more precepts that the bhikkhus have to observe in accordance with the teachings of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*.

Lies, slander, abuse, and idle, frivolous talk are unwholesome verbal actions, whereas abstaining from such unwholesome speech is wholesome verbal action. To make one’s living through unwholesome actions or unwholesome speech is likewise unwholesome livelihood. Conversely, wholesome livelihood is that which has nothing to do with such action or speech. It follows that, for the layman, the observance of the five precepts ensures moral purity.

Some people may say that the precepts refer only to lying and do not explicitly enjoin abstinence from the other kinds of wrong speech and wrong livelihood. However, abstinence from lying implies abstinence from the other kinds of unwholesome speech since all of these evils involve false assertions. Likewise, we avoid wrong livelihood if we avoid killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and selling intoxicants, since keeping the five precepts entails avoiding these immoral actions, whether it is to earn one’s living or for any other reason. So the five precepts constitute the basic moral restraint for the laity.

## The Virtue of Sense-faculty Restraint

Then Sakka asked the Buddha how a bhikkhu should practise sense-restraint (*indriyasamvarasīla*). *Indriya* means to govern or control, and here it refers to the six governing sense-organs, namely the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body and the mind. These six govern seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and consciousness respectively. Sakka asked the Buddha how one should guard these senses.

The Buddha made a distinction between two kinds of sense-objects: those that should be accepted and those that should be rejected. One should accept the sense-objects that discourage bad kamma and encourage good kamma;

and one should ignore those that discourage good kamma and encourage bad kamma. We should avoid looking at objects that cause pleasure, anger, *etc.* If they are unavoidable, we ought to stop thinking and practise some kind of contemplation; or we should make a note of seeing, and stop short of letting the mind wander beyond bare awareness. This is the way to reject unwholesome sense-objects.

Similarly, we should not pay attention to unwholesome kamma. On the other hand we should listen to the recitation of the Dhamma, as it is obviously the mainspring of good kamma. Whatever the sound may be, if we focus on hearing and note its qualities of impermanence, *etc.*, this will contribute to the development of insight.

The enjoyment of the sense of smell usually causes bad kamma. On rare occasions it induces good kamma as, for instance, when we note the fragrance of flowers offered at the shrine, with reference to the three characteristics. The same may be said of tastes, but since we cannot live without food, we can avoid bad kamma only by eating mindfully. It is also good for us if we can avoid very delicious food, and of course, we should always avoid any food or drink that is intoxicating. Although we may eat good food, we can avoid defilement if we do not crave for or care about its delicacy. This degree of restraint is impossible for unmindful persons.

Bodily contact also usually leads to unwholesome kamma. It is not possible to avoid all touching, but we should avoid, as far as possible, sexual contact, which causes pleasure and attachment. We should restrain the senses so that we can detach ourselves, and thus disregard delightful or painful sensations. The best way to gain total restraint is, as mentioned before, to note the impermanence, *etc.*, of all tactile sensations. Good kamma arises through mindfulness of all tactile impressions in accordance with the *Satipatthāna Sutta*. Discriminative and discursive thinking about men, women, enemies, and so on, is to be avoided since it leads to passion, ill-will and the other defilements. Should such thoughts occur, they must be replaced with meditation on the Buddha, one's morality, *etc.*, and their arising and passing away should be noted.

There are many other discourses that contain the Buddha's teaching about the restraint of the senses. Typical of these teachings is the following advice: "When you see a man or a woman you should not think of his or her physical features. You should avoid noticing the eyes, eyebrows and other particular features of the body as this will surely give rise to defilements."

Men should not think of a woman's physical features as a whole, or the particular features such as hair, mouth, bosom and so forth, and likewise,

women should avoid thinking of those of a man, for such thinking fuels the passions. The meditator must give bare attention to seeing and avoid thinking about the physical form as a whole or about the different parts of the body.

The Buddha pointed out the evils arising from lack of sense-restraint: “One who does not guard his eyes is forever beset with craving and ill-will”, but this restraint must be exercised in the proper way. The meditator must avoid looking at familiar objects (pleasant or unpleasant) that arouse unwholesome thoughts. If he sees them by chance he should pay no attention to their form, colour, *etc.*, and should retain no impression of them. He simply keeps himself aware of what he is seeing and bears in mind its impermanence, *etc.*

The same may be said of the other senses: hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. With the development of concentration, the meditator can focus on all psycho-physical phenomena and realise their characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self, thereby leaving little room for the emergence of defilements. This is the best way to restrain the senses, and through such sense-restraint the meditator can attain the holy path and its fruition, after passing through the successive stages of insight. The attainment of Arahantship in this way is mentioned in the following story of Mahātissa thera from the *Visuddhimagga*.

### **The Story of Mahātissa Thera**

While Mahātissa thera was on the way to Anurādhapura to collect alms, he met a woman. Having quarrelled with her husband, she had set out for her parents’ home. She was well dressed and at the sight of the elder she laughed seductively. Formerly the elder had often reflected on the impurity of the human body, and so, on looking at the woman, he had a vision of a loathsome skeleton. Consequently he attained the first *jhāna*, and through insight meditation, became an Arahant. The husband, having followed the woman, met the elder and asked him whether he had seen a woman. The elder replied that he had seen only a skeleton that had gone along the road.

The elder must have practised contemplation on the impurity of the body for a long time. His experience is a lesson for meditators who are disheartened by their lack of progress, for they will attain insight in due course if they keep on trying.

### **The Story of Cittagutta Thera**

The restraint of the senses as practised by another elder is also cited in the *Visuddhimagga*.

Cittagutta therā dwelt in a cave in Sri Lanka, high up on the walls of which were frescoes of the Buddha's birth stories (*Jātakas*). Since he practised constant sense-restraint, the elder never looked up, and so he remained quite unaware of these frescoes.

One day some young monks came to the cave. They were fascinated by the pictures and remarked on their beauty to the elder, but he replied that he had never noticed them, although he had lived in the cave for over sixty years. His response was an indirect rebuke to the visitors for their lack of mindfulness with respect to their eyes.

There was also a Gangaw tree near the entrance of the cave. The elder had never looked up at it and so he knew that the flowers were in full bloom only when he saw the petals lying on the ground. Hearing about the elder's holiness, the king invited him to the palace, but, in spite of repeated invitations, the elder refused to visit the king. As a consequence, the king forbade the suckling of infants by their mothers in the village where the elder went about to collect alms in the morning. So, out of compassion for the babies, the elder finally went to the palace. The king and the queen paid respects to the elder and he blessed them one after another saying, "May the king be happy!" When the young monks asked him why he always said "May the king be happy!", whether he addressed the king or the queen, the elder replied that he did not notice whether it was the king or the queen. This is a lesson for those who practise sense-restraint.

The most important thing is to avoid those sights that give rise to defilements, and if they are unavoidable, to contemplate their impurities or to make a note simply of seeing. Here we should bear in mind the Buddha's reply to Venerable Ānanda, on the eve of his *parinibbāna*, when he asked how a bhikkhu should behave regarding women. The Buddha said that a bhikkhu should avoid seeing women, and if he cannot avoid seeing them, he should not speak to them. If he cannot avoid speaking to them, then he should be mindful, and regard the woman either as his mother, sister or daughter, according to her age.

This is the first practice suggested in the *Bhāradvāja Sutta* of the *Samyuttanikāya*<sup>1</sup> for overcoming sensual desire. The second practice mentioned is the reflection on the impurity of the human body. The third practice is the restraint of the senses.

The Buddha's teaching applies to other sense-objects as well. We should avoid listening to sounds such as songs, *etc.*, which arouse the defilements.

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<sup>1</sup> S.iv. pp.110–112.

If we cannot avoid them, we must make a note simply of hearing. The need for such mindfulness is obvious in the case of monks and meditators, but the Buddha's teaching was addressed to Sakka and to the other *devas*. *Devas* are usually engrossed in sensual pleasures and so it is necessary for them to restrain their senses as far as possible. The same may be said of lay disciples when they observe the Sabbath or practise meditation.

The scents of flowers, perfumes, *etc.*, that cause defilements to arise should be treated in the same way. So should the food that the meditator eats only after due reflection (that he eats not for pleasure but to preserve his health). Sensations of taste and touch that lead to defilements are also to be avoided, and if unavoidable, they should be dealt with in the same way. Making a note of walking, sitting, *etc.*, constitutes mindfulness of tactile sensations.

According to the commentary, the practice of *Nissajji dhutaṅga* is a wholesome pursuit in relation to the sensation of touch. *Nissajji dhutaṅga* is the ascetic practice of never lying down but remaining always in the sitting position, even when asleep, which some meditators do. Venerable Sāriputta, Venerable Mahākassapa and other prominent disciples of the Buddha practised it for long periods, ranging from twelve years in the case of Venerable Rāhula to a hundred and twenty years in the case of Venerable Mahākassapa. Since they were Arahants their object was not to acquire merit but to serve as examples for posterity.

The meditator should patiently make a note of wholesome sensations of touch while practising insight meditation, keeping himself mindful of wholesome sense-objects. When he feels unpleasant sensations in the body he should not fidget, but should exercise patience as far as possible, and keep on contemplating those sensations in accordance with the teachings of the *Sakkapañha Sutta*.

Moreover, the meditator should not think of anything that can give rise to craving or ill-will; he must refrain from doing so, not only with respect to the mental-objects or thoughts that occur to him at present, but also with regard to those belonging to the past and the future as well. They should be noted and rejected.

### **The Self Restraint of the Three Theras**

The commentary mentions the story of three elders whom we should emulate in our efforts to remove unwholesome thoughts and to practise mindfulness. On the first day of their rains-retreat, they admonished one another and pledged that they would have no sensual or aggressive thoughts during the three months.

On the *Pavāraṇā* day, which marks the end of the rains-retreat, the eldest bhikkhu asked the youngest how he had controlled his mind during this time. *Pavāraṇā* is a ceremony in which one bhikkhu invites another to point out his faults or any breaches of the monastic rules that he has unwittingly committed during the retreat. The young monk said that he had not allowed his mind to leave the monastery but had kept it confined within the building.

By this he meant that if his mind went astray during his meditation, he restricted it to the monastery, so that he never thought of anything outside it. His accomplishment was indeed laudable in view of the fact that, by and large, meditators do not have a firm hold over their minds before they develop concentration. They cannot prevent their minds from wandering when asked to practise mindfulness.

When the eldest asked the second monk the same question, the latter said that he did not allow his mind even to leave his room. So his powers of concentration were better developed than those of the younger monk.

Then the two younger monks asked the eldest how much control he had had over his mind. The elder replied that he had not allowed his mind to leave his own body and mind. This shows that he confined his attention simply to the psycho-physical phenomena that arise at the six senses with every moment of seeing, hearing, *etc.* The elder's ability to concentrate is most impressive — perhaps he was an Arahant. This degree of mind-control, which the three elders had attained, is indeed an inspiration for those who practise mindfulness.

The commentary commends the contemplation of mind-objects together with loving-kindness (*mettā*) *etc.*, so we should cultivate *mettā* saying, "May all beings be free from danger" and so forth. Moreover, since the commentary says "*mettā, etc.*," it is to be assumed that all mind-objects should be contemplated for insight knowledge. To summarise, *vipassanā* contemplation of any kind is commendable because it means the accumulation of wholesome kamma.

### **Satipaṭṭhāna: A Big Heap of Wholesome Kammās**

Of the many kinds of contemplation, the Buddha described the four foundations of mindfulness as the sum total of all wholesome *dharmas* or kammās. Giving alms frequently or leading a very good moral life may mean a big accumulation of wholesome kammās. However, the donor, though a morally good person, may occasionally be harassed by irrelevant thoughts, and, of course, it is impossible to perform charity or to practise strict morality all day and all night. So it is not really true to call charity or morality a big heap of wholesome kammās.

On the other hand, the practice of *Satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā* requires constant mindfulness of all bodily behaviour, feelings, thoughts, moments of seeing, hearing, *etc.* Except during sleep, the meditator has to be mindful at every moment. If one makes a note of his feelings, *etc.*, at least once in a second this means one acquires one wholesome *dhamma* in that brief period. One gains 3,600 wholesome *dhammas* in an hour, so, if we exclude four sleeping hours, one gains merit to the tune of 72,000 wholesome *dhammas* in a day. Merit accrues at every moment of noting 'sitting', *etc.* One can acquire it even while urinating, so *Satipaṭṭhāna* is no doubt a big heap of wholesome *dhammas* that should be cultivated.

### Diversity of Views

Sakka was very gratified by the Buddha's discourse. Before he came to see the Buddha, he had met several self-styled sages and had made enquiries about their teachings, but had found that they held different views. Now that he had attained the first stage of the holy path after hearing the words of the Buddha, he knew the true Dhamma, and hence he knew also the true Buddha and the true Saṅgha. He was now free from all doubts. He did not tell the Buddha explicitly about this but he implied it in his next question.

"Lord, do all those who call themselves *samaṇa-brāhmaṇas* hold the same views? Do they all lead the same moral life? Do they all have the same desire or the same goal?"

Of course, Sakka knew the answers to these questions but he asked only as a prelude to his question about their differences. The Buddha answered his second question as follows.

"O Sakka! In this world people do not have the same kind of temperament. Their temperaments are different. Reflecting wrongly, they firmly and obsessively cling to the views that best suit their temperaments. They insist that only their view is right and that all other views are wrong. It is because of their bigotry that all self-styled sages and holy men hold different views. They are committed to different systems of moral values; they have different desires and different goals in life."

Owing to their different temperaments, people differ from one another in their inclinations and preferences with regard to colour, sound, clothes and so forth. Likewise they talk about the beliefs that they have accepted on the basis of their attachments and speculations. Some cherish the belief in the immortality of the soul. They say that the soul (*atta*) exists for ever and that it is not subject to destruction like the gross physical body. This is the



eternity belief (*sassatadiṭṭhi*). It has wide appeal, not differing fundamentally from the religions that teach that man is created by God, and that after death those who have pleased Him achieve salvation in heaven, while those who have displeased Him are condemned to eternal damnation. Then there is the annihilation belief (*ucchedadiṭṭhi*), which denies a future life and insists on the complete extinction of the individual after death. These are the doctrines of those religions that claim a monopoly on the truth and that reject all other teachings as false. Such bigotry is the cause of differences in the beliefs, moral principles, aspirations and objectives of life.

### Eternity Belief and Buddhism

According to Buddhism, when a man dies he is reborn, the new existence being conditioned by his kamma. This raises the question as to whether the Buddhist theory of rebirth is the same as the eternity belief, but the Buddha's teaching is very far removed from the idea of a permanent ego. Buddhism denies the existence of an ego-entity and recognises only the process that involves the ceaseless arising and passing away of all psycho-physical phenomena. When rebirth-consciousness ceases, the life-continuum consciousness (*bhavaṅga-citta*) arises, which also passes away incessantly. With the life-continuum always in this state of flux, the consciousness that reflects on visual form, sound, *etc.*, arises, and this reflecting consciousness is followed by eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness and so forth. When this ceases, life-continuum takes its place. Thus the two streams of *bhavaṅga-citta* and ordinary consciousness flow alternately. At the moment of death, the decease-consciousness (*cuti-citta*), the last moment of life-continuum, passes away. The cessation of *cuti-citta* is termed death because the process of mind and matter ceases, without the arising of any new consciousness.

Immediately after the cessation of decease-consciousness, the rebirth-consciousness arises, conditioned by one's kamma. This rebirth-consciousness marks the beginning of a new existence. So it follows that rebirth has nothing to do with any ego-entity or the transfer of mind and matter from the previous life. With the cessation of this new consciousness, the continuous flow of life-continuum, *etc.* arises, as in the previous existence. We regard this process of mind and matter as a particular person but it does not embody any soul or ego-entity. This fact can be realised by those who practise insight meditation.

Buddhism does not propound eternalism since it teaches that craving leads to rebirth. When the meditator attains Arahantship, he is wholly free

from craving and the other defilements. The Arahant is not attached to any sense-object, even on the verge of death, so this rules out the arising of any new process of mind and matter. Nevertheless, it does not follow that Buddhism teaches annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*), for the annihilationist view presupposes an ego in a living being — an ego that is the subject of experiences, good or bad. Buddhism rejects the idea of the ego and recognises only that there is a process of mind and matter. At the death of the Arahant, it is not the ego but the process of mind and matter that becomes extinct. This extinction is brought about through the practice of insight meditation, which ensures the end of craving for the continuation of life.

### **Mahāyāna and Theravāda**

There are now four great religions of mankind. Their differences are due to the diverse temperaments and contrasting views among the followers of each religion. There are two schools of Buddhism: Theravāda and Mahāyāna, which have held different views for over 2,000 years. This is due to the different inclinations attributable to the adherents of the two schools.

The basic teaching of Mahāyāna Buddhism is that all living beings achieve complete freedom from the suffering of *saṃsāra* only after attaining Buddhahood. Being an Arahant or a *Paccekabuddha* does not mean full liberation. After becoming a Buddha, the Mahāyānist does not enter the *nibbānic* state alone. He enjoys the peace of *nibbāna* only in the company of other beings, that is, only after all other beings have become Buddhas.

This is an indirect repudiation of egoism but the view is quite untenable. For, if the Buddhas are to defer their *parinibbāna* and wait until all other living beings have attained Buddhahood, where and how are they to live for such a long time? Insects and other forms of lower life are innumerable. Are the Buddhas to wait and suffer old age, sickness and death until the liberation of the lowest living being? This view makes little sense and yet it is acceptable to some people because it suits their temperaments.

It differs from the doctrine of the Theravāda, which is the true Dhamma based on the Buddha's teaching in the Pāli Canon. According to this view, among meditators who reach the last stage of the holy path, there are those who aspire to be the close disciples of the Buddha. On the Arahant's attainment of *parinibbāna* the process of mind and matter, which conditions rebirth, ceases, so there is an end to their suffering in *saṃsāra*. They need not wait for anybody nor is it possible for them to do so. This is also the destiny of *Paccekabuddhas* and *Sammāsambuddhas*. This view is quite reasonable.

Mahāyāna Buddhists identify their nibbāna with the Sukhavati abode. They describe it as a paradise, and say that, as Buddhas, all living beings live happily there forever, being free from old age, sickness and death. Sukhavati does not differ essentially from the heaven that is glorified by those who believe in immortality. This belief is probably based on the writings of those who sought to spread the eternity view among Buddhists.

Later on, many Mahāyāna sects arose, which was also due to the different temperaments of their followers.

The commentaries tell us how the Theravāda split into eighteen sects. In Burma today there are also differences of opinion regarding the Buddha's teaching. There is no doubt that the Buddha emphasised the four noble truths, and the noble eightfold path comprising morality, concentration and wisdom; but some say that it is not necessary to practise insight meditation, that they can follow their easy way to salvation. Some dismiss morality as irrelevant to the goal of Buddhism, a view that is shared by those who do not care for morality. They express such views because they do not accept the teaching in the *Sakkapañha Sutta* and other discourses.

The Buddha's teaching to the wandering ascetic, Subhadda, provides a criterion for deciding whether any doctrine is really the true Dhamma for conquering defilements. The gist of the teaching, which is found in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, is that no doctrine that is devoid of the noble eightfold path can lead to stream-winning and the other stages of the holy path. The eightfold path is found only in the *Buddha-dhamma*, and thus it is only this Dhamma that will make a man a stream-winner, and so forth. We can judge any doctrine by this criterion and so tell whether it accords with the Buddha's teaching.

Nevertheless, the fact is that most people accept only those teachings that accord with their inclinations. There are some Buddhists who believe that theirs is *Ariyan* morality if they regard what they practise as *Ariyan* morality. Others want to enjoy life only as human beings, *devas*, etc. They do not relish the prospect of the process of mind and matter ceasing. Some people do not wish to be reborn in the *brahmā* worlds, which are devoid of sensual pleasure, because they prefer rebirth in the sensual world. Then there are some who crave for the renewal of both mind and matter, while others want only one of these renewed. However, wise men, who realise the evils of the endless cycle of saṃsāra, seek the extinction of both mind and matter.

Some people believe in eternal happiness in heaven or annihilation after death as their destiny. For some, the supreme goal is the perceptionless *Asaññā*

world, which they believe is free from all suffering. Again, some regard the formless world (*arūpaloka*) as their ultimate objective, while others say that their goal is to make a clear distinction between the soul (*atta*) and the mind-body complex. These various goals depend on the different temperaments of the people who pursue them. Actually, the highest goal of life is the nibbāna of the Arahant, which means the complete cessation of the mind and matter continuum after death, as a result of the total extinction of defilements.

## The Ultimate Goal

Sakka was pleased with the Buddha's answer and so asked another question: "Lord, do the so-called *samaṇa-brāhmaṇas* really attain their ultimate goal? Is there any real end to their striving? Do they live the genuine noble life? Do they really have the ultimate Dhamma?"

Here the ultimate goal, the real end to striving (*iccantayogakkhemi*) and the ultimate Dhamma (*iccantapariyosana*) refer to nibbāna. By the noble life he meant the practice of insight meditation and the noble path. In other words, with these four questions Sakka asked the Buddha whether the ascetics and the *brāhmaṇas* practise insight meditation and the eightfold path, and whether they have attained nibbāna.

The Buddha answered in the negative. According to the Buddha, only those bhikkhus who are liberated through practice of the path leading to the extinction of craving achieve the supreme goal, put an end to striving, lead the noble life and attain the ultimate Dhamma.

Here the bhikkhus referred to in the Buddha's statement are the Buddhas, *Paccekabuddhas* and Arahants. The Arahant is one who has done away with the four biases (*āsavas*), which give rise to a new existence. In fact, he has uprooted the fetters (*yogas*)<sup>1</sup> and so has attained the ultimate goal and the ultimate Dhamma; and his final victory is due to his practice of the noble path.

Those who have not yet freed themselves from the fetters and biases through the eightfold path are far from nibbāna. They continue to be subject to rebirth and suffering. So, when Baka Brahmā invited the Buddha to what he regarded as his eternal paradise, the Buddha told him to have no illusions about his mortality, and to have no craving for any kind of existence.

The Buddha said, "Having seen the perils of all kinds of existence, whether it be that of a human being, a *deva*, a *brahmā* or the denizens of the lower worlds ... I do not glorify any kind of existence, but deprecate it."

<sup>1</sup> The Pāli word 'yoga' has two meanings. In one sense it means 'striving,' 'undertaking,' or 'duty,' in another sense it means 'union,' 'bondage,' or 'fetter.' (Editor's note).

Every kind of existence is subject to suffering. It is worst in the lower worlds, but human existence is also afflicted with the suffering of old age, sickness, and death. Even the *devas* have to suffer because of their frustrated desires, and in the *brahmā* world they are not free from the suffering of thinking, planning, and ceaseless change.

The Buddha said, "I have seen the perils of every kind of existence; I have also seen the path of those who do not want existence and who therefore seek its extinction. So I deprecate all kinds of existence."

Being aware of the evils of existence, some wise men became ascetics so that they could seek liberation, but they did not know nibbāna or the eightfold path leading to it. Some attained *rūpajhāna* and believed that they would enjoy immortality in the *rūpavacarabrahmā* world, the goal of such *jhāna*. For some ascetics, eternal life was to be found in the *Asaññā* (perceptionless) abode of the *rūpavacarabrahmā* world, whilst for others it was to be enjoyed only in the *arūpavacara* world. So these ascetics were content with the *rūpajhāna* and the *arūpajhāna* that they had attained.

Contrary to their expectations, these yogis were not immortal in the *brahmā* worlds, and so after death they returned to the sensual world of *devas* and human beings. From there they passed on according to their kamma. As a result of some evil kamma they might have found themselves in the lower worlds. Thus, although they had sought the extinction of existence, they did not achieve their objective, and had to go on suffering. Hence the Buddha's disdain for all kinds of existence. The renewal of existence is due to attachment to life. This attachment is the same as the sensuous bias (*kāmayoga*) and the bias for existence (*bhavayoga*). The Buddha repudiated and overcame this attachment.

According to the commentary, there were altogether fourteen questions that Sakka put to the Buddha. Sakka was very pleased with the answers that he was given and, after expressing his deep appreciation, he stated his view about craving as follows:

"Lord, this virulent craving is a disease; it is like a boil, an arrow or a thorn in the flesh. It attracts living beings to existence and so they live miserably."

"Craving is virulent because it thirsts first for this and then for that. It attaches itself to pleasant objects and longs to consume them. Like a leaf rustling in the wind, it is always in a flurry, restless, hungry and greedy. Craving is a chronic disease that is incurable, but it is not so critical as to cause immediate death. It sets a man at ease when it is gratified, yet however much he pampers it with the sense-objects that it likes, it is insatiable; it longs for all sense-objects, which it seeks to enjoy repeatedly."

“Craving is loathsome and terrible like a boil. It is also like a thorn in the flesh.” A thorn may be hidden in the flesh so that we cannot see any sign of it. As we cannot remove it, it will keep on causing pain. Likewise, it is hard to get rid of craving, which is always harassing us. We worry so much about the objects of our desire that we cannot sleep at night, and because of our attachment to life we have to wander from one existence to another, the nature of each existence depending on our kamma.”

After commenting thus on the Buddha’s teaching, Sakka declared himself free from all doubts, as a result of hearing the Buddha’s discourse. He had attained the first stage of the holy path, which obviously ruled out the possibility of his rebirth in the lower worlds after his death. He was assured of a good rebirth, which meant that he could now attain the higher stages of insight independently.

### **Moral Practice of a Candidate for Sakka’s Office**

The commentary mentions the seven duties of a man who aspires to be king of the gods. These are enumerated in the *Sagāthāvagga Saṃyutta*<sup>1</sup> as follows:

1. He supports and looks after his parents throughout his life.<sup>2</sup>
2. He always reveres the old people among his relatives.
3. He speaks gently and sweetly.
4. He never speaks ill of another person.
5. He manages his household with a mind free from the taint of meanness.
6. He always speaks the truth.
7. He sees to it that he is never angry. If he sometimes gets angry, he removes his anger instantly.

As for Sakka, the king of the gods who had the dialogue with the Buddha in the *Sakkapañha Sutta*, the commentary on that discourse gives an account of his previous life as the youth Māgha in Macala village in the kingdom of Māgadha, long before the rise of Buddhism.

Māgha was the leader of thirty-three young men who repaired roads and bridges, built rest-houses and together did other good deeds for the welfare of the community. The headman of the village was corrupt and so he hated them. Formerly he had been used to getting money from them, when they were given to drinking and doing unlawful things, but now that they were

<sup>1</sup> S.i. p.228.

<sup>2</sup> After his parents have died, his duty is not over. He must perform meritorious deeds, sharing the merit with them. (Editor’s note).

devoting themselves entirely to serving the community, there was an end to this source of income. So he went to the king and presented false charges against them. Without making any enquiries, the king ordered them to be arrested and trampled to death by elephants.

Then Māgha said to his friends, "It is natural that misfortunes befall all beings who are immersed in the round of rebirths. The real refuge for people in this world is in speaking the truth. So we should declare solemnly, 'If we are thieves or robbers, let the elephant trample us. If we are not, let it not trample us'."

Māgha's friends acted on his advice, and so the elephant did not even approach them, but ran away trumpeting loudly. The king's men goaded the animal in vain with their spears. So the young men were brought before the king. Questioned by him, Māgha said that it was their invocation of the power of truth that had repelled the elephant. He also told the king what they had been doing before this, and how it was greed that had prompted the village headman to lay false charges against them.

On hearing this, the king at once set them free, gave them gifts, and conferred on them permanent ownership of Macala village. The young men devoted themselves to community service more zealously and vigorously than ever. After death, Māgha became Sakka and his thirty-three comrades became *devas* in his celestial abode.

Such, in brief, is the account of Māgha's good deeds that led to his rebirth as Sakka. There is one thing that we should note in this story of Māgha. The good deeds they did were not due to their thorough knowledge of the *Buddha-dhamma*. Perhaps they might have heard only that good deeds have good results, and it was this simple teaching that motivated Māgha to do good. He did not hope to attain the holy path or nibbāna by doing this, but because of his good deeds he became the king of the gods, and after hearing the Buddha's discourse, he attained the first stage of the holy path.

This shows that a person may not have nibbāna in mind while he is doing good deeds, but if he believes in the law of kamma and does those good deeds sincerely, he will, as a result, pass on to the celestial or human worlds. There he will be reborn with three wholesome predispositions.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to such predispositions he can attain special insights, after hearing and practising the Dhamma. So when we do good deeds our actions should be based on belief in kamma. The best thing, of course, is to do good in the hope of attaining the path or nibbāna.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tihetupaṭṭisandhika*: = being reborn with three noble root-conditions viz., non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion.

## The Elation of Sakka

When Sakka expressed his joy at attaining the first stage of the holy path, the Buddha asked him whether he had ever experienced such joy before. Sakka replied: "Lord, I was once overjoyed at my victory in battle against the Asuras, but that joy had its origin in the clash of weapons. It had nothing to do with disillusionment and it did not lead to special insight-knowledge or nibbāna. But now my joy at the attainment of the stream-winner stage is not rooted in the clash of weapons. It is bound up with disillusionment and detachment, and will also lead to illumination and nibbāna."

Sakka went on to say that he was overjoyed because of the six benefits that would accrue to him.

1. The first thing that made him joyful was his attainment of the stream-winner stage and the renewal of his existence as Sakka. For his good deeds in his previous life as Māgha, he became king of the *devas*, and this first existence lasted thirty-six million years by human reckoning. Then seeing that his death was imminent, he came to hear the *Buddha-dhamma*. While listening to the Buddha's discourse on wholesome indifference, he practised insight meditation and attained the first stage of the holy path. He was overjoyed at his permanent liberation from the lower worlds and at the prospect of enjoying heavenly bliss for another thirty-six million years.

2. He will be reborn in the human family of his choice when his life in the *deva* world has run its course. It is said that the span of life among human beings is now decreasing by one year in every century. About 2,500 years have elapsed since the time of the Buddha and so we have to assume that the span of human life has decreased by twenty-five years. This assumption is plausible since today only a few people live beyond seventy-five years.

Man's life-span is likely to be reduced to only ten years after the next 6,500 years. It is said that by that time delicacies such as butter, honey, *etc.*, will have disappeared. Good varieties of rice will become a thing of the past, and poor quality grain will become the best staple food.

People will no longer avoid killing, stealing and other misdeeds. Immoral acts will become rampant and nobody will have any sense of moral values. Those who do not respect their parents, older relatives or virtuous monks will be extolled and honoured by many people. Even now there is a trend in some places towards such disregard of traditional values. Moreover, there will be sexual perversions such as incest, and the moral life of mankind will degenerate to the level of animals.



People will become extremely malicious, aggressive and murderous, even towards their own parents and children, and fratricidal strife will mark relationships among brothers and sisters. There will be armed conflicts, followed by a holocaust that will lead to mutual destruction, with men regarding one another as animals. It will then be easy to produce powerful weapons. The possibility of such a holocaust does not seem remote in view of the production of extraordinary weapons in modern times.

Mutual destruction will eventually bring mankind to the verge of total extinction. Only those who do not want to kill or be killed, and who take refuge in forests, will escape death. It will be hard for these few survivors to meet one another, and they will do so only after travelling great distances. As a result they will love each other, and will abstain from killing and from other evil deeds. This will lead to a gradual increase in man's life-span, and people will again do good, avoid evil and enjoy longevity. As Sakka's rebirth in the human world will take place in that developing era, he will associate with good people.

Sakka says that he will be conceived in his mother's womb with full awareness. This shows what naturally happens to a stream-winner in his passage from one existence to another. Obviously a *deva's* mind is clear and serene at the moment of death because he dies without suffering. Likewise he will not be confused when he is in the womb of his human mother. The human stream-winner, too, dies without delusion. He may be afflicted with physical pain but his consciousness is clear and normal. Although he is unable to speak, he usually dies with his mind free from delusion and obscurity. Sakka is happy because he will die peacefully and pass on to the human world to be reborn in the noble family of his choice.

3. Sakka says that it will give him great pleasure to live by the teaching of the Buddha. If the span of human life is to decrease by one year in every century, it will be reduced to ten years at the end of ninety centuries. Suppose a great part of the human race were to be wiped out by a nuclear war, Sakka would be only nine thousand years old and would continue to live more than thirty-five million years. The average man's life-span would then be hundreds of thousands of years.

In view of the prediction that the Buddha's teachings will persist for only five thousand years, and that there will be mass destruction at the time when mankind has a ten year life-span, it has to be assumed that Buddhism will have become extinct by the time of the global conflict. There will be nobody who has memorised the *Buddha-dhamma*, nor will there be Buddhist books and scriptures. Inscriptions from the *Piṭaka* may still exist in Burma but there will be no one

who can preach the Dhamma. However, since Sakka is a stream-winner, the Dhamma will remain fresh in his memory as it will for all other *Ariyas*. Therefore, although Buddhism will be unknown to the majority of people of that time, it will continue to be a living force for the man who is Sakka incarnate. He will observe the five precepts, understand impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self on the level of a stream-winner, and overcome some defilements. In other words, he will continue to be a dedicated disciple of the Buddha.

A stream-winner in the immaterial world (*arūpaloka*) will not forget to practise mindfulness. He can contemplate the mental processes and attain Arahantship. He may be in the *rūpavacara-brahmā* world during the lifetime of the next Buddha, but, as a disciple of the former Buddha, he will become an Arahant and attain nibbāna. These stream-winners do not become disciples of the succeeding Buddha, but practise insight meditation as disciples of the former Buddha. This is evident since some former disciples of the preceding six Buddhas identified themselves during the visit of Gotama Buddha to the Suddhavāsa realm. So it is pointless to pray for Arahantship under the guidance of another Buddha if one has already attained the stream-winner stage within the former Buddha's dispensation.

Sakka also says that while living by the *Buddha-dhamma*, he will always be mindful. He will continue to practise mindfulness just as he is practising now. This prospect affords him much pleasure because he is thus assured of the successive attainment of other insights.

4. Sakka says, "Lord, if through the right practice of insight meditation I attain *sambodhi*, I will try and contemplate to attain higher insights. The *sambodhi* that I attain as a human being will mark the last of my human existences."

Here *sambodhi* means the three higher stages of insight. But later he says that he will again become the king of the gods, that after attaining the non-returner stage in his present life he will pass on to the Suddhavāsa realm, and that finally he will attain Arahantship in the Akaniṭṭha realm. In view of these statements, the commentary holds that *sambodhi* refers to the insight of a once-returner.

So Sakka will be at the once-returner stage when he passes on to the human world. It will be the last existence in which he is bound up with old age, sickness and the other sufferings of human life. This is the fourth reason why he is joyful.

5. Sakka says that, after his death in the human world, he will again become the highest god (*uttamo devo*) in the celestial worlds.

According to the commentary, he will become the chief *deva* of Tāvatiṃsa heaven. So, if he has to pass through a single life-time as a human being, the human life-span must be the same as that of the *devas* in Tāvatiṃsa. Sakka incarnate on earth must be as old as a deity who holds the office of the king of the gods, in other words, he must live for thirty-six million years.

Alternatively, the stream-winner Sakka may pass through several lifetimes. In that case what are we to understand by the seven lifetimes of a stream-winner? Here Sakka's rebirths in the human world should be understood in the same sense as that of a non-returner. The non-returner is said to be subject to a single rebirth. He may be reborn up to five times in the Suddhavāsa realm, but since this takes place only in the material world and has nothing to do with the sensual or immaterial (*arūpa*) worlds, we may say that he is reborn only once. Likewise, Sakka may be conceived many times in the human world, but as his rebirth is restricted to human existence, it may be regarded as a single lifetime on earth.

Sakka was overjoyed at the prospect of attaining the once-returner stage as a human being, and at his rebirth as the king of the gods.

6. Sakka says, "The Akaniṭṭha world is so called because there the *devas* are endowed with power, wealth, longevity and other qualities. They are the noblest *devas*. I will have my last existence in that superior world."

Akaniṭṭha is the highest of the five Suddhavāsa worlds. Although its inhabitants are called *devas*, they are in fact *brahmās*. Presumably there are many *brahmās* since each is said to have many attendants. Sakka will be a once-returner on earth, and a non-returner in the *deva* world, where he will pass on to Aviha, which is the lowest of the Suddhavāsa worlds. Then after passing through other celestial worlds, he will reach the Akaniṭṭha world where he will attain nibbāna.

According to the commentary, Sakka will be in the *brahmā* world for 31,000 world-cycles. There are only two other individuals, Anāthapiṇḍika, the merchant, and Visākhā, the great female disciple of the Buddha, who will enjoy the same longevity in the *brahmā* worlds. Thus Sakka, Anāthapiṇḍika and Visākhā have no equal, in respect of the high quality of their lives, among beings subject to rebirth.

So the sixth cause of Sakka's joy was the prospect of attaining nibbāna in the Akaniṭṭha Brahmā world. Then Sakka concluded his statement to the Buddha as follows.

"Lord, today I pay my respects to you just as the *devas* are doing to Brahmā. Lord, you are the only true Buddha (*Sambuddha*). You are the supreme teacher

who can instruct the *devas* and human beings for their ultimate welfare. In the worlds of *brahmās*, *devas* and human beings you have no equal.”

Then Sakka uttered three times: “*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*” and joyfully bowed before the Buddha. Here *arahato* means “worthy of honour” and *Sammāsambuddho* means “One who knows the four noble truths by himself.”

This is the end of the *Sakkapañha Sutta*. The discourse has enlightened many living beings, as it did Sakka and many other *devas*. Those who study and apply its teaching will certainly attain unusual insight knowledge on the noble path.



