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Abhaya Sutta

The Discourse on Fearlessness | A 4.184/2:173-176

Theme: Overcoming the fear of death

Translated by Piya Tan ©2005

Death studies

Fear is always the fear of *loss*, that is, separation from what one considers as desirable, pleasant or worthy of attention. The fear is greatest when there is *craving*, a strong attachment. When one has a strong desire for something, one is attached to it, and one fears losing what one is attached to. Craving is essentially the drive to seek satisfaction of sensual desires (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, feelings and thoughts) from external sources, without understanding the true nature of one's mind. **The Dhammapada** puts it succinctly:

<i>Piyato jāyati soko</i>		From the dear arises sorrow;
<i>piyato jāyati bhayaṃ</i>		From the dear arises fear;
<i>piyato vippamuttassa</i>		For one freed from the dear,
<i>n'atthi soko kuto bhayaṃ</i>	Dh 212	There is no sorrow, much less fear.
<i>Pemato jāyati soko</i>		From love ¹ arises sorrow;
<i>pemato jāyati bhayaṃ</i>		From love arises fear;
<i>pemato vippamuttassa</i>		For one freed from love,
<i>n'atthi soko kuto bhayaṃ</i>	Dh 213	There is no sorrow, much less fear.

In the **Bhaya, bherava Sutta** (M 4),² the Buddha, recounting how he has himself overcome fear when struggling for awakening, admonishes those living in spiritual solitude in the forest to do the same. **The Gilāyana Sutta** (S 55.54) closes with a very significant remark that the dying wise layman has “‘directed [his mind] to the cessation of self-identity’—then, Mahānāma, there is no difference between a lay follower who is thus liberated in mind and a monk who has been liberated in mind for a hundred years, that is, there is no difference between the one liberation and the other.”³ This means that the layman dies an arhat.

The Dhānañjāni Sutta (M 97)⁴ records how Sāriputta guides the dying brahmin, Dhānañjāni, through a similar sequence of reflections as those of the Gilāyana Sutta. **The Saṅkhār'upapatti Sutta** (M 120)⁵ similarly deals with choosing a good rebirth and makes an interesting comparative study with the Gilāyana Sutta. Such suttas are important Buddhist texts in Buddhist Psychology, especially Death Studies. Both these suttas clearly show that a dying person may be guided by a skillful person to be reborn in a higher plane or even attain liberation itself.

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¹ *Pema* is worldly love, close to the Greek *philia*, love amongst friends.

² M 4/1:16-24.

³ S 55.54/5:408-410 = SD 4.10.

⁴ M 97/2:193-195 = SD 4.9.

⁵ M 120/3:99-103 = SD 3.4.

The Discourse on Fearlessness

A 4.184/2:173-176

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1a Then Jāṇussoṇi went up to the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and friendly exchange was concluded, Jāṇussoṇi sat down at one side. Sitting thus at one side, he said this to the Blessed One:

“Master Gotama, I hold this doctrine and this view, that there is no one, being subject to death, who fears not, who does not fall trembling before death.”⁶

1b “Indeed, brahmin, there is no one, being subject to death, who fears not, who does not fall trembling before death.

But, brahmin, there is also one, being subject to death, who fears not, who does not fall trembling before death.

Those who fear death

2 And who, brahmin, is **one, being subject to death, has fear, who falls trembling before death?**

(1) Here, brahmin, there is a certain person whose lust, [174] whose desire, whose love, whose thirst, whose fever, whose craving for sense-pleasures have not gone away.⁷ Then a certain grave, serious illness touches him.

When he is touched by that certain grave, serious illness, he thinks thus:

‘Oh, pleasant sense-pleasures will leave me behind! Oh, I have to leave pleasant sense-pleasures behind!’⁸

So he grieves, suffers, laments, beats his breast, falls into confusion.

This, brahmin, is one who, being subject to death, has fear, who falls trembling before death.

3 (2) Furthermore, brahmin, here, there is a certain person whose lust, whose desire, whose love, whose thirst, whose fever, whose craving for sense-pleasures have not gone away. Then a certain grave, serious illness touches him.

When he is touched by that certain grave, serious illness, he thinks thus:

‘Oh, this beloved body will leave me behind! Oh, I have to leave this pleasant body behind!’

So he grieves, suffers, laments, beats his breast, falls into confusion.

This, brahmin, is one who, being subject to death, has fear, who falls trembling before death.

4 (3) Furthermore, brahmin, here, there is a certain person who has done no good, done no wholesome deed, not made a secure refuge for himself. He has done evil, shown cruelty, done wrong. Then a certain grave, serious illness touches him.

When he is touched by that certain grave, serious illness, he thinks thus:⁹

‘I have done no good, done no wholesome deed, not made a secure refuge for myself; I have done evil, shown cruelty, done wrong!

Hereafter, sir, I shall go to the destiny of those who have done no good, done no wholesome deed, not made a secure refuge for themselves, done evil, shown cruelty, done wrong!’

So he grieves, suffers, laments, beats his breast, falls into confusion.

This, brahmin, is one who, being subject to death, has fear, who falls trembling before death.

⁶ *Ahaṃ hi bho Gotama evaṃ, vādī evaṃ, diṭṭhī: n’atthi yo so maraṇa, dhammo samāno na bhāyati na santasaṃ āpajjati maraṇassā ti.*

⁷ *Idha brāhmaṇa ekacco kāmesu avīta, rāgo hoti avigata, chando avigata, pemo avigata, pariḷāho avigata, taṇho, lit* “Here brahmin there is a certain one whose lust for sense-pleasures has not gone away, whose desire has not gone away, whose affection has not gone away, whose fever has not gone away, whose craving has not gone away.”

⁸ *Piyā vata maṃ kāmā jahissanti piye vāhaṃ kāmā jahissāmi ti.*

⁹ This quote forms **Tapanīya S** (It 2.1.3/24 f), and briefly mentioned in **(Duccarita) Tapanīya S** (A 2.1.3/1:49).

5 (4) Furthermore, brahmin, here, there is a certain person who has doubts, who has misgivings, who has come to no certainty regarding the True Teaching.¹⁰ Then a certain grave, serious illness touches him.

When he is touched by that certain grave, serious illness, he thinks thus:

‘I have doubts, have misgivings, have come to no certainty regarding the True Teaching!’

So he grieves, suffers, laments, beats his breast, falls into confusion.

This, brahmin, is one who, being subject to death, has fear, who falls trembling before death.

These, brahmin, are the four who, being subject to death, have fear, who fall trembling before death.

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Those who fear not death

6 And who, brahmin, is **one, being subject to death, has no fear, who does not fall trembling before death?**

(1) Here, brahmin, there is a certain person whose lust, whose desire, whose love, whose thirst, whose fever, whose craving for sense-pleasures, have gone away.¹¹ Then a certain grave, serious illness touches him.

When he is touched by that certain grave, serious illness, he does not think thus:¹²

‘Oh, pleasant sense-pleasures will leave me behind! Oh, I have to leave pleasant sense-pleasures behind!’¹³

He grieves not, suffers not, laments not, beats not his breast, falls not into confusion.

This, brahmin, is one who, being subject to death, has no fear, who does not fall trembling before death.

7 (2) Furthermore, brahmin, here, there is a certain person whose lust, whose desire, whose love, whose thirst, whose fever, whose craving for sense-pleasures, have gone away. Then a certain grave, serious illness touches him.

When he is touched by that certain grave, serious illness, he does not think thus:¹⁴

‘Oh, this beloved body will leave me behind! Oh, I have to leave this beloved body behind!’

He grieves not, suffers not, laments not, beats not his breast, falls not into confusion.

This, brahmin, is one who, being subject to death, has no fear, who does not fall trembling before death.

8 (3) Furthermore, brahmin, here, there is a certain person who has done no evil, shown no cruelty. He has done no wrong, done good, done the wholesome, made a secure refuge for himself. Then a certain grave, serious illness touches him.

When he is touched by that certain grave, serious illness, he thinks thus:¹⁵

‘I have done no evil, shown no cruelty, done no wrong, done good, done the wholesome, made a secure refuge for myself!’

Hereafter, sir, I shall go to the destiny of those who have done no evil, shown no cruelty, done no wrong, done good, done the wholesome, made a secure refuge for themselves!’

So he grieves not, suffers not, laments not, beats not his breast, falls not into confusion.

This, brahmin, is one who, being subject to death, has no fear, who does not fall trembling before death.

¹⁰ *Puna ca paraṃ brāhmaṇa idh’ ekacco kaṅkhī hoti vicikicchī aniṭṭhaṇ, gato saddhamme.*

¹¹ *Idha brāhmaṇa ekacco kāmesu vīta, rāgo hoti vigata, chando vigata, pemo vigata, pariḷāho vigata, taṅho,* lit “Here brahmin there is a certain one whose lust for sense-pleasures has gone away, whose desire has gone away, whose affection has gone away, whose fever has gone away, whose craving has gone away.”

¹² *Na evaṃ hoti,* lit “this is not so.” Be Ce Se; but PTS omits *na*.

¹³ *Pīyā vata maṃ kāmā jahissanti piye vāhaṃ kāme jahissāmi ti.*

¹⁴ *Na evaṃ hoti,* Be Ce Se; but PTS omits *na*.

¹⁵ This quote forms **Atapanīya S** (It 2.1.4/25 f) and briefly mentioned in (**Sucarita**) **Atapanīya S** (A 2.1.4/1:49 f).

9 (4) Furthermore, brahmin, here, there is a certain person who has no doubt, has no misgiving, has come to certainty regarding the True Teaching.¹⁶ Then a certain grave, serious illness touches him.

When he is touched by that certain grave, serious illness, he thinks thus:

‘I have no doubt, have no misgivings, have come to certainty regarding the True Teaching!’

So he grieves not, suffers not, laments not, beats not his breast, falls not into confusion. [176]

This, brahmin, is one who, being subject to death, has no fear, who does not fall trembling before death.

These, brahmin, are the four who, being subject to death, have no fear, who do not fall trembling before death.

Jānussoṇi goes for refuge

“Excellent, master Gotama! Excellent, master Gotama! Just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned, or were to reveal what was hidden, or were to show the way to one who was lost, or were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way, in numerous ways, the Dharma has been made clear by the Blessed One.

I go to the Blessed Gotama for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May the Blessed Gotama remember me as a lay follower who has gone to him for refuge from this day forth for life.”

— evaṃ —

051023; 061101; 070222; 090620; 120924

¹⁶ *Puna ca paraṃ brāhmaṇa idh' ekacco kaṅkhī hoti vicikicchī aniṭṭhaṇi, gata saddhamme.*