

11b

Mā Puñña Bhāyī Sutta

The “Do Not Fear Merit” Discourse | It 22/14-16

Traditional: It 1.3.2 Khuddaka Nikāya, Iti,vuttaka 1, Eka Nipāta 3, Tatiya Vagga 2

Mettā Sutta (Ee, WT) The Lovingkindness Discourse¹

Theme: The 3 grounds for merit-making

1 Related suttas

A parallel version of the first half of **the Mā Puñña Bhāyī Sutta** (It 1.3.2/14-16) appears in **the (Puñña) Mettā Sutta** (A 7.58a),² and this section is referred to once in **the Khuddaka Commentary** (KhpA 230) and twice in the Jātaka (**the Araka Jātaka**, J 169; **the Dhamma-d, dhaja Jātaka**, J 220). In the Araka Jātaka (J 169), similar words are ascribed to the Bodhisattva when he was the teacher Araka.³

In both (Puñña) Metta Sutta and the Mā Puñña Bhāyī Sutta, the Buddha declares that as a result of his practice of the three ground for merit, he enjoyed worldly happiness and well-being for a long time, and also rebirth as Mahā Brahmā, as Shakra, and “many hundred times I was a universal monarch,” with the latter Sutta adding more epithets to the mention of universal monarch [§3]. Clearly here these are the benefits of “merit” (*puñña*): characteristically life-affirming and this-worldly. In itself, such merit still keeps us within samsara, but it can be used as a foundation and launching pad for wholesome (*kusala*) action leading to spiritual awakening.

2 Terminology

2.1 SUTTA STRUCTURE AND THEME. Another interesting point is that in **the Mā Puñña Bhāyī Sutta** (It 22), initially, at the end of the prose section, the Sutta declares that the three reasons or grounds for the karmic blessings are given as giving, self-mastery and restraint [§4]. Subsequently, however, in the stanza section, the triad is restated as giving, a life of stillness [harmonious living], and a lovingkind mind [§5], which concurs with the traditional list of the three grounds of merit-making. “A lovingkind mind” (*metta-citta*) clearly refers to “cultivation” (*bhāvanā*). It is understandable here that for the laity and scholastics they should at least practise the cultivation of lovingkindness (*mettā bhāvanā*).

2.2 THE GROUNDS FOR MERIT-MAKING. The Sutta’s commentary explains “taming” or “self-mastery” (*dama*) as “the stilling of defilements such as lust by the collecting and stilling of the eye and other faculties”;⁴ “restraint” (*saññama* or *saṃyama*) is the restraint of the body (posture and gesture) and speech⁵ (ItA 1:78). This explanation for not appear helpful.

Of the three terms [§4], *dāna* is of course giving of food etc as merit-making. *Dama* is the taming of the five sense-faculties, that is, the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. *Saññama* is the control of the mind (the sixth sense-faculty), that is, the overcoming of the mental hindrances. The Commentary, however, reverses the last two explanations (ItA 1:78).

The meditation here is clearly that of the divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*).⁶ The triad here alludes to three “grounds for merit” (*puñña, kiriya vatthu*): giving (*dāna*), moral virtue (*sīla*), and mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*).⁷ A significant point to note here is that the closing of the Mā Puñña Bhāyī Sutta—from §5 onward (the verses) —is found in the closing half of **the Puñña, kiriya, vatthu Sutta 2** (It 3.2.1).⁸

¹ For the sake of disambiguation, it would be proper to call it **(Mā Puñña Bhāyī) Metta S** = The “Do not fear” Lovingkindness Discourse.

² A 7.58a/4:88-91 = SD 2.11a.

³ Tr Nyanaponika & Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* (1999 §147). See **Araka S** (S 7.70) = SD 16.17(2).

⁴ *Damassā ti cakkh’ādi, indriya, damanassa c’eva samādhāna, vasena rāg’ādi, kilesa, damanassa ca.*

⁵ *Saṃyamassā ti kāya, vacī, saṃyamassa.*

⁶ See **Brahma, vihāra** = SD 38.5.

⁷ **D 33.1.10**(38/3:218; **A 8.36**/4:241-341 = SD 22.17; **It 3.2.1**/51 = SD 22.17(2.1).

⁸ It 3.2.1/51 f = SD 22.17 (2.1).

2.3 SAMA, CARIYA. The Sutta’s Commentary explains *sama, cariya* as “abstaining from disharmony [restlessness] of body, etc, one conducts oneself with the harmony [stillness] of body, etc; the meaning is that one’s moral virtue is utterly pure.”⁹ The Dhammapada Commentary interestingly explains it as “with a conduct that stills all unwholesomeness.”¹⁰

Following the Commentaries, the term, which is here translated as “a calm [harmonious] conduct,”¹¹ can as such also mean “harmonious living,”¹² that is, a life moderated by the moral virtue and lovingkindness towards others. I think either sense can apply in this context, depending on the audience. If it is addressed to the general laity and scholastics, then *sama, cariya* is best rendered as “harmonious living” or “a peaceful life,” and if addressed to renunciant and lay practitioners, then “a life of stillness” gives the best sense.

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The “Do Not Fear Merit” Discourse

It 22/14-16

This was spoken by the Blessed One, spoken by the Arhat as heard by me:

1 “Bhikshus, do not fear merit.¹³ [15] This “merit,” bhikshus, is another name for happiness, desirable, pleasant, beloved and agreeable.¹⁴

For, I very well know, bhikshus, I have for a long time experienced the desirable, pleasant, beloved¹⁵ and agreeable fruits of meritorious deed performed.

2 Having cultivated a mind of lovingkindness for seven years, for seven aeons¹⁶ of world-contractions and world-expansions,¹⁷ I did not return to this world.¹⁸ Whenever, bhikshus, a world was destroyed, I was reborn among the devas of streaming radiance (*Ābhassarā*).¹⁹

⁹ *Kāya, visam’ādini vajjetvā kāya, sam’ādi, caritaṃ, suvisuddhaṃ sīlan ti attho.*

¹⁰ *~ ti sabbākusalāni sametvā caraṇena* (DhA 4:143) on Dh 388b.

¹¹ A 1:55; M 3:292 (×2); S 1:90, 101 f; It 16, 52; Dh 388; Miln 19; J 6:128; DhA 4:145.

¹² This sense of *sama, cariya* is famously found in **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41/1:285-290 = SD 5.7) and elsewhere (M 3:292; J 2:261); or, they could be polysemous (eg Dh 388b). We also find *sama* (impartial, upright, of even mind) as opposed to *visama* (uneven, disharmonious, disagreeable) (eg A 1:74, 293 f; Sn 215, 468, 952).

¹³ “Merit,” *puñña*, given in the plural (*puññānaṃ*) in Pali, but in modern English, “merit” is an uncountable noun. In the pl sense, it refers to “acts of merit.” On merit, see **Beyond good and evil** = SD 18.7 (6.3) *Puñña*.

¹⁴ The phrase “desirable, pleasant, beloved and agreeable” (*iṭṭhassa kantassa piyassa manāpassa*).

¹⁵ *Piyam*, omitted in A 7.58a here.

¹⁶ “Aeon,” *kappa*, is divided into 4 phases of cosmic expansion, stable state, cosmic contraction, stable state (A 4.156, 7.62). **Pabbata S** says that an aeon would last longer than it would take a man (assuming he is long-lived) to wear down a mountain a league (7 mi = 11.25 km) high, a league wide, a league round by stroking it once a century with a fine muslin (S 15.5).

¹⁷ *Satta saṃvaṭṭa, vivaṭṭa, kappe na-y-imaṃ lokam punar āgamāsim*. Buddhist cosmology speaks of a “pulsating” universe, that is, in modern terms, a cycle “big bang,” steady state, “big crunch,” steady state, ad infinitum. See **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1.2.1-3).

¹⁸ *Satta vassāni metta, cittaṃ bhāvetvā satta saṃvaṭṭa, vivaṭṭa, kappe na-y-imaṃ lokam punar-āgamāsim*. AA: He had attained to the absorptions with lovingkindness and thus did not return to this world, that is, the sense sphere (*kāma, loka*). (That is, he is reborn in *Ābhassara*, a 2nd-dhyana plane.) See foll n.

¹⁹ *Ābhassarā*, the highest of the 3 Brahma worlds of the 2nd-dhyana plane. When the universe devolves through “fire,” all lower worlds are destroyed, and the beings there re-arise in *Ābhassara* or in a parallel universe: see **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1.2.2/1:17) = SD 25.2 & **Aggañña S** (D 27.10/3:84 f) = SD 2.19 esp n on “mostly” at D 27.10a; Vism 13.30/414 (how the universe is destroyed), 13.41-44/416 f (the universe’s destruction and re-evolution); ItA 1:76. On parallel universes, see **Kosala S 1** (A 10.29.2/5:59 f) = SD 16.15; Kvu 13.1/476.

3 When the world unfolded [evolved] again,²⁰ I was reborn in an empty Brahma-vimana [Brahma-palace].²¹ And there, bhikshus, I was Mahā Brahmā, the Vanquisher [Overcomer], Unvanquished, the All-seeing, the All-powerful.²² And thirty-six times, bhikshus, I was Shakra, leader of the devas,²³ and many hundred times I was a universal monarch,²⁴ a just and righteous king,²⁵ conqueror of the world's four corners, with a country blessed with stability, possessor of the seven jewels.²⁶ So what need is there to speak of provincial kingship?

4 Of this matter, then, bhikshus, this occurred to me:

‘Now, of what deed of mine is this the karmic fruit, of what deed is the ripening, on account of which there was in me²⁷ such great power, such great majesty?’

Of this matter, bhikshus, this occurred to me:

‘This is indeed the fruit of three deeds of mine, the ripening of three deeds, on account of which I am now of such great power, such great majesty, that is to say, of giving, of taming, of restraint.’²⁸

5 ²⁹The Blessed One spoke on this matter. Then he said this:

²⁰ Presumably for the 8th time: Comy is silent.

²¹ “Brahma-vimana,” *brahmā, vimāna*, ie, the divine realm or “celestial realm” of a particular deva or brahma. **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1) explains how Brahmā “falls” (*cavati*) from his 2nd-dhyana Ābhassara world and finds an empty brahma-vimana (without any mention of the deva-realm or dhyana-plane) (D 1.39 f/1:17) = SD 25.1. Comy says that this brahma-world he is reborn into is of the 1st dhyana plane (ItA 1:76). Masefield’s concern that Comy’s equating with the 1st dhyana “does not seem to accord too well with the comparison to same at Vism 108: (sic) (It:M 21 n78)—which is uncalled for, since, as a rule, devas and brahmas “fall” (*cavati*) to a lower realm when they die.

²² “Mahā Brahmā... almighty,” *Mahā, brahmā abhibhū anabhibhūto aññad-atthu, daso vasavatti*. This is an abbreviated version of Mahā Brahmā’s self-proclaimed divine titles: see **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1.42/1:18) = SD 25.2. J Hartley Moore renders *aññad-atthu, dasa* (CPD sv) as “comprehending the purpose of others,” analyzing the cpd as *anya(d)-artha-drś*. The neut form *anyad* occurs at the beginning of a cpd in Skt. For the *u* in *atthu* instead of *a*, cf Franke, *Pali und Sanskrit*, 103. The collocation of *artha* and *drś*- is not unusual, being found, eg in the Skt cpd *artha, darśanam*, “perception of objects.” (1908:35 n6). See Böthlingk & Roth, *Sanskrit Wörterbuch*, sv *anyad*. The term is often one of Mahā Brahmā’s many epithets: It 4.13/122,7.

²³ The lifespan of devas in Tāvātimsa is equivalent to 36M human years (A 3.70.19/1:213).

²⁴ “Universal monarch,” *cakka, vatti*, often rendered as “wheel-turner.” **S Comy** explains: “For, having turned the wheel that has arisen, he is a wheel-turner (*cakka, vatti*) (*uppannañ hi cakkam vattetvā so cakka, vattī nāma hotī ti*) (SA 3:153). **Sn Comy**: “He is a ~ because he wields (*vatteti*) the wheel jewel (or, he has the wheel jewel turned); he turns with the wheel endowed with 4 characteristics (ie the *saṅgha, vatthu*: generosity, pleasant or convincing speech, beneficial conduct and just impartiality) for the benefit of others; and there is turning of the wheels of posture (ie standing, walking, sitting, reclining) in this (*cakka, ratanam vatteti, catūhi sampatti, cakkehi vattati, tehi ca param vatteti, para, hitāya ca, iriyā, patha, cakkānam vatto etasmim atthi ti cakka, vatti*) (SnA 2:449, cf 454). On *iriyā, patha, cakka*, see DA 249 = MA 3:365 = CA 40; AA 1:120 = 2:284. **It Comy**: “For of these (seven jewels), the wheel-turning king unconquered, conquers” (*tesu hi rājā cakka, vatti cakka, ratanena ajitam jināti*) (ItA 1:77), which evokes kings who performed the horse sacrifice (*assa, medha*; Skt *aśva, medha*): see (**Pasenadi**) **Yañña S** (S 3.9/1:75 f) = SD 22.11 Intro (1.22). See also **Cakka, vatti Siha, nāda S** (D 26/3:58-79) = SD 36.10 Intro (2).

²⁵ The rest of the sentence does not appear in (**Puñña**) **Metta S** (A 7.58a/4:89) = SD 2.11a. Cf It:M 22 n82.

²⁶ *Cātur-anto vijitāvī janapada-t, thāvāriya-p, patto satta, ratana, sampanno*, **D 1:88, 2:16, 18, 19, 146, 198, 3:59, 75, 142, 146, 177; M 2:134, 146; A 4:89, 105; It 15; Sn p106** (cf SnA 450 = DA 1:250); cf D 2:169; M 2:146; Sn 552 = Tha 822, 914; Miln 37; Divy 467.12-16. **The 7 jewels** (*ratana*) are: the wheel jewel, the elephant jewel, the horse jewel, the gem jewel, the woman jewel, the householder jewel, and the commander jewel (A 4:89). For details, see **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 17/2:169-199) = SD 36.12.

²⁷ “There was in me,” *mayham... etad ahoṣi*. Comy: This thought occurred when the Blessed One reviewed the last time he was himself a wheel-turning monarch (ItA 1:78).

²⁸ *Dāna dama saññaṃa*. *Dāna* is of course giving of food etc as merit-making. *Dama* is taming of the five sense-faculties, ie, the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. *Saññaṃa* is the control of the mind (the 6th sense-faculty), ie, the overcoming of the mental hindrances. Comy, however, reverses the last two explanations (ItA 1:78). The meditation here is clearly that of the divine abodes. The triad here alludes to 3 “grounds for merit” (*puñña, kiriya vatthu*): giving (*dāna*), moral virtue (*sīla*), and mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*) (D 33.1.10(38/3:218; A 8.36/4:241-341; It 3.2.1/51). See Intro (2.2) & foll n.

- 6 *Puññam eva so sikkheyya
āyat'aggam sukha'udrayam
dānañ ca sama,cariyañ ca
metta,cittañ ca bhāvaye.* One should indeed train in merit,
fruiting in happiness,³⁰ the best of what's to come—
cultivating generosity, [16] a calm [harmonious]
conduct³¹ and a lovingkind heart.
- 7 *Ete dhamme bhāvayitvā
tayo sukha,samudraye³²
avyāpajjam sukham lokam
paṇḍito upapjati ti.* Having cultivated these three states
that fruit in happiness,
into a trouble-free³³ happy world
the wise is reborn.

This, too, is a matter spoken by the Blessed One. Thus it was heard by me.

— evam —

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²⁹ From here on the whole passage is found in the closing half of **Puñña,kiriya,vatthu S 2** (It 3.2.1/51 f) = SD 22.17 (2.1).

³⁰ “Fruiting in happiness,” Be Ce *sukha'udrayam* (preferred); Ee Se *sukha'indriyam*.

³¹ “A calm [harmonious] conduct,” *sama,cariya*, alt tr “a life of stillness”: see Intro (2).

³² Emended reading. Be Ce Se *sukha,samuddaye*.

³³ “Trouble-free,” *avyapajjam*, ie free from suffering by way of such trouble as sensual desire etc (ItA 1:79).