Bālena Paṇḍita Sutta
The Discourse on the Wise Compared to the Fool
[Proof for the three-life dependent arising]
(Sarīyutta Nikāya 12.19/2:23-25)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2006

1 A modern commentary

1.1 IGNORANCE AND CRAVING. The message of the Bālena Paṇḍita Sutta is a simple one: our body arises into existence out of ignorance and is yoked to craving (avijjā,nīvaraṇassa...taṁhāya sampayuttasa evam ayaṁ kāyo samudāgato) [§§2, 3]: ignorance is the root of existence, and craving is its fuel.¹ This is very close to the commentarial explanation (SA 2:38).

Ignorance (avijjā) here refers to a fundamental ignorance of true reality, technically explained as not fully understanding the four noble truths² or at best only knowing them on a “word” level.³ It is a phase or level of our life when we do not really understand what is evil (unwholesome) and what is good (wholesome), and as such are driven by instinctively reactive habitual tendencies (anusaya).⁴

Although our deepest consciousness or mind, or the subconscious⁵—is, by nature, radiant (pabhassara), the currents of external sense-stimuli—forms, sounds (especially words), smells, tastes, touches, and mind-objects (especially thoughts)—incessantly invading us through the six senses, cloud up the radiance and goodness.⁶ Our inability to keep up with such sense-stimuli—chasing after those we misperceive as pleasurable, pushing away those regarded as painful, and ignoring the neutral ones—we simply lose touch with present reality, proliferating our minds into a million thoughts.⁷

All this flurry of mental activities then feed itself through craving (tanhā),⁹ a primordial thirst or sense of lack that arises and is sustained by a habitual measuring of oneself against others.¹⁰ This habitual tendency supports an acquisitive attitude characterized by obsessive collecting without any sense of fulfilment. The locus of control is projected outwards, so that we fail to work towards inner stillness, where true happiness lies.

1.2 INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL. The Buddha further states that “There is only this body (with its consciousness)¹¹ and external name-and-form” (ayaṁ c‘eva kāyo bahiddhā ca nāma,rūpaṁ) [§§2, 3], which the Commentary explains as referring to the conscious body of others externally, and that the meaning should be explained in terms of the five aggregates and six sense-bases of oneself and of others (SA 2:38).

Technically and academically, the commentarial explanation may be correct, but it is somewhat narrow, considering the context. Bodhi instructively notes

¹ Fuel or food (āhāra): see Putta, maṁsa S (S 12.63/2:97-100) Intro (2).
² See Dhamma,cakkha-pavattana S (S 56.11/5:420-424) = SD 1.1 esp Intro (5-6).
³ On the 3 levels of spiritual learning—the word level, the reflective level, and cultivation level—see Levels of Learning = SD 40.4.
⁴ See Anusaya = SD 31.3 & “I” the nature of identity = SD 6.14 & SD 19.11(3).
⁵ I have consciously used this term in a Buddhist sense, for the sake of convenience, without affiliating it to any secular psychological system. See The Unconscious = SD 17.8b (6).
⁶ See Pabhassara S (A 1.6.1-2/1:10; also A 1.5.9-10/1:10; MA 1:167).
⁷ See Pasūra S (Sn 4.8) eg speaks of “thinking over views in the mind” (manasā diṭṭhi,gatāni cintayanto, Sn 834) & Sūci,loma S (S 808*) mentions “the mind’s thoughts” (mano,vitakkā) (S 10.3/1:207). See Johansson, “Citta, Mano, Viññā— a psychosemantic investigation,” 1965:183, 186. See also The Unconscious = SD 17.8b.
⁹ See “Mine” the nature of craving = SD 19.3.
¹⁰ See “Me” the nature of conceit = SD 19.2a.
¹¹ Skt savijñānakah kāyāḥ samudāgataḥ (Tripāṭhi sūtra 12, 1962:140).
This interpretation of bahiddhā nāmarūpa seems dubious. We may have here, rather, a rare example of the term nāmarūpa being employed to represent the entire field of experience available to consciousness, “external name” being the concepts used to designate the objects cognized. (S:B 740 n48)

This is, in fact, attested by the stock phrase, “with regard to this conscious body and all external signs” (imasmiṁ saviññāṇake kāye bahiddhā ca sabba,nimittesu).  

The commentary to the Anānada Sutta (A 3.32/1:132) explains bahiddhā ca sabba,nimittesu that “all external signs” refers to just these: the signs of form, of sound, of smell, taste, touch, of notions of eternalism, etc, of a person, of dharmas [states]” (AA 2:206). The Anusaya Sutta (S 18.21/2:252) commentary here adds: “external’ (bahiddhā ca) means the conscious bodies of others and insentient objects: by the former is meant (dasseti, “is shown”) one’s own consciousness and that of others, and by the latter, external forms not bound by the sense-faculties [ie external inanimate objects]” (SA 2:214 f).

1.3 The Pair. The sutta continues: “There is only this body (with its consciousness) and external name-and-form; as such, there is this pair [dyad] (itim etam dvayaṁ)” [§2]. The Sānīyutta Commentary explains “this pair” as the internal and the external sense-bases, which it calls “the great dyad” (mahā-dvaya). “However,” notes Bodhi,

while the sense-bases are usually shown to be the condition for contact and are also called a dyad, it seems that here the text intends the term dyad to denote one’s own conscious body and ‘external name-and-form.’ The six sense bases are introduced only in the next sentence, after contact has already been said to arise from a duality. At D 2:62,12-37 [Mahā, nidāna Sutta, D 15.20] too the Buddha demonstrates that name-and-form can be a direct condition for contact without mention of the six sense bases. (S:B 740 n48)

1.4 The “All.” All beings, both the foolish and the wise, have come thus far in this way. All sentient beings suffer in similar manner, and the reason is clear:

There are only the six sense-bases. When any of them is touched [stimulated], the foolish feels pleasure and pain (sukha,dukkha).  

Saḷ’ev’ āyatanāni yehi phuṭṭho bālo sukha, dukkhaṁ paṭisaṁvediyati etesaṁ vā aññatarena. [§§2, 3]  

It might appear logical to render sukha, dukkha here as “pleasure or pain,” but I have rendered the dvandva conjunctively—as “pleasure and pain—as is often done (rather than disjunctively) to keep to the psychological and spiritual senses of the passage. The import is that while we often perceive a sense-stimulus as pleasurable, that very same stimulus, or rather our reaction to or memory of it, also brings pain (such as wanting more of it, or being dissatisfied with it). The Pali dvandva, sukha, dukkha, it should be noted, is pregnant with both the disjunctive and conjunctive senses.

“All there are only the six sense-bases.” [§3] All that we really are consists of the six senses (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind). All that we can experience or know are but the six sense-objects

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12 Anusaya S (S 18.21/2:252), Apagata S (S 18.22/2:253), Rādha S (S 22.71/3:79 f), Surādha S (S 22.72/3:80 f).
13 Rūpa, nimittāṁ sadda, nimittāṁ gandha, nimittāṁ rasa, nimittāṁ phoṭthabba, nimittāṁ sassat’ādi, nimittāṁ puggala, nimittāṁ dhamma, nimittāṁ eva, rāpesa ca bahiddhā sabba, nimittesu. Here “sign” (nimitta) refers to what the mind first takes as its object: see Nimitta = SD 19.7.
14 Parassa saviññāṇakaṁ va aviññāṇakaṁ va. Purimena va attano ca parassa ca viññāṇam eva dasseti, pacchimena bahiddhā anindriya, baddha, rūpāṁ.
15 Eg at Dukkha S (S 12.43/2:71-73), Loka S (S 12.44/3:73 f).
16 Eg at Dvaya S 1 (S 35.92/4:67), Dvaya S 2 (S 35.93/4:67-69).
17 Saḷ’ev’ āyatanāni yehi puṭṭho bālo sukha, dukkhaṁ paṭisaṁvediyati etesaṁ vā aññatarena. See Intro (1.4).
The Blessed One said this:

3 “Bhikshus, I will teach you the all. Listen to it.
And what, bhikshus, is the all?
The eye and forms,
the ear and sounds,
the nose and smells,
the tongue and tastes,
the body and touches,
the mind and mind-objects. This is called the all.

4 Bhikshus, if anyone were to say thus: ‘Rejecting this all, I shall make known another all’—that would be empty talk on his part.
When questioned he would not be able to reply and, moreover, he would meet with vexation.
And what is the reason for this?
Because, bhikshus, that would not be within his domain.” (S 35.23/4:15 = SD 7.1)

“When any of them [the sense-bases] is touched [stimulated], the foolish feels pleasure and pain.” [§3] From this point on, the sutta is very similar to the Sall’atthena Sutta (S 36.6), which in fact elaborates on what happens after that:

7 “Bhikshus, when the uninstructed ordinary person is touched by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, laments, beats his breast, becomes confused. So he feels two feelings: the bodily and the mental.

8a Bhikshus, it is just as if they were to wound a person with a dart [arrow], and then they were to wound him with a second dart. As such, bhikshus, that person would feel the sensation of two darts.

Even so, bhikshus, when the uninstructed ordinary person is touched by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, laments, beats his breast, becomes confused. So he feels two feelings: the bodily and the mental.

8b And being touched by that painful feeling, he shows aversion towards it. When he shows aversion towards the painful feeling, the latent tendency towards painful feeling lies latent in him.

8c When touched by a painful feeling, he delights in sensual pleasure.
Why is that so?
Because, bhikshus, the uninstructed ordinary person knows no other escape than through sensual pleasure.

8d And when he delights in sensual pleasure, the latent tendency of lust towards pleasant feeling lies latent in him.

8e He does not understand according to reality the arising, the passing away, the gratification, the danger and the escape with regards to feelings.

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18 S 35.23/4:15 = SD 7.1.
19 On the all (sabba), see SD 7.1 Intro.
20 “Mind-objects,” dhammā, alt tr “mental phenomena.”
21 Comy: The second wound (amugata,vedham) would be just a finger’s breadth or two-fingers’ breadth away from the first one. For the one wounded, as such, would feel the subsequent worse than the first. (SA 3:76).
22 See Nakula,pitā S (S 22.1/3:1-5) = SD 5.4.
23 Latent tendencies (anusayā): see SD 5.5 Intro n.
24 Comy: The escape is mental concentration, the path and the fruit, but he does not know this, knowing only sensual pleasure. (SA 3:77)
Not understanding these things according to reality, the latent tendency of ignorance (avijjā’nusaya) towards neutral feeling lies latent in him.26

If he feels a pleasant feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him. If he feels a painful feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him. If he feels a neutral feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him.

This, bhikshus, is called an uninstructed ordinary person who is yoked to birth, death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair—he is one who is yoked to suffering, I say!27

(S 36.6/4:208 f) = SD 5.5

The Balena Paṇḍita Sutta summarizes this teaching by saying:

Because the foolish has not lived the holy life for the utter destruction of suffering. As such, with the breaking up of the body, after death, the foolish fares on to another body. Faring on to another body, he is not freed from birth, decay-and-death; not freed from sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, and despair; not freed from suffering, I say! [§7]

So what is “the holy life” (brahma,carīya)? This is what we shall examine next.

2 The holy life

The Bālena Paṇḍita Sutta says that the foolish awakened person goes on suffering because he “has not lived the holy life for the utter destruction of suffering” (na...acari brahma,carīya sammā,dukkha-k,khāyāya) [§7], but the wise but awakened person “has lived the holy life for the utter destruction of suffering” (acari brahma,carīya sammā,dukkha-k,khāyāya) [§8]. The term “holy life” (brahma,carīya), in a narrow sense, means celibacy, that is, a life of abstaining from all sensual pleasures, especially sexuality, so that all our energies are directed toward mental cultivation as a foundation for spiritual liberation.28

On a broader scale, the holy life is the spiritual training that applies to all who wish to walk the path to awakening, ordained or lay. Such a holy life comprises the three trainings (ti,sikkhā) of moral virtue, mental concentration and wisdom. This is the training that is referred to in the Great Commission:

Freed am I, bhikshus, from all snares, divine and human! You too, bhikshus, are freed from all snares, divine and human.

Go forth, O bhikshus, on a mission29 for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good and happiness of the gods and humans.

Let not two of you go the same way.

Teach the Dharma, bhikshus, good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, both in the spirit and in the letter.

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25 Cf Cūḷa Sīhanāḍa S (M 11.7/1:65), where the Comy says the arising (samudaya) the views of being (bhava,-diṭṭhi) and non-being (vibhava,diṭṭhi) are due to any of these eight conditions (attha-hāna): the five aggregates, ignorance, contact, perception, thought, unskilful consideration, evil friends and the voice of another [Pm 1:138]. Their disappearance (attha-gama) is the path of stream-entry which eradicates all wrong views. Their gratification (assāda) may be understood as the satisfaction of psychological need that they provide; their danger (ādīnava) is the continual bondage that they entail; the escape (nissaraṇa) from them is Nirvana (MA 2:11). See also Chachakkha S (M 148) where the latent tendencies are explained in connection with each of the 6 senses (M 148.28-33/3:285).

26 The most important characteristic of neutral feelings to note is their impermanent nature (It 47). This is because a neutral feeling appears to be the most stable of the three types of feeling. When they are noted as impermanent, it will lead to the arising of wisdom, thereby countering the latent tendency of ignorance. See §3n. See Anālayo, Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization, 2003:171.

27 Mahā Taṭṭha,sānkhyā S (M 38) concludes with an interesting, broader explanation of how an unawakened person delights all kinds of feelings—whether pleasant, painful or neutral—“he delights in that feeling, welcomes it, and remains clinging to it.” It also describes a Buddha responds to these feelings (M 38.30-41/1:266-271). See Intro above & also Cūḷa,vedalla S (M 44.25-28/1:303 f).

28 The best example is the 3rd of the eight precepts (āṭṭha sīla, A 3.70/1:211) or ten precept (dasā sīla, Kh 2/1).

29 “Mission,” cārikaḥ, usu tr as “moving or walking about, wandering, roaming; pilgrimage; journey” (DPL).
Declare the holy life in its whole⁴⁰ and complete purity.
There are beings with little dust in their eyes who, not listening, would be ruined.
They will grow if they understand the Dharma.⁴¹

I will myself, bhikshus, go to Senānīgama⁴² near Uruvelā to teach the Dharma.
(Mv 11.1 = V 1:20 f = S 4.5/1:105 f; Mvst 3:415 f)

The Sutta says this in connection with “the wise, hindered by ignorance and yoked to craving”⁴³ [§8].
In the Commentaries such a being is called a “good worldling” (kalyāṇa puthujjana),⁴⁴ but the more familiar canonical expression is that of an “instructed noble disciple” (sutavā ariya,śāvaka).⁴⁵ However, in the case of the wise disciple, he has abandoned ignorance and destroyed craving:

But, bhikshus, for the wise, hindered by ignorance and yoked to craving, this body has thus arisen. For the wise that ignorance has been abandoned and that craving has been utterly destroyed. [§8]

Of this wise worldling, the Sall’atthena Sutta (S 36.6) says:

9 Bhikshus, when the instructed noble disciple is touched by a painful feeling, he does not sorrow, or grieve, or lament, or beat his breast, or become confused. So he feels (only) one feeling: the bodily, not the mental.

10a Bhikshus, it is just as if they were to wound a person with a dart, but they were not to wound him with a second dart. As such, bhikshus, that person would feel the sensation of (only) one dart.

Even so, bhikshus, when the instructed noble disciple is touched by a painful feeling, he does not sorrow, or grieve, or lament, or beat his breast, or become confused. So he feels (only) one feeling: the bodily, not the mental.⁴⁶

10b And being touched by that painful feeling, he shows no aversion towards it. When he shows no aversion towards the painful feeling, the latent tendency⁴⁷ of aversion towards painful feeling does not lie latent (in him).

10c When touched by a painful feeling, he delights not in sensual pleasure.

Why is that so?

Because, bhikshus, the instructed noble disciple knows escape other than through sensual pleasure.

10d And when he does not seek delight in sensual pleasure, the latent tendency of lust towards pleasant feeling does not lie latent (in him).

10e He understands according to reality the arising, the passing away, the gratification, the danger and the escape with regards to feelings.

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30 “Whole,” kevala, ie unadulterated, entire, not mixed with anything else.
31 “If they understand the Dharma,” dhammassā aĩñātāro, lit “if they are knowers of the Dharma.”
32 Senānīgama. This is the original name as found in the Canon (eg V 1:21; M 1:166. 240; A 1:106). The Comys give it as Senānīgama, the market town of Senānī, on the Neraijarā bank near Uruvelā, and where Sujātā gives milk-rice to the Bodhisattva, which is his last meal before the awakening J 1:68; MA 2:173; SA 1:172; AA 1:401; BA 7; ApA 72; DhAs 34). The Lalita,vistara calls it Senāpati,grāma (Lalv 311.248).
33 Avijjāya nivutissa paṇḍitassa yāya ca tanhāya sampayuttassa.
34 On the 2 types of worldlings (puthujjana), see SD 5.4 Intro (3).
35 Or sometimes simply as “instructed disciple” (sutavā puthujjana): see Assutava S 1 (S 12.61/2:94 f) = SD 20.2.
36 Comy: Of the noble disciples, the stress here is on the arhat, although it would also apply to the Non-returner. The Commentaries say that both have abandoned aversion (paṭīgha) or ill will (dosa), and thus are no longer subject to mental pain or displeasure (domanassa). However, anyone with a body, including the Buddhas, is subject to bodily painful feeling. (SA 3:77)
37 Latent tendencies (anusayā): see SD 5.5 Intro n.
Understanding these things according to reality, the latent tendency of ignorance towards neutral feeling does not lie latent (in him).

If he feels a pleasant feeling, he does not feel that it is yoked to him. If he feels a painful feeling, he does not feel that it is yoked to him. If he feels a neutral feeling, he does not feel that it is yoked to him.

This, bhikshus, is called an instructed noble disciple who is not yoked to birth, or death, or sorrow, or lamentation, or physical pain, or mental pain, or despair—he is one who is not yoked to suffering, I say!

Bhikshus, this then is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between the instructed noble disciple and the uninstructed ordinary person.

The wise one, deeply learned, feels not a feeling (in his mind)
That is pleasurable or painful—
This is the great difference
Between the wise and the uninstructed ordinary person.

For the deeply wise who has mastered the Dharma,
Who truly sees this world and the next.
Desirable things do not agitate his mind
Nor does the undesirable bring him aversion.

For him, there is neither attraction nor repulsion,
They have been dispersed, come to an end,
And having known that dustless sorrowless state [nirvana],
He rightly knows that he has crossed over existence. (S 36.6/4:209 f) = SD 5.5

3 Significance of the Bālena Paṇḍita Sutta

The short but important Bālena Paṇḍita Sutta throws a clear light on a better understanding of dependent arising as occurring over three lives [Table 3]. The sutta clearly and succinctly summarizes what in later exegetical and scholastic model of “the four groups” (catu,saṅkhepa) and the “twenty modes” (vīsat’ākāra), explained in the Paṭisambhidā,ma[ga,38] the Visuddhi,ma[ga,39] and the Abhidhamma,atha,saṅgaha.40

The past causes are the ignorance and craving that bring both the foolish and the wise into present existence [Table 3]. The present results are the conscious body, name-and-form, the six sense-bases, contact, and feeling, that is, the being of body-and-mind that we are right now. These are the ignorance and craving that the foolish clings to and does not abandon. The future results consist of birth, decay and death, to which the foolish are again subject in a renewed existence.

Thus as has been noted by Bodhi, “This should also help establish the validity of the ‘three-life’ interpretation of paṭicca-samuppāda and demonstrate that such an interpretation is not a commentarial innovation.” (S:B 741 n50)41

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The 3 periods</th>
<th>The 12 links</th>
<th>The 20 modes &amp; 4 groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PAST EXISTENCE</td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Ignorance</td>
<td><strong>Karma process</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Volitional activities</td>
<td>(<strong>kamma.bhava</strong>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 past causes: 1,2,8,9,10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRESENT EXISTENCE</td>
<td>3. Consciousness</td>
<td>4. Name-and-form (mental and physical existence)</td>
<td><strong>Rebirth process</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. The sixfold sense-base</td>
<td>6. Contact</td>
<td>(<strong>upapatti.bhava</strong>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Feeling</td>
<td></td>
<td>5 present results: 3-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Existence</td>
<td></td>
<td>(<strong>kamma.bhava</strong>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>5 present causes: 1,2,8,9,10</td>
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<td>(<strong>upapatti.bhava</strong>)</td>
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<td>5 future results: 3-7</td>
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Table 3. The three-life dependent arising
The Discourse on the Wise Compared to the Foolish
(S 12.19/2:23-25)

1 Residing at Sāvatthi.

This body arises through ignorance and craving

2 Bhikshus, for the foolish, hindered by ignorance and yoked to craving, [24] this body has thus arisen. There is only this body (with its consciousness)43 and external name-and-form; thus, there is this pair [dyad].
   Dependent on the pair there is contact.
   There are only the six sense-bases. When any of them is touched [stimulated], the foolish feels pleasure and pain.44

3 Bhikshus, for the wise, hindered by ignorance and yoked to craving, this body has thus arisen. There is only this body (with its consciousness)45 and external name-and-form; thus, there is this pair.
   Dependent on the pair there is contact.
   There are only the six sense-bases. When any of them is touched [stimulated], the wise feels pleasure and pain.

4 Bhikshus, what then is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between the instructed noble disciple and the uninstructed ordinary person?"

5 “Venerable sir, our teachings are rooted in the Blessed One, guided by the Blessed One, has the Blessed One as refuge. It would be good indeed if the Blessed One were to explain its meaning. Having heard the Blessed One, the bhikshus would remember it.”46

6 “Then listen, bhikshus, pay close attention to it, I will speak.”
   “Yes, venerable sir!” the bhikshus replied in assent to the Blessed One.

The foolish fares on

7 The Blessed One said this:
   “Bhikshus, for the foolish, hindered by ignorance and yoked to craving, this body has thus arisen. But for the foolish, that ignorance has not been abandoned and that craving has not been utterly destroyed.
   What is the reason for that?
   Because the foolish has not lived the holy life for the utter destruction of suffering. As such, with the breaking up of the body, after death, the foolish fares on to another body.
   Faring on to another body, he is not freed from birth, decay-and-death; not freed from sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, and despair; not freed from suffering, I say!

42 Avijjā, nīvaraṇassa bhikkhhave bālāsa tanhāya sampayuttassa evam ayān kāyo samudāgato. Iti ayān c’eva kāyo bahiddhā ca nāma, riṇapi ith’etan dvayaṁ dvayān paṭicca phasso saḷ’ev’āyatanānī. Yehi phuṭṭho bālo sukha, dukkhaṁ paṭisamvediyati etesaṁ vā aśāvatarena.

43 Skt savijñānakaḥ kāyaḥ samudāgataḥ (Tripāṭhi sūtra 12, 1962:140).

44 Saḷ’ev’āyatanānī yehi phuṭṭho bālo sukha, dukkhaṁ paṭisamvediyati etesaṁ vā aśāvatarena. I have rendered sukha, dukkhaṁ here disjunctively (then conjunctively, as more common) to keep to the logic of this sentence. See Intro (1.4).

45 See §2 n.

The wise does not fare on

8  Bhikshus, for the wise, hindered by ignorance and yoked to craving, this body has thus arisen. But for the wise, that ignorance has been abandoned and that craving has been utterly destroyed.

What is the reason for that?

Because the wise has lived the holy life for the utter destruction of suffering. As such, with the breaking up of the body, after death, the wise does not fare on to another body.

Not faring on to another body, he is freed from birth, decay-and-death; freed from sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, and despair; freed from suffering, I say!

9  This, bhikshus, then, is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between the instructed noble disciple and the uninstructed ordinary person.”

— evam —

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