

## Kutūhala,sālā Sutta

### The Discourse on the Debating Hall

[Rebirth is driven by karmic fuel]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 44.9/4:398-400)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2007

#### 1 Vaccha,gotta's questions

**1.1 UPĀDĀNA.** **Vaccha,gotta** is a wanderer who approaches the Buddha for teachings on numerous occasions.<sup>1</sup> **The Kutūhala,sālā Sutta** (S 44.9) records the Buddha's answers to his questions on rebirth. The Buddha states that rebirth runs on "fuel" (*upādāna*), which also translates as "clinging" (*upādāna*), a wordplay.

We again come across this usage of *upādāna* in **the Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 72), where the Buddha explains the meaninglessness of the ten "undeclared questions" (*avyākata*), and the state of one who has attained nirvana.<sup>2</sup> The Pali term *upādāna* is a pun, meaning both "fuel" and "clinging." Here it is translated in keeping with the simile of fire.

A similar usage of *anāhāra* (*na + āhāra*, literally, "without food") appears in the same Sutta, where the Buddha uses the simile of a fire "without fuel" to illustrate the nature of nirvana.<sup>3</sup>

**1.2 INTERMEDIATE STATE.** To Vaccha's second and final question, the Buddha makes his famous statement on the intermediate state:<sup>4</sup> "Vaccha, when a being has laid down this body, but is not yet reborn into another body, it is fuelled by craving, I say." [§15]. The Buddha's answer implies a temporal gap between the dying moment and the rebirth moment, denied by the Thera,vāda which follows the commentarial tradition, which explains that at the death-moment, the being itself is said to be "not yet born" because the rebirth-consciousness has not yet arisen.<sup>5</sup>

#### 2 The six teachers

**2.1** The six teachers (*cha satthā*) or ford-makers (*tittha,kāra*) mentioned in the Kutūhala Sutta (S 44.9) are as follows, with a mention of their beliefs as culled from **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2), where their teachings are mentioned in some detail:<sup>6</sup>

(1) Pūraṇa Kassapa	antinomian ethics, amoralism, non-action
(2) Makkhali Gosāla	fatalism, determinism, denial of causality
(3) Nigaṇṭha Nāta,putta	fourfold restraint, liberation through self-mortification
(4) Sañjaya Belaṭṭhi,putta	agnosticism, skepticism, evasion
(5) Pakudha Kaccāyana	atomism (forerunner of Vaiśeṣika philosophy)
(6) Ajita Kesa,kambalī	materialism, annihilationism

**(1) Pūraṇa Kassapa**, an Ājīvika (naked ascetic), taught an antinomian ethics, that is, there is neither good nor evil, and that out actions have no moral causality (or karma does not exist).<sup>7</sup> Pūraṇa's theory of non-action (*akiriya,vāda*) is refuted in **the Apaṇṇaka Sutta** (M 60),<sup>8</sup> **the Karota Sutta** (S 24.6)<sup>9</sup> and **the Hetu Sutta** (S 24.7).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72) = SD 6.15 Intro (1).

<sup>2</sup> M 72.19a/1:487 = SD 6.15.

<sup>3</sup> M 72.19a/1:487 = SD 6.15.

<sup>4</sup> Canonical evidence for the intermediate state is discussed in **Is rebirth immediate?** = SD 2.17 esp (3-8).

<sup>5</sup> *Anupanno hotī ti cuti-k,khaṇe yeva paṭisandhi,cittassa anuppannattā anupapanno hoti* (SA 3:114).

<sup>6</sup> D 2.16-32/1:52-59 = SD 8.10.

<sup>7</sup> See **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.16-18/1:53) = SD 8.10.

<sup>8</sup> M 60.13-20/1:404-407 = SD 35.5

<sup>9</sup> S 24.6/3:208 f = SD 23.10.

<sup>10</sup> S 24.7/3:210 f = SD 23.6.

(2) **Makkhali Gosāla** was the founding leader of the Ājīvakas,<sup>11</sup> and like Pūraṇa Kassapa, teaches an anti-karma system of fatalism (*niyati*), denying moral causality.<sup>12</sup> **The Hetu Sutta** (S 24.7) specifically refutes the determinism (*niyati*) or anti-karma views (*akiriya,vāda*) of Makkhali Go,sāla.<sup>13</sup> His views are also mentioned and refuted in **the Mahā,diṭṭhi Sutta** (S 24.8).<sup>14</sup>

(3) **Nigaṇṭha Nāta,putta**, the leader of the Jains, who teaches liberation of the soul through self-mortification.<sup>15</sup> The Nikāyas record a number of encounters, often philosophically humorous ones, such as **the Upāli Sutta** (M 56), which refutes his claim to omniscience,<sup>16</sup> **the Deva,daha Sutta** (M 101), where some of his views are refuted,<sup>17</sup> and **the Nigaṇṭha Nāta,putta Sutta** (S 41.8), where Citta the householder confounds the nirgrantha on the nature of faith.<sup>18</sup>

(4) **Sañjaya Belaṭṭhi,putta** was a materialist skeptic, that is, he only believes in this world and does not provide any useful answers philosophical or religious whatsoever.<sup>19</sup> He was also the erstwhile teacher of Sāriputta and Moggallāna.<sup>20</sup>

(5) **Pakudha Kaccāyana** (also known as Pakudhaka Kaccāyana or Pakudhaka Kātiyāna) taught the doctrine of the seven substances or “bodies” (*satta,kāya*).<sup>21</sup> As such, he is what we might call an atomist. His views are mentioned and refuted in **the Mahā,diṭṭhi Sutta** (S 24.8).<sup>22</sup> His view that human beings are divided into “six classes by birth” (*cha-l-ābhijāti*) are refuted in **the Cha-l-ābhijāti Sutta** (A 6.57).<sup>23</sup>

(6) **Ajita Kesa,kambali** was a materialist annihilationist, that is, he believed that neither this world nor anything else exists. Everything is nothing but the four elements: earth, water, fire and wind.<sup>24</sup> His view is refuted in **the Apanṇaka Sutta** (M 60).<sup>25</sup>

Vaccha,gotta is presented as being aware of the teachings of the six teachers (*cha satthā*). However, as has been noted by **Bhikkhu Bodhi**,

It is strange that predictions about rebirth are ascribed to Ajita, since elsewhere he is reported to have taught materialism and to have denied an afterlife. Even Sañjaya is reported to have been a sceptic about such issues. (S:B 1456 380)

2.2 Apparently, the six sectarian teachers mentioned in the Kutūhala,sālā Sutta (S 44.9) are not meant to be taken in a historical sense. It is religious fiction based on history, a narrative to dramatize the Buddha’s teachings for the edification of the ancient Indian audience familiar with the numerous teachers who claim to teach the universal truth. The purpose of this narrative is to show that none of the teachers, except for the Buddha, are able to declare *the non-rebirth* of their best disciples.

The longest and most detailed accounts of the six teachers are found in **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2),<sup>26</sup> where each of the teachers is described in the same stock passage as being “the leader of an order, the leader of a group, the teacher of a group, well known and famous ford-maker, well considered

<sup>11</sup> An anti-brahmanical community whose pessimistic doctrines are related to those of Jainism: see D 2.19/1:53 = SD 8.10 n.

<sup>12</sup> See **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.19-21/1:52 f) = SD 8.10. See **Cha-l-ābhijāti S** (S 6.57) = SD 23.5 Intro (1.1).

<sup>13</sup> S 24.7/3:210 f = SD 23.6.

<sup>14</sup> S 24.8/3:211-213.

<sup>15</sup> D 2.27-29/1:57 f = SD 8.10.

<sup>16</sup> M 56/1:371-387 = SD 27.1.

<sup>17</sup> M 101/2:214-228 = SD 18.4.

<sup>18</sup> S 41.8/4:298-300 = SD 40.7.

<sup>19</sup> D 2.30-32/1:58 f = SD 8.10.

<sup>20</sup> See Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples* 2004: 5.10.

<sup>21</sup> That is, earth, water, fire, wind, happiness, and the soul, all of which are fixed and permanent, so that if someone were to cut another up, he was simply cutting these seven substances (D 2.24-26/1:56 f) = SD 8.10.

<sup>22</sup> S 24.8/3:211-213.

<sup>23</sup> A 6.57/3:383-387 = SD 23.5.

<sup>24</sup> D 2.21-23/1:55 f = SD 8.10.

<sup>25</sup> M 60.5-12 = 1:401-404 = SD 35.5.

<sup>26</sup> D 2.16-32/1:52-59 = SD 8.10.

[regarded as holy] by the masses.<sup>27</sup> From such a statement, we can surmise that early Buddhism must contend with not only the orthodox brahmins and their Vedic dogmas, but also with the various sectarian teachers and their teachings.<sup>28</sup> We also know, from **the Dahara Sutta** (S 3.1) that the Buddha is evidently younger than all the six teachers.<sup>29</sup>

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## The Discourse on the Debating Hall

(S 44.9/4:398-400)

[398]

2 Then, the wanderer Vaccha,gotta approached the Blessed One. Then, having approached the Blessed One, he exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and friendly exchange was concluded, the wanderer Vaccha,gotta sat down at one side.

3 Seated thus at one side, the wanderer Vaccha,gotta said this to the Blessed One:

“Some days ago, master Gotama, on some past occasions, some ascetics, brahmins, and wanderers of other sects assembled in the debating hall,<sup>30</sup> and this talk arose amongst those assembled:

4 (1) ‘This Pūrana Kassapa—the leader of an order, the leader of a group, the teacher of a group, well known and famous ford-maker, well considered [regarded as holy] by the masses—declares the rebirth of a disciple who had died, passed away, thus: “That one was reborn there. That one was reborn there.”

And declares the rebirth of his disciple who is a supreme person, a perfect person, attained to the highest, too, who had died, passed away, thus: “That one was reborn there. That one was reborn there.”

5 (2) ‘This Makkhali Gosāla... (too.)

And he declares the rebirth of his disciple who is a supreme person, a perfect person, attained to the highest, too, who had died, passed away, thus: “That one was reborn there. That one was reborn there.”

6 (3) ‘This Nigantha Nāta,putta... (too.)

And he declares the rebirth of his disciple who is a supreme person, a perfect person, attained to the highest, too, who had died, passed away, thus: “That one was reborn there. That one was reborn there.”

7 (4) ‘This Sañjaya Belatthi,putta... (too.)

And he declares the rebirth of his disciple who is a supreme person, a perfect person, attained to the highest, too, who had died, passed away, thus: “That one was reborn there. That one was reborn there.”

8 (5) ‘This Pakudha Kaccāyana... (too.)

And he declares the rebirth of his disciple who is a supreme person, a perfect person, attained to the highest, too, who had died, passed away, thus: “That one was reborn there. That one was reborn there.”

9 (6) ‘This Ajita Kesa,kambala—the leader of an order, the leader of a group, the teacher of a group, well known and famous ford-maker, well considered [regarded as holy] by the masses—declares

<sup>27</sup> *Saṅghī c’eva gaṇī ca gaṇ’ācariyo ca ñāto yasassī tittha,karo sādhu,sammato bahu,janassa.* [= §4 etc]

<sup>28</sup> For a monograph on the six teachers, see AL Basham, *History and Doctrine of the Ājīvikas*, London, 1951: 10-26 & passim.

<sup>29</sup> S 3.1/1:68-70.

<sup>30</sup> “The debating hall” (*kutūhala,sālā*, lit “commotion hall”) is a place where ascetics and brahmins of other sects engage in various discussions, and it so named on account of the frequent commotion, “What does this one say? What does that one say?” (SA 3:114). Apparently, there is no building named as such (*pacceka,sālā n’atthi*), as it is a generic term for a place of discussion (MA 3:235; SA 3:114). See **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9.1/1:178) = SD 7.14 n.

the rebirth of a disciple who had died, [399] passed away, thus: “That one was reborn there. That one was reborn there.”<sup>31</sup>

And declares the rebirth of his disciple who is a supreme person, a perfect person, attained to the highest, too, who had died, passed away, thus: “That one was reborn there. That one was reborn there.”

**10** (7) ‘This recluse Gotama—the leader of an order, the leader of a group, the teacher of a group, well known and famous ford-maker, well considered [regarded as holy] by the masses—declares the rebirth of a disciple who had died, passed away, thus: “That one was reborn there. That one was reborn there.”

But in the case of his disciple who is a supreme person, a perfect person, attained to the highest, who had died, passed away, he does *not* declare his rebirth thus: “That one was reborn there. That one was reborn there.”

But, he declares of him, thus: “He has cut off craving, and through full mastery over conceit, he has made a total end of suffering.”<sup>32</sup>

**11** There is uncertainty in me, master Gotama, there is doubt in me. How should the Dharma of the recluse Gotama to be understood?”

**12a** “It is fitting that you are uncertain, that you doubt, Vaccha. Doubt has arisen in you over what is doubtful.

### Rebirth and the intermediate state

**12b** Vaccha, I declare that there is rebirth for one with fuel [with clinging], not for one without fuel [without clinging].

**13** Vaccha, just as fire burns with fuel, not without fuel,<sup>33</sup> even so, Vaccha, I declare that there is rebirth for one with fuel [with clinging],<sup>34</sup> not for one without fuel [without clinging].<sup>35</sup>

**14** “But, master Gotama, when a flame is tossed by the wind and goes a long way, what does master Gotama declare to be its fuel?”

“Vaccha, when a flame is tossed by the wind and goes a long way, I declare that it is fuelled by the wind [the air]. For, Vaccha, at that time, the wind [the air] is the fuel.” **[400]**

**15** “And further, master Gotama, when a being has laid down this body, but has not yet been reborn in another body, what does the master Gotama declare to be the fuel?”

“Vaccha, when a being has laid down this body, but is not yet been reborn in another body, it is fuelled by craving, I say. For, Vaccha, at that time, craving is the fuel.”<sup>36</sup>

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080326; 080403; 080904

<sup>31</sup> It is interesting here that Ajjita, an annihilationist, would make statements on rebirth. There at least two possible explanations: (1) the redactors simply added the *peyyāla* without considering Ajjita’s philosophy, or (2) this is the opinion of Vacchagotta himself.

<sup>32</sup> *Acchejji taṅhaṃ vivattayi saññojanaṃ sammā,mānābhisamayā antam akāsi dukkhassā ti.*

<sup>33</sup> See **Upasīva Pañha** (Sn 5.7): “Just as a flame tossed about the wind’s force...| goes out, and no longer counts (as a flame)” (*accī yathā vāta,vegena khitto | atthaṃ paleti, na upeti saṅkhaṃ*, Sn 1074), where Comy explains: “It goes to its end, and is not reckoned to have gone in any direction.” (SnA 594)

<sup>34</sup> This sentence, in essence, is the same as Sn 1074: *accī yathā vāta,vegena khitto | atthaṃ paleti, na upeti saṅkhaṃ* (Sn 1074), “Just as a flame tossed about by the force of the wind...goes out and no longer counts (as a flame),” (Norman, 1992:120) a teaching the Buddha gave to Upasīva.

<sup>35</sup> *Seyyathā’pi vaccha, aggi saupādāno jalati, no anupādānaṃ, evam eva kho’haṃ vaccha saupādānassa kho’haṃ vaccha uppattiṃ paññāpemi, no anupādānassa.*

<sup>36</sup> *Yasmim kho vaccha samaye imaṃ ca kāyaṃ nikkhipati, satto ca aññataraṃ kāyaṃ anuppanno hoti, tam ahaṃ taṅhūpādānaṃ vadāmi. Taṅhā hi’ssa vaccha tasmim samaye upādānaṃ hoti ti.*