

(Gilāna) Phagguna Sutta
The Discourse to (the Sick) Phagguna
[Benefits of knowing the Dharma at the time dying]
(Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.56/3:379-383)
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008

Introduction

Phagguna is one of the early saints known only from a couple of suttas in which he figures. **The (Aṭṭa,buddha) Phagguna Sutta** (S 35.83) records Phagguna as asking the Buddha if it were possible, by means of any of the senses, to recognize and proclaim the past Buddhas. The Buddha replies that it is not possible.¹

The (Gilāna) Phagguna Sutta (A 3.56) probably records the same Phagguna as he lies in his sick-bed. On Ānanda's suggestion, the Buddha visits and counsels the gravely ill Phagguna.² He dies soon after, having attained arhathood.³

This is a Sutta about terminal counselling, of inspiring the gravely ill and dying on how to keep their mind wholesome, even happy, do that their last moments are wholesome, leading to some spiritual attainment, such as streamwinning, or at least a wholesome rebirth. We should not leave such training to the last minute, but we need to constantly keep our minds in habitually wholesome states, so that the last moments of our lives have a wholesome momentum with good fruit (at least, either streamwinning or a happy rebirth).

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The Discourse to (the Sick) Phagguna
(A 6.56/3:379-383)

Originating in Sāvattṭhī.

Phagguna is ill

1a Now at that time, the venerable Phagguna was sick, in pain, and seriously sick.

Then the venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed One, saluted him and sat down at one side. Seated thus at one side, the venerable Ānanda said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, the venerable Phagguna is sick, in pain, and seriously sick. It would be good if the Blessed One were to visit the venerable Phagguna.”

The Blessed One consented by his silence.

1b Then in the evening, when the Blessed One had emerged from his solitary retreat, he visited the venerable Phagguna.

The venerable Phagguna, saw the Blessed One coming from afar. Seeing the Blessed One coming from afar, he stirred on his bed.

Then the Blessed One said this to the venerable Phagguna:

“It's all right, Phagguna, do not stir on your bed. There are these seats already prepared before me (by someone).⁴ I will sit there.”

¹ S 35.83/4:52 f.

² A 3.56/3:379-383 = SD 23.4.

³ AA 3:393.

The Buddha asks after Phagguna

1c The Blessed One sat down on the prepared seat. Thus seated, the Blessed One said this to the venerable Phagguna:

“How are you, Phagguna? I hope you are bearing up, and getting better. I hope that your painful feelings are abating, that their abating is evident, not their rising.”⁵

PHAGGUNA’S PAINS.⁶ “I cannot bear it, bhante; I am not getting better; my painful feelings are not subsiding, but rising; their rising is evident, not their subsiding.

(1) Violent winds are cutting⁷ through my head like a strong man cleaving it open with a sharp sword.⁸

I cannot bear it, bhante; ...

(2) Violent pains are crushing my head as if a strong man were tightening a strong leather strap around my head as a headband.⁹ [380]

I cannot bear it, bhante; ...

(3) Violent winds are rending my belly as if a skilled butcher or his apprentice were to carve up a cow’s¹⁰ belly with a sharp butcher’s knife.¹¹

I cannot bear it, bhante; ...

(4) Violent pains are burning up my body¹² as if two strong men were to seize a weaker man by both arms, and burn and roast him over a pit of burning coal.¹³

I cannot bear it, bhante; I am unable to keep going, and my pains are not subsiding, but rising; their rising is evident, not their subsiding.

THE BUDDHA ADMONISHES PHAGGUNA. Then the Blessed One, having instructed, inspired, roused and gladdened the venerable Phagguna with a Dharma talk,¹⁴ rose and left.

⁴ *Sant’imāni āsanāni pure [v] parehi*) paññattānim tatthāham nisīdissāmī ti.

⁵ *Kacci te āvuso gaha,pati khamaṇīyaṃ kacci vāpanīyaṃ kacci dukkhā vedanā paṭikkamanti no abhikkhamanti, patikkamo sānam paññāyati no abhikkamo ti*, lit “Householder, perhaps you are bearing it, perhaps you can keep going; that your painful feelings are abating, not rising; that their abating is evident, not their rising.” This is stock. The underscored phrase lit tr “perhaps you are fit to keep going.” I have rendered this as “How are you?” and place it at the head of the sentence for the sake of acceptable English.

⁶ This section is stock: **Dhānañjāni S** (M 97.29/2:193,1) = SD 4.9, **Anātha,piṇḍik’ovāda S** (M 143.4/3:259,8); **Phagguna S** (A 6.56/3:379,25), to describe the illness of the brahmin Dhānañjāni, of the householder Anātha,piṇḍika, and of the monk Phagguna, respectively.

⁷ “Cutting,” *ūhananti*, lit “are rising upwards.”

⁸ *Seyyathā’pi bhante Sāriputta, balavā puriso tiṅhena sikharena muddhani abhimantheyya, evam eva kho bhante Sāriputta, adhimattā vātā muddhani ūhananti*.

⁹ *Seyyathā’pi bhante Sāriputta, balavā puriso daḥhena varattabandhena sīse sīsa,veṭhanam dadeyya*.

¹⁰ “Cow,” *go*, which is actually a collective term meaning, “cow, ox, bull.”

¹¹ *Seyyathā’pi bhante Sāriputta, dakkho go,ghātako vā go,ghātakantevāsī vā tiṅhena go,vikantanena kucchim parikanteyya*

¹² “Burning up my body,” *kāyasmim dāho*, lit “burning in the body.”

¹³ *Seyyathā’pi bhante Sāriputta, dve balavanto purisā dubbalataram purisam nānā,bāhāsu gahetvā aṅgāra,-kāsuṃ santāpeyyum samparitāpeyyum*.

¹⁴ “The Blessed One then **instructed** (*sandassetvā*), **inspired** (*samādapetvā*), **roused** (*samuttejetvā*) and **gladdened** (*sampahaṃsetvā*)... with a Dharma talk.” This action sequence reflects the basic structure of the Buddha’s teaching method: (1) the Dharma is shown; (2) the listener/s are filled with enthusiasm; (3) they are fired with commitment; and (4) filled with joy. Comys (eg DA 1:293; UA 242; cf VA 1:65; MA 2:35) explain that by **instructing**, the Buddha dispels the listener’s **delusion**; by **inspiring him**, **heedlessness** is dispelled; by **rousing him**, **indolence** is dispelled; and by **gladdening**, brings the practice to a **conclusion**. In short, when we teach Dharma to benefit others, we should do our best to **bring instruction, inspiration, motivation and joy** to the listener. These 4 qualities are, in fact, the sixth or last of the ideal skills of a Dharma speaker. See SD 11.4 Intro (4) & also LS Cousins, in his review of *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (tr. Nāṇamoli) in JBE 4 1997:272, where gives a slightly different

Phagguna dies

2a Then, not long after the Blessed One had left, the venerable Phagguna passed away. And at the time of his death, his faculties were utterly clear.¹⁵

2b Then the venerable Ānanda [381] approached the Blessed One, saluted him and sat down at one side. Seated this at one side, the venerable Ānanda said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, the venerable Phagguna passed away not long after the Blessed One left him. And at the time of his death, his faculties were utterly clear.”

“But why, Ānanda, should the monk Phagguna’s faculties not be utterly clear?”

Ānanda, the monk’s mind was not freed from the five lower fetters.¹⁶ But having heard the Dharma, his mind was freed from the five lower fetters.

Six advantages of timely listening to the Dharma

2c Ānanda, there are these **six advantages of timely listening to the Dharma, of investigating of its meaning.**¹⁷ What are the six?

3 (1) HE LISTENS TO THE BUDDHA’S TEACHING & BECOMES A NON-RETURNER.

Here, Ānanda, a monk’s mind is not freed from the five lower fetters.

At the time of his dying, he gets to see the Tathagata. The Tathagata teaches him the Dharma, good in its beginning, good in its middle, good in its end, endowed with the spirit and the letter [with meaning and phrasing]. He proclaims the holy life that is entirely complete and pure.

Having heard the Dharma teaching, his mind is freed from the five lower fetters.

This, Ānanda, is the first advantage of timely listening to the Dharma.

4 (2) HE LISTENS TO A DISCIPLE’S TEACHING & BECOMES A NON-RETURNER.

Furthermore, Ānanda, a monk’s mind is not freed from the five lower fetters.

At the time of his dying, he does not get to see the Tathagata, but he gets to see a disciple of the Tathagata. The Tathagata’s disciple teaches him the Dharma, good in its beginning, good in its middle, good in its end, endowed with the spirit and the letter [with meaning and phrasing]. He proclaims the holy life that is entirely complete and pure.

Having heard the Dharma teaching, his mind is freed from the five lower fetters.

This, Ānanda, is the second advantage of timely listening to the Dharma.

5 (3) HE INVESTIGATES THE DHARMA & BECOMES A NON-RETURNER.

Furthermore, Ānanda, a monk’s mind is not freed [382] from the five lower fetters.

At the time of his dying, he gets to see neither the Tathagata nor the Tathagata’s disciple.

But, he thinks over, ponders over, turns over in his mind, the Dharma as he has heard it, as he has learned it.¹⁸ On account of his thinking over, pondering over, turning over in his mind, the Dharma as he has heard it, as he has learned it, his mind is freed from the five lower fetters.

This, Ānanda, is the third advantage of investigating the meaning (of the Dharma).¹⁹

listing of the above. See also Kalupahana, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy*, 1992:65-67. On *ācikkhanti deseti*, etc, see also A 4.92.5(4a) n = SD 14.11b.

¹⁵ *Tam hi c’assa samaye maraṇa,kāle indriyāni vippasādimsu.*

¹⁶ The 5 lower fetters. There are 10 **mental fetters** (*dasa saṃyojanā*): (1) self-identity view (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*), (2) persistent doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rules and rites (*sīla-b,bata,parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma,rāga*), (5) repulsion (*paṭigha*), (6) greed for form existence (*rūpa,rāga*), (7) greed for formless existence (*arūpa,rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61, A 5:13, Vbh 377). In some places, no. 5 (*paṭigha*) is replaced by illwill (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are the lower fetters (*oram,bhāgiya*) that bind one to the “lower” realm, ie, the sense world, and the rest, the higher fetters (*uddham,bhāgiya*) that bind one to the “higher” realms, ie the form and formless worlds.

¹⁷ *Cha-y-ime ānanda ānisamsā kālena dhamma,savaṇe, kālena atthūpaparikkhāya.*

¹⁸ *Api ca kho yathā,sutam yathā,pariyattam dhammam cetasā anuvitakketi, anuvicāreti, manasā’nupekkhati.*

¹⁹ This refrain [5] and the one at §8 are both the same, but differ from the other teaching sections [3, 4, 6, 7]: see the lemma sentence [2c].

6 (4) HE LISTENS TO THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING & BECOMES AN ARHAT.

Furthermore, Ānanda, a monk's mind is not freed from the five lower fetters. And his mind is not freed through the supreme destruction of acquisitions.²⁰

At the time of his dying, he gets to see the Tathagata. The Tathagata teaches him the Dharma, good in its beginning, good in its middle, good in its end, endowed with the spirit and the letter [with meaning and phrasing]. He proclaims the holy life that is entirely complete and pure.

Having heard the Dharma teaching, his mind is freed through the supreme destruction of acquisitions.

This, Ānanda, is the fourth advantage of timely listening to the Dharma.

7 (5) HE LISTENS TO A DISCIPLE'S TEACHING & BECOMES AN ARHAT.

Furthermore, Ānanda, a monk's mind is not freed from the five lower fetters. And his mind is not freed through the supreme destruction of acquisitions.

At the time of his dying, he does not get to see the Tathagata, but he gets to see a disciple of the Tathagata. The Tathagata's disciple teaches him the Dharma, good in its beginning, good in its middle, good in its end, endowed with the spirit and the letter [with meaning and phrasing]. He proclaims the holy life that is entirely complete and pure.

Having heard the Dharma teaching, his mind is freed through the supreme destruction of acquisitions.

This, Ānanda, is the fifth advantage of timely listening to the Dharma.

8 (6) HE INVESTIGATES THE DHARMA & BECOMES AN ARHAT.

Furthermore, Ānanda, a monk's mind is not freed from the five lower fetters. And his mind is not freed through the supreme destruction of acquisitions.

At the time of his dying, he gets to see neither the Tathagata nor the Tathagata's disciple.

But, he thinks over, ponders over, turns over in his mind, the Dharma as he has heard it, as he has learned it.

On account of his thinking over, pondering over, turning over in his mind, the Dharma as he has heard it, as he has learned it, his mind is freed through the supreme destruction of acquisitions.

This, Ānanda, is the sixth advantage of investigating the meaning the Dharma.

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²⁰ *Anuttare ca kho upadhi, saṅkhaye cittaṃ avimuttaṃ hoti.* Comy glosses “the supreme destruction of acquisitions” (*anuttare upadhi, saṅkhaye*) as “nirvana” (A 3:393). “Acquisitions” = *upādhi* (P & BHS), meaning “remnant, substrate,” or more correctly, “acquisitions” or “belongings,” attachment to which leads to rebirth) is often confused with *upādi* (“clinging,” from *upa* + *ā* + *dā* “to take”). See CPD: *upadhi*, & **The Unconscious** = SD 17.8b(4.4).