The (Rajah) Discourse on Decay and Death

12 (Rāja) Jarā Maraṇā Sutta
The Discourse on Decay and Death, Ee Rāja Sutta

Be Jarā,maraṇa Sutta The Discourse on Decay and Death, Ee Rāja Sutta The Discourse to the Rajah
Theme: Even the most powerful must die
Translated by Piya Tan ©2010, 2013

Introduction

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike th'inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Thomas Gray (1751)

The (Rāja) Jarā Maraṇa Sutta (S 3.3), the third sutta in the Kosala Saṁyutta, is a reflection on impermanence, or more exactly, on decay and death (jarā, maraṇa). The Sutta opens with the rajah Pasenadi, now a devotee of the Buddha, asking him a question on the meaning of life. The Buddha answers with a variation of the first noble truth, that of suffering: “Maharajah, for one who is born, there is nothing other than decay and death.” [§3]

Everyone in society, no matter what class—kshatriya (warrior), brahmin (priest) or houselord (the propertied)—no matter how rich, are all subject to decay and death [§§4-5], even those who have left the world, the great arhats, too, are subject to decay and death. Or more exactly their bodies are subject to decay and death, but they are no more subject to rebirth, and so have gone beyond suffering [§6].

The Sutta closes with “the royal chariot verse” which has three words, all meaning “good,” that is, sata, santa and sabbhi. The second word, santa, however, can also mean “peaceful.” [§8]

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1 Originating in Sāvatthī.

Pasenadi’s question

2 Sitting at one side, the rajah Pasenadi of Kosala said this to the Blessed One:
“Bhante, for one who is born, is there anything other than decay and death?”

The Buddha’s teaching

3 “Maharajah, for one who is born, there is nothing other than decay and death.”
4 Maharajah, even for a kshatriya of the great halls, fabulously wealthy, greatly rich, with abundant gold and silver, with abundant supplies, with abundant wealth and grain,
for him, too, there is nothing other than decay and death.

2 On Kosala Saṁyutta, see Dahara S (S 3.1) @ SD 42.11 (1).
3 Atthi nu kho bhante jātassa aṇāttra jarā,marañāti.
5.1 Maharajah, even for a brahmin of the great halls, fabulously wealthy, greatly rich, with abundant gold and silver, with abundant supplies, with abundant wealth and grain, for him, too, there is nothing other than decay and death.

5.2 Maharajah, even for a houselord of the great halls, fabulously wealthy, greatly rich, with abundant gold and silver, with abundant supplies, with abundant wealth and grain, for him, too, there is nothing other than decay and death.

6 Maharajah, even for monks who are arhats, with mental influxes destroyed, who have lived the holy life, done what is to be done, laid down the burden, reached their own goal, destroyed the fetters of being, completely liberated through direct knowledge, even for them this body is subject to breaking up, subject to being laid down.

7 The Blessed One said this. The Teacher, the Sugata [well-farer], having said this, added:

The royal chariot verse

8 Jiranti ve rāja,rathā sucittā
tho sarīram pi jaraṁ upeti
sataṁ ca dhammo na jaraṁ upeti
santo have sabbhi pavedayantī.

The royal chariot, well-adorned, indeed decay!
And the body, too, comes to age.
But the truth of the good does not decay.
Indeed, the peaceful teach the good. = Dh 151

— evaṁ —

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4 “Mental influxes,” āsava. The term āsava (lit “in-flow, out-flow”) comes from ā-savati “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as influxes, taints (“deadly taints,” RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists 4 kinds of āsava: the influx of (1) sense-desire (kām’āsava), (2) desire for eternal) existence (bhav’āsava), (3) wrong views (dīṭṭh’āsava), (4) ignorance (avijjāsava) (D 16.2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These four are also known as “floods” (oghā) and “yokes” (yogā). The list of three influxes (omitting the influx of views) [43] is probably older and is found more frequently in the Suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these āsavas is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict: āsava.

5 Sadatthā, may be resolved as: (1) sa-d-atham, “one’s own goal,” (2) sat + athā, “the sublime goal,” “the ideal.”

6 Ye pi te mahā, rāja bhikkhū arahanto khīṁ āsavā vusitavanto kata,karaṇīyā ohita, bhārā anuppatta, sa-d-atham parikkhiṇa,bhava,samyojanā samma-d-aṁnhā, vimutta.

7 Tesam pāyaṁ kāyo bhedana,dhammo nikkhepana,dhammo ’ti.

8 Only in Be Se.