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Sīvaka Sutta

The Discourse to Sīvaka | S 36.21/4:230 f

Theme: Not everything is due to karma

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

1 Ancient Indian medicine

The main purpose of this sutta is to refute the wrong view that “everything is due to past karma” (*pubbaka, hetu, vāda*), a form of determinism that has been criticized and refuted in various ways by the Buddha, such as in the **the Devadaha Sutta**¹ where it is ascribed to the Jains, and **the Tittḥ’āyatana Sutta** (A 3.61/1:173 f).

This sutta is also one of the earliest historical references to ancient Indian medicine. It lists eight causes of bodily suffering in answer to a question posed by Sīvaka, probably a wanderer who is also a healer or doctor. These eight causes are also found in **the Samaṇa-m-acala Sutta 1**,² **the (Ābādhika) Gīrīmānanda Sutta**³ and **the (Samaṇa) Sukhumāla Sutta**.⁴ In the last sutta, one who is disease-free is said to be one free from these 8 causes (cf Nm 370). In **the Milinda, pañha** (Miln 134 f), Nāgasena discusses the 8 causes of suffering in the context of the Buddha’s lack of moral vice. All this attests to the early history of this aetiology.

The first four of these causes—the three peccant (illness-bringing) humours and their combination—are central to Āyurveda medical aetiology. The first three humours (Skt *doṣa*)⁵ are the *tri, doṣa* of Āyurvedic medicine.⁶

They are also a prominent aspect of the Mahāyāna medicinal philosophy and healing (Zysk 1998 ch 4).⁷ While these four causes are internal, the rest are external causes of bodily suffering, except for karmic results, which are both.

The 7th cause—“assault” (*opakkamikāni*)—is of special interest here. It is also translated as “external agency”, but the Pali forms *upakkama*, *opakkama*, *opakkamika*, and the Sanskrit *upakrama* (from *upa-* and *√KRAM*, to stride) have the primary meaning of “attacking suddenly.” As such, Zysk thinks:

it therefore could be equivalent to the *āgantū*, or external, category of disease causation in Indian medicine. According to the āyurvedic medical tradition, *āgantū* causes are generally violent and traumatic and involve injury to the body.⁸ (Zysk 1998:30)

It should be understood here that although the Buddha declares that karma is not the only cause of one’s sufferings, it is clear from his teachings that karma can have a strong influence on how one is affected or not affected by any of these causes of suffering. The feelings referred to in this sutta are those of a narrower sense of physical pain, not the usual broader sense of pleasurable, painful and neutral feeling.

¹ M 101/2:214-223.

² A 4.87.5/2:87.

³ A 10.60.7/5:110 = SD 15.11.

⁴ A 5.104/3:131.

⁵ In early Western physiology, current until the Middle Ages, **humour** (Latin “moisture”) refers to one of the 4 cardinal fluids of the body which, in variant mixtures, were thought to determine a person’s temperament and features (or complexion), ie, their mental qualities and physical disposition. The 4 humours are blood, phlegm, choler (yellow bile) and melancholy (black bile). The ideal person had an ideal balance of the four. A predominance of one produced a person who was sanguine (Latin *sanguis*, “blood”), phlegmatic, choleric or melancholic. (From *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Micropaedia, 15th ed.)

⁶ Zysk 1998:29 f.

⁷ Zysk 1998 ch 4.

⁸ Caraka Saṁhita Sūtrasthāna 20.3; Suśruta Saṁhitā Sūtrasthāna 1.24 f.

The cause of illness and pain listed above are also mentioned in **the Samaṇa-m-acala Sutta** (A 4.87) and elsewhere. The arhat, too, experiences them, but “they do not affect him much, he suffers little sickness.”⁹

2 The 5 natural orders

The theme of the Sīvaka Sutta is that karma is not the only cause of bodily suffering. The Commentaries mention **the five natural orders** (*pañca,niyāma*), of which karma is only one. These natural orders govern the physical phenomena within and without a human being as well as his mental processes. The five natural orders are as follows:

- (1) The laws of energy (*utu,niyāma*), lit “the order of heat,” include both heat and cold (temperature). They cause changes in our bodies, such as ageing and illness, and in the external world, such as the climate, the seasons, the weather, and rains with characteristic regularity. This category would include the great corpus of laws of physics.
- (2) The laws of heredity (*bīja,niyāma*), lit “the order of seeds,” concern the physical organic order, and account for the fact of resemblance (genetics). They explain such things as how rice seeds produce rice, how sugary taste comes from sugar-cane or honey, and the peculiar characteristics of certain fruits. The scientific theories of cells and genes, and the physical similarities of twins also come under this purview.
- (3) The laws of karma (*kamma,niyāma*), ie “the order of volition (or will),” concern all actions, past, present and future, in the form of thought, word and deed, and the potentiality of producing effects. Some of these effects appear as thoughts, material forms, personality and environment that often are of the nature that appear to be dissimilar to their causes. As a result of such mental and physical events, there arise in one some other thoughts to do various things. This means that whatever is the effect of some cause, it may itself become a cause of other effects. It is on this basis that we speak of present actions as determining future results, whether it is in pleasant places such as the heavens, or unpleasant places such as the hells, or as liberation from suffering.
- (4) The laws of mental processes (*citta,niyāma*), literally, “the order of thought,” deal with the orderly sequence of the process of cognition. Thoughts control speech and action and contribute to mental and physical health or ill-health. This process however does not deny the possibility of our having to choose between competing and conflicting thoughts: we can choose to act either in a moral or an immoral way. Even then, we are conditioning our thoughts, speech or action. Psychic phenomena, such as telepathy, teleportation, telekinesis, telesthesia, retrocognition, premonition, clairvoyance, clairaudience, materialization and thought-reading, all come under this category.
- (5) The laws of nature (*dhamma,niyāma*) deal with “causal conditionality” (*idap,paccayatā*), that is, the principle behind dependent arising (SA 2:40).¹⁰ It includes other events connected with nature, such as the natural phenomena occurring at the birth, during the life and at the death of Buddhas. It includes the “act of truth” or asseveration (*sacca,kiriya*), and also gravity, instincts, plant tropisms and nature itself. (DA 2:432; DhsA 272)

The laws of karma and the laws of mental processes are very closely related so that they may seem to be identical, but *intention* is what differentiates karma from mere mental processes. The laws of mental processes (*citta,niyāma*) governs all mental activities, including *the non-intentional*. In contemporary terms, it is useful to understand that intentional actions include both *conscious* and *unconscious* actions.

“Conscious” here refers deliberate actions, carefully planned and mindfully executed. The best example is that of going on a meditation retreat: one prepares well for it, keeps to the precepts and retreat rules, avoid anything that might distract one from one’s practice. “Unconscious” refers to personal habits (such

⁹ **Samaṇa-m-acala S** (A 4.87/2:87, 88) = **Samaṇa,sukhumāla S** (A 5.104/3:131). On the causes of illness & pain, see **Sīvaka S** (S 36.21/4:230); **Giri-m-ānanda S** (A 10.60/5:109 f), **Ti,kicchaka S** (A 10.108/5:218), **Vamana S** (A 10.109/5:219); Nm 1:13, 17, 2:361, 468.

¹⁰ See **Paccaya S** (S 12.20) @ SD 39.5 (1.1.2.3).

as being easily angered, or worrying) and routine actions (such as working in a wrong livelihood). In this latter case, one could be constantly breaking the precepts or causing pain to others without being conscious of it or even not caring about it.

An analogy of a man rowing a boat helps to show the relationship of **the 5 natural laws**. The fact that the boat floats and moves in the water by the power of the oars is due to the laws of energy. The nature of the boat's wood (such as being pliable and resistant) are because of the laws of heredity or genetics. The rower's ability to row and manoeuvre the boat is governed by the laws of mental processes. The man or rower himself is intention (a law of karma). He could be rowing to visit the Buddha (good karma), or to kill someone (bad karma). After a while, his attention is directed away from his rowing so that he does it unconsciously, as it were. But it is all part of his karma, depending on his intention. If the boat suddenly sprung a dangerous leak despite his careful preparations, it could be explained as the result of the laws of nature.

Thailand's leading monk thinker, **Payutto**, in *Good, Evil and Beyond* (1993) give a helpful overview of the five natural orders and the special nature of the fifth order, the laws of nature, thus:

The first four *niyāma* are contained within, or based on, the fifth one, *dhamma,niyāma*, the Law of Dhamma, or the Law of Nature. It may be questioned why Dhammaniyama, being as it were the totality, is also included within the subdivisions. This is because this fourfold categorization does not cover the entire extent of Dhammaniyāma.

To illustrate: the population of Thailand can be sorted into different categories, such as the royalty, the government, public servants, merchants and the populace; or it may be categorized as the police, military, public servants, students and the populace; or it can be divided up in a number of other ways. Actually, the words "the populace" include all the other groupings in the country. Public servants, householders, police, the military, merchants and students are all equally members of the populace, but they are singled out because each of those groups has its own unique characteristics. Those people without any relevant feature particular to them are grouped under the general heading, "the populace." Moreover, although those groupings may change according to their particular design, they will always include the word "the populace," or "the people," or a similar generic term. The inclusion of Dhammaniyāma in the five *niyāma* should be understood in this way. (Payutto 1993:2; Pali normalized)

In addition to these five natural orders, Payutto further suggests a sixth order. While the traditional five orders are natural, the sixth is a man-made one, namely, "the law of social preference":

Apart from the five kinds of natural law mentioned above, there is another kind of law which is specifically man-made and is not directly concerned with nature. These are the codes of law fixed and agreed upon by society, consisting of social decrees, customs, and laws. They could be placed at the end of the above list as a sixth kind of law, but they do not have a Pali name. Let's call them Social Preference.¹¹ These codes of social law are products of human thought, and as such are related to the law of kamma. They are not, however, the law of kamma as such. They are merely a supplement to it, and do not have the same relationship with natural truth as does the law of kamma, as will presently be shown. However, because they are related to the law of kamma they tend to become confused with it, and misunderstandings frequently arise as a result. Because both *kamma,niyāma* and Social Preference are human concerns and are intimately related to human life, it is very important that the differences between them are clearly understood.

In general we might state that the law of kamma is the natural law which deals with human actions, whereas Social Preference, or social laws, are an entirely human creation, related to nature only insofar as they are a product of the natural human thought process. In essence, with

¹¹ In the Thai language, the words "gummaniyahm" (*kammaniyāma*) and "sungkom niyom" (social preference) have a certain amount of fluency that is lost in the translation.

the law of kamma, human beings receive the fruits of their actions according to the natural processes, whereas in social law, human beings take responsibility for their actions via a process established by themselves. (Payutto 1993:5 f; Pali normalized & emphases added)

3 Related sutta

The Deva,hita Sutta (S 7.13) records how Upavāṇa, as the Buddha's attendant, attends to him when he is suffering from wind illness. Upavāṇa approaches the brahmin Devahita for help. The brahmin brings along some hot water and molasses. The Buddha then washes himself with the hot water, after which he drinks a concoction of molasses in warm water. The Buddha's illness then abates (S 7.13/1:174 f). The Commentary here says that the Buddha had occasional attacks of wind [gastric ailment] as a result of his six years of asceticism before the great awakening (SA 1:258).

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The Discourse to Sīvaka

S 36.21/4:230 f

[230]

1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying at the Squirrel's Feeding Ground near Rājagaha.

2 Then the wanderer Moliya Sīvaka¹² approached the Blessed One and saluted him. Having saluted him, and having exchanged greetings, he sat down at one side.

The brahmins' view that all feelings arise from past causes

3 Sitting thus at one side, the wanderer Moliya Sīvaka said this to the Blessed One:

“There are, master Gotama, some recluses and brahmins who hold such a doctrine, such a view, that is to say:

‘Whatever a person feels, whether it is pleasurable, painful or neutral, all that is due to past deeds.’¹³
But what does the master Gotama say regarding this?”

The 8 conditions for feelings

4.1 (1) “Now, Sīvaka, there are some feelings here that arise due to bile disorders (*pitta,samuṭṭhānāni*).¹⁴

That some feelings arise from *bile disorders*, Sīvaka, one should know this for oneself, and Sīvaka it is a common truth in the world,¹⁵ too, that some feelings arise from *bile disorders*.¹⁶

¹² Comy: His name is Sīvaka, but because he has a topknot (*cūḷā*), he is called *moḷiya* [a syn for *cūḷā*] (SA 3:81).

¹³ The view that everything is due to past karma (*pubbaka,hetu,vāda*) is often criticized and refuted in various ways by the Buddha: **Deva,daha S** (M 101/2:214-223) where it is ascribed to the Jains, **Sīvaka S** (S 36.21/4:230f) & **Titth'āyatana S** (A 3.61/1:173 f). A formal refutation of *pubbaka,hetu,vāda* is found **Kathā,vatthu** (Kvu 17.3/545 f = Kvu:SRD 314 f).

¹⁴ Symptoms of bile disorders (also called *bhagandaḷā*) include nervousness and excitement suggesting that one has emotional and neurotic problems. See **Giri-mānanda S** (A 10.60.7/5.110) = SD 15.15.

¹⁵ “Common truth in the world,” *lokassa...sacca.sammataṃ*, lit “the world's conventional truth.”

¹⁶ “Bile” here, along with “phlegm” [§5] and “wind” [§6], form the 3 ancient humours, which in the Greek theory or “humourism,” became 4: earth (black bile), water (phlegm), fire (yellow bile) and wind (blood), and which in due course became the basis for basic personality types of the melancholy (despondent, sleepless, irritable), the phlegmatic (calm, unemotional), the choleric (easily angered, bad-tempered), and the sanguine (courageous, hopeful, amorous) respectively. See eg Noga Arikha, *Passions and Tempers: A History of the Humours*, NY: Ecco, 2007.

4.2 Now, Sīvaka, when those recluses and brahmins teach such a teaching, who hold such a view: ‘Whatever a person feels, whether it is pleasurable, painful or neutral, all that is due to past deeds’—they deviate from¹⁷ what one should know for oneself, and from the common truth in the world.

Therefore, I say that these recluses and brahmins are wrong.

5 (2) Now, Sīvaka, there are some feelings¹⁸ here that arise due to phlegm disorders (*semha samuṭṭhānāni*).¹⁹

That some feelings arise from *phlegm disorders*, Sīvaka, one should know this for oneself, and Sīvaka it is a common truth in the world,²⁰ too, that some feelings arise from *phlegm disorders*.

6 (3) Now, Sīvaka, there are some feelings here that arise due to wind disorders (*vāta samuṭṭhānāni*).²¹

That some feelings arise from *wind disorders*, Sīvaka, one should know this for oneself, and Sīvaka it is a common truth in the world,²² too, that some feelings arise from *wind disorders*.

7 (4) Now, Sīvaka, there are some feelings here that arise due to a combination [imbalance of the three] (*sannipātikāni*).

That some feelings arise from *a combination*, Sīvaka, one should know this for oneself, and Sīvaka it is a common truth in the world,²³ too, that some feelings arise from *a combination*.

8 (5) Now, Sīvaka, there are some feelings here that arise due to weather changes (*utu pariṇāma, jāni*).

That some feelings arise from *weather changes*, Sīvaka, one should know this for oneself, and Sīvaka it is a common truth in the world,²⁴ too, that some feelings arise from *weather changes*.

9 (6) Now, Sīvaka, there are some feelings here that arise due to improper care (*visama, parihāra, jāni*).²⁵

That some feelings arise from *weather changes*, Sīvaka, one should know this for oneself, and Sīvaka it is a common truth in the world,²⁶ too, that some feelings arise from *weather changes*.

10 (7) Now, Sīvaka, there are some feelings here that arise due to assaults [trauma upon oneself caused by outside agencies] (*opakkamikāni*).²⁷

That some feelings arise from *assaults*, Sīvaka, one should know this for oneself, and Sīvaka it is a common truth in the world,²⁸ too, that some feelings arise from *assaults*. [231]

11.1 (8) Now, Sīvaka, there are some feelings here that arise due to the results of one’s karma (*kamma, vipāka, jāni*).

¹⁷ “They deviate from,” *atidhāvanti*, also “run past, transgress, go too far” (CPD).

¹⁸ In contrast to the 3 kinds of feelings mentioned earlier [3, 4b], from hereon [5-11a]. “Feelings” refers to a narrow sense of physical pain.

¹⁹ Symptoms of phlegm disorders include sluggishness and apathy suggesting that one has depression.

²⁰ “Common truth in the world,” *lokassa...sacca.sammataṃ*, lit “the world’s conventional truth.”

²¹ Symptoms of wind disorders incl hiccup, stitch (brief sharp pain running through the body) and stomach-ache. See Intro (3) above.

²² “Common truth in the world,” *lokassa...sacca.sammataṃ*, lit “the world’s conventional truth.”

²³ “Common truth in the world,” *lokassa...sacca.sammataṃ*, lit “the world’s conventional truth.”

²⁴ “Common truth in the world,” *lokassa...sacca.sammataṃ*, lit “the world’s conventional truth.”

²⁵ Causes of this include sitting or standing too long, and being bitten by a snake.

²⁶ “Common truth in the world,” *lokassa...sacca.sammataṃ*, lit “the world’s conventional truth.”

²⁷ *Opammikā ābādhā*. It is also translated as “assault” or “external agency,” but the Pali forms *upakkama*, *opakkama*, *opakkamika*, and the Sanskrit *upakrama* (from *upa-* and $\sqrt{\text{KRAM}}$, to stride) have the primary meaning of “attacking suddenly.” As such, Zysk thinks “it therefore could be equivalent to the *āgantū*, or external, category of disease causation in Indian medicine. According to the āyurvedic medical tradition, *āgantū* causes are generally violent and traumatic and involve injury to the body” [Caraka Saṃhita Sūtrasthāna 20.3; Suśruta Saṃhitā Sūtrasthāna 1.24 f] (Zysk 1998:30). This suffering may arise from being arrested for crime, being attacked by robbers, accidents, etc; the Buddha’s foot being hurt by a piece of rock due to Devadatta’s attempted assassination.

²⁸ “Common truth in the world,” *lokassa...sacca.sammataṃ*, lit “the world’s conventional truth.”

That some feelings arise from the results of one's karma, Sīvaka, one should know this for oneself, and, Sīvaka, it is the common truth in the world, too, that some feelings arise from the results of one's karma.

The brahmins are wrong

11.2 Now, Sīvaka, when those recluses and brahmins teach such a doctrine, who hold such a view, that:

‘Whatever a person feels, whether it is pleasurable, painful or neutral, all that is due to past deeds’—they deviate from what one should know for oneself, and from the common truth in the world. Therefore, I say that these recluses and brahmins are wrong.’

Sīvaka goes for refuge

12 When the Blessed One has spoken thus, the wanderer Moliya Sīvaka said this to the Blessed One: “Excellent, master Gotama! Excellent, Master Gotama! Just as if, master Gotama, one were to place upright what had been overturned, or were to reveal what was hidden, or were to show the way to one who was lost, or were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way the master Gotama has, in numerous ways, the Dharma has been made clear by the master Gotama.

I go to the master Gotama for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May the master Gotama remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth for life.”

13 Bile, phlegm and wind, too,
a combination and the weather, too,
improper [care] and assault,
with results of karma as the eighth.

*Pittam semham ca vāto ca
sannipātā utūni ca
visamaṃ opakkamikaṃ
kamma, vipākena aṭṭhamīti.*

— evaṃ —

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041031; rev 060401; 071006a; 091103 LEG; 111219; 120329; 130311