Kaccā(ya)na,gotta Sutta
The Discourse to Kaccā(ya)na,gotta
[On what really is the middle way]
(Saṁyutta Nikāya 12.15/2:16-17)
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

Introduction

1 Related suttas
The Kaccāna,gotta Sutta (S 12.15/2:17), the Acela Kassapa Sutta (S 12.17/2:20), the Aññatara Brāhma Sutta (S 12.46/2:75 f), the (Sabella) Jāpussoḍī Sutta (S 12.47/2:76 f), and the Lokāyatika Sutta (S 12.48/2:77), all share the well known statement of the Buddha regarding the extremes of “all exists” (sabbam atthi) and “nothing exists” (sabbani ‘n’atthi), and of eternalism (sassata) and annihilationism (ucccheda), and “not following either of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dharma by the middle” (ete te ubho ante anupagamma majjhena tathāgato dhamma deseti). The “middle” here refers to dependent arising (paṭicca samuppāda).

This whole Sutta is quoted by Ānanda in the Channa Sutta (S 22.90/3:134 f) in his instruction of the arrogant elderly monk Channa who had become proud and domineering from his past role as the Bodhisatva’s charioteer. As a posthumous skillful means to rehabilitate Channa, the Buddha imposes the “supreme penalty” (brahma,dañña) (D 2:154), that is, the Sangha totally boycotting him, until he decides to reform himself. This teaching, given by Ānanda to Channa (Comy says soon after the Buddha’s passing, SA 2:317), quotes the entire Kaccāna,gotta Sutta. At the end of Ānanda’s teaching, Channa declares that he has attained to the Dharma (dhammo abhisameto).

For a balanced approach, the Kaccāna,gotta Sutta should be studied with the Puppha (or Vaddha) Sutta (S 22.94), which opens with this paragraph:

Monks, I do not quarrel with the world; rather, it is the world that quarrels with me. A proponent of the Dharma does not quarrel with anyone in the world. Of that which the wise in the world agree upon as not existing, I too say that it does not exist. And to that which the wise in the world agree upon as existing, I too say that it exists.

(S 22.94.3/3:138)

The Buddha goes on to explain that “what the wise in the world agree upon as not existing” is that the five aggregates are “permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change” (nissatta dhuvam nissatta dhhamman) and that what the wise in the world agree as existing” is that the aggregates are “impermanent, suffering, subject to change” (anissatta dukkha avipariṇāma dhhamman).

In his translation of the Puppha Sutta, Bhikkhu Bodhi makes this helpful note:

This portion of the sutta [S 22.94.3/3:138 quoted] offers an important counterpoint to the message of the Kaccānagotta Sutta (12.15). Here the Buddha emphasizes that he does not reject...
all ontological propositions, but only those that transcend the bounds of possible experience. While the Kaccānagotta Sutta shows that the “middle teaching” excludes static, substantialist conceptions of existence and nonexistence, the present text shows that the same “middle teaching” can accommodate definite pronouncements about these ontological issues. The affirmation of the existence of the five aggregates, as impermanent processes, serves as a rejoinder to illusionist theories, which hold that the world lack real being. (S:B 1085 n185)

The full standard version of dependent arising (with 12 links) given here is also found in such texts as the (Paṭicca,samuppāda) Desanā Sutta (S 12.1) and the (Paṭicca,samuppāda) Vibhaṅga Sutta (S 12.2).\(^5\)

This Sutta should be studied with the Lokāyatika Sutta (S 12.48/2:77) where two pairs of extreme views are rejected: that all exist and that all do not exist, and that all is one and that all is plurality. The Buddha’s teaching on the origin and ending of the world (in terms of the five aggregates) is found in the Loka Sutta (S 12.44/2:73 f).

2 Terminology

Two important terms in this Sutta are the abstract nouns atthitā (“is-ness”) and n’atthitā (“not-is-ness”), here rendered respectively as “existence” and “non-existence”. They are derived from the verbs atthi (it is, it exists) and n’atthi (it is not, it does not exist) respectively. However, bhava is also rendered as “existence”. However both atthi and bhava, although they are verbs-to-be, come from different roots: the former from √AS, “to be”, the latter from √BHŪ, “to be.”

However, atthitā is the abstract notion of existence while bhava is the concrete individual existence in any of the three realms (sense sphere, form sphere and formless sphere). In fact, Nāgārjuna uses them as synonyms in his famous statement in the Mūla,madhyaṃaka Kārikā (see MK 15,7 below). Bodhi notes that

For the sake of marking the difference, bhava might have been rendered by “being” (as was done in [M:NB, The Middle Length Sayings of the Buddha], but this English word, I feel, is too broad (suggestive of “Being,” the absolute object of philosophical speculation) and does not sufficiently convey the sense of concreteness intrinsic to bhava.

Moreover, “Mostly,” yebhuyyena [4] below, refers to the ordinary being, except for the noble saints (ariya,puggala) who hold on to the extreme notions of either something exists (atthitā) (eternalism, sassata) or does not exist (natthitā) (annihilationism, uccheda) (SA 2:32). Bodhi says:

In view of these explanations it would be misleading to translate these two terms, atthitā and natthitā, simply as “existence” and “non-existence” and then to maintain (as is sometimes done) that the Buddha rejects all ontological notions as inherently invalid. The Buddha’s utterances at 22:94 [Puppha Sutta, see (1)], for example, show that he did not hesitate to make pronouncements with a clear ontological import when they were called for. In the present passage atthitā and natthitā are abstract nouns formed from the verbs atthi and natthi. It is thus the metaphysical assumptions implicit in such abstractions that are at fault, not the ascriptions of existence and nonexistence themselves. (S:B 734 n29)

Here I have followed Bodhi in rendering atthitā as “the notion of existence” and natthitā as “the notion of non-existence.”

3 On nirodha

The terms samudaya [5] and nirodha [5, 8] are commonly tr respectively as “origin” and “ending, cessation”. However, from the teachings of this Sutta, which underlies the Buddha’s Teaching as a whole, they are better rendered as “arising” and “non-arising”. Payutto makes an important note:

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\(^5\) On Vibhaṅga S (S 12.2) see SD 5.11 (2004). For a detailed study of dependent arising, see SD 5.12 (2004).

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Generally speaking, the word ‘cease’ [or ‘end’] means to do away with something which has already arisen, or the stopping of something which has already begun. However, \textit{niruddha} in the teaching of Dependent Origination (as also in \textit{dukkhaniruddha}, the third of the Noble Truths) means non-arising, or non-existence, of something because the cause of its arising is done away with. For example, the phrase ‘when \textit{avijjā} is \textit{niruddha}, \textit{saṅkhāra} are also \textit{niruddha},’ which is usually taken to mean, “with the cessation of ignorance, volitional impulse cease,” in fact means that ‘when there is no ignorance, or no arising of ignorance, or when there is no longer any problem with ignorance, there is no volitional impulses, volitional impulses do not arise, or there is no longer any problem from volitional impulses.’ It does not mean that ignorance already arisen must be done away with before the volitional impulses which have already arisen will also be done away.

Where \textit{niruddha} should be rendered as cessation is when it is used in reference to the natural way of things, or the nature of compounded things. In this sense it is a synonym for the words \textit{bhaṅga} (breaking up), \textit{anicca} (transient), \textit{khaya} (cessation) or \textit{vaya} (decay). For example, in the Pali it is given: \textit{imaṃ kho bhikkhave tisso vedanā aniccaṃ saṅkhātā paṭiccasamuppānā khaya-dhammā vayadhammā virāgdhammā nirodhadhammā}—“Monks, these three kinds of feelings are naturally impermanent, compounded, dependently arisen, transient, subject to decay, dissolution, fading and cessation” \cite{S 4:214}. (All factors occurring in the Dependent Origination cycle have the same nature.) In this instance, the meaning is “all conditioned things (saṅkhāra), having arisen, must inevitably decay and fade according to supporting factors.” There is no need [here] to try to stop them, they cease of themselves.

As for \textit{niruddha} in the third Noble Truth (or the Dependent Origination cycle in cessation mode), although it also describes a natural process, its emphasis is on practical considerations. It is translated in two ways in the Visuddhimagga \cite[Vism 16.18/495]. One way traces the etymology to \textit{ni} (without) + \textit{rodha} (prison, confine[s], obstacle, wall, impediment), thus rendering the meaning as “without impediment,” “free from confinement.” This is explained as “free of impediments, that is, the confinement of \textit{saṁsāra}.” Another definition traces the origin to \textit{anuppāda}, meaning “not arising,” [and goes on to say “\textit{niruddha} here does not mean \textit{bhaṅga}, breaking up and dissolution.”]\footnote{I have been unable to trace this bracketed reading in the Visuddhimagga.}

Therefore, translating \textit{niruddha} as “cessation,” although not entirely wrong, is nevertheless entirely accurate. On the other hand, there is no other word which comes so close to the essential meaning as “cessation.” However, we should understand what is meant by the term.

(Payutto 1994:106-108; slightly edited. See also §8b n below)

4 Nāgārjuna

In chapter 15 of \textit{the Mūla,madhyamaka Kārikā}, Nāgārjuna (late 2\textsuperscript{nd} century CE) alludes to the early canon (here quoted in the Sanskrit with translation):

\begin{quote}
kātyāyānaṃ avalāde c’āstī ti nāstī ti c’ōbhyaṃ | 
pratisiddhaṃ bhagavatā bhāvabhāva,vibhāvinā ||
\end{quote}

In the Admonition to Kātyāyana, the Blessed One,
Free from existence and non-existence, refuted both “it is” and “it is not.” \cite{MK 15,7}

AK Warder points out that the use of the expression “middle way” is best exemplified in Nāgārjuna’s \textit{Mūla,madhyamaka Kārikā}, where dependent arising appears to represent the “middle way” par excellence.\footnote{AK Warder, “Is Nāgārjuna a Mahāyānist?” in \textit{The Problem of Two Truths in Buddhism and Vedānta}, ed M Sprung, Dordrecht, 1973:79, 81. See also Gethin, \textit{The Buddhist Path to Awakening}, 2001:201 & Huntington, \textit{The Emptiness of Emptiness}, 1989:37.} In fact, the most frequently quoted and important canonical text for Nāgārjuna is apparently the

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The Discourse to Kaccāna,gotta
(S 12.15/2:16-17)

1 [The Buddha was] residing near Sāvatthī. [17]
2 Then the venerable Kaccāna,gotta approached the Blessed One, saluted him, sat down at one side.

Duality
3 Seated thus at one side, he said this to the Blessed One:
   “Venerable sir, it is said, ‘Right view, right view.’ In what way, venerable sir, is there right view?”
4 “This world, Kaccāna, mostly depends upon a duality: upon (the notion of) existence and (the notion of) non-existence.
5 But for one who sees the arising of the world as it really is with right wisdom, there is no notion of non-existence regarding the world.
   And for one who sees the ending of the world as it really is with right wisdom, there is no notion of existence regarding the world.
6a This world, Kaccāna, is mostly bound by fixation [attachment], clinging and inclination.
6b But this person (with right view) does not engage in, cling to, incline towards that fixation and clinging, the latent tendency of mindset and inclination—he does not take a stand (that anything is) ‘my self’.

8 For a discussion, see Dhamma,cakka-pavattana S (S 56.11) in SD 1.1 Intro (5).
9 “Mostly,” ye bhuyena, here refers to the ordinary being, except for the noble saints (ariya,puggala) who hold on to the extreme notions of either something exists (atthitā) (eternalism, sassata) or does not exist (nātthitā) (annihilationism, uccheda) (SA 2:32). See foll n.
10 Here, following Bodhi, I have rendered atthitā as “the notion of existence” and n’atthitā as “the notion of non-existence.” See Intro (2).
11 On the tr of the terms samudaya and nirodha see Intro (3).
12 The 2 sentences of this verse are the two extremes rejected by the Buddha in Lokāyatika S (S 12.48/2:77), including 2 more: that all is unity and that all is plurality. Comy: In terms of dependent arising, “the origin of the world” is the direct conditionality (anuloma paccay’ākāra), “the ending of the world” is the reverse conditionality (paṭiloma paccayākāra). Here the world refers to formations (sankhāra). In reflecting on the direct-order dependent arising, (seeing the rise of phenomena) one does not fall into the notion of annihilationism; reflecting on the reverse dependent origination, (seeing the ending of phenomena) one does not fall into the notion of eternalism. (SA 2:33). The Buddha’s teaching on the origin and ending of the world (in terms of the five aggregates) is found in Loka S (S 12.44/2:73 f).
13 “bound…adherence,” PTS upāy’upādānābhinivesa,vinibandha, but preferred reading is Be Ce upāy’upādānābhinivesa,vinibandha = upāya (attachment, fixation) + upādāna (clinging) + abhinivesa (inclination, mindset, adherence) + vinibandha (bound, shackled) [all reading vinibandha, bondage]. Comy: Each of the three—fixation, clinging, inclination [mindset]—arise by way of craving (tanhā) and views (diṭṭhi), for it is through these that one fixates to, clings to, inclines to the phenomena of the three spheres as “I” and “mine.” (SA 2:33). These three words appear to be syns or near-syns of latent tendencies, but I have rendered them in order of their subtlety (fixation, clinging, inclination [mindset]). See S:B 736 n31.

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He has neither uncertainty nor doubt that what arises is only suffering arising, what ceases is only suffering ceasing. His knowledge about this is independent of others.

It is in this way, Kaccāna, that there is right view.

7 "Everything is [all exists] (sabbam atthi)," Kaccāna, this is one extreme. "Everything is not [all does not exist] (sabba n’atthi)," this is the second extreme.

The middle way: dependent arising

Without resorting to either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Teaching by the middle:

8a

Avijjā, paccayā saṅkhārā

With ignorance as condition, there are volitional formations;

sanākha, paccayā viññānaṁ

with volitional formations as condition, there is consciousness;

viññāna, paccayā nāma, rūpaṁ

with consciousness as condition, there is name-and-form;

nāma, rūpa, paccayā salāyatanāṁ

with name-and-form as condition, there is the sixfold sense-base;

salāyatanā, paccayā phasso

with the sixfold sense-base as condition, there is contact;

phassa, paccayā vedanā

with contact as condition, there is feeling;

thanā, paccayā upādānaṁ

with feeling as condition, there is craving;

upādāna, paccayā bhavo

with craving as condition, there is clinging;

bhava, paccayā jāti

with clinging as condition, there is birth;

jāti, paccayā maraṁ

with birth as condition there arise decay and death,

soka, parideva, dukkha, domanass’-upāyasā sambhavanti

—Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

8b

Avijjāya eva asesa, virāga, nirodha, sanākaha, nirodho

But with the remainderless fading away and ending of ignorance, volitional formations end.

14 “But this... ‘My self,’” taṁ cāyaṁ upāy upādānaṁ cetasa adhiṭṭhānaṁ abhinivesānasayaṁ na upeti na upādīyatā nādiṭṭhathi “attā me” ti. Comy: Craving and views are called “mental standpoint” (cetasa adhiṭṭhana) because they are the foundation for the (unwholesome) mind, and “the latent tendency of inclination [mindset],” or perhaps “inclination [mindset] and latent tendency” (abhinivesānasaya) because they stay to the mind and lie latent there (SA 2:33). This is a difficult sentence, and I am guided by the Sutta spirit than the letter. See S:B 736 n32. Cf Hālid-dākāni S 1 (S 22.3.9/3:10) = SD 10.12.

15 Comy: Suffering (dukkha) here refers to the 5 aggregates of clinging. What the noble disciple sees, when he reflects on his own existence, is not a self or a substantially existent person but only the arising and passing away of causal conditions (paccay uppanna, nirodha) (of dependent arising). (SA 2:33). Cf Sela’s verses (S 548-551/1:134) & Vajira’s verses (S 553-554/1:135).

16 “Independent of others,” aparā-paccayā. From stream-entry on, the noble disciple sees the truth of the Dharma by himself, and as such is not dependent on anyone else, not even the Buddha, for his insight into the Dharma. However, he may still approach the Buddha or an enlightened teacher for instructions and guidance in meditation until he attains liberation.

17 On the two “notions” in this sentence, see Intro (2).

18 Comy: When it is said, “With ignorance as condition, there are volitional formations,” the meaning should be understood thus: “It is ignorance and it is a condition; hence ‘ignorance-as-condition’ (avijjā ca sā pacayā cā ti avijjā pacayā). Through that ignorance-as-condition, volitional formations come to be (tasmā avijjā pacayā sanḍkhārā sambhavanti)” (SA 2:9 f). Bodhi: “This explanation suggests that the verb sambhavanti, which in the text occurs only at the end of the whole formula, should be connected to each proposition, thus establishing that each conditioned state arises through its condition. The twelve terms of the formula are treated analytically in [Vibhaṅga S].” (S:B 725 n1)

19 Payutto, in the context of the quote in Intro (3) above, suggests that the reverse (cessation) cycle of dependent arising might be better rendered as: “being free of ignorance, there is freedom from volitional impulses...,” or
Sankhāra, nirodha viññāna, nirodho viññāna, nirodha nāma, rāpa, nirodho nāma, rāpa, nirodha saññiyatana, nirodho phassa, nirodho phassa, nirodho vedanā, nirodho vedanā, nirodho taññā, nirodho taññā, nirodha upadhāna, nirodho upadhāna, nirodha bhava, nirodho bhava, nirodho jāti, nirodho jāti, nirodha jarā, maranām soka parideva, dukkha, dukkha, soka parideva, dukkha, dukkha, — Such is the ending of this whole mass of suffering. 20

Bibliography


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“when ignorance is gone, volitional impulses are gone…,” or “when ignorance is no longer a problem, volitional impulses are no longer a problem.” (1994:107). See Intro (3) above.

20 Comy: By “ending” (nirodha) in all these phrases Nirvana is meant. For all those phenomena end in dependence on Nirvana, and therefore the latter is spoken of as their ending. Thus in this sutta, the Blessed One teaches the round of existence (vaṭṭa) and the ending of the round (vivattā) by 12 phrases and brought the discourse to a climax in Arhathood (SA 2:18).

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