1 Key teaching and related suttas

1.1 KEY TEACHING. The Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta (A 8.83) is a short straightforward Sutta. The discourse opens with the Buddha asking the monks a question, that is, whether they know how to answer eight questions that sectarian wanderers like to ask [§1]. The monks reply no [§2]. The Buddha begins teaching by restating the questions [§3], and then answers them [§4], thus:

THE SECTARIANS’ 10 QUESTIONS:¹

1. In what are all things rooted? kiṁ mūlakā, āvuso, sabbe dhammā,
2. In what are all things born? kiṁ sambhavā, sabbe dhammā,
3. In what do all things arise? kiṁ samudayā, sabbe dhammā,
4. In what do all things converge? kiṁ samosaraṇā, sabbe dhammā,
5. What is the leader of all things? kiṁ pamukhā, sabbe dhammā,
6. What is the supreme lord of all things? kiṁ adhipateyyā, sabbe dhammā,
7. What is the highest of all things? kiṁ uttarā, sabbe dhammā,
8. What is the essence of all things? kiṁ sārā, sabbe dhammā,
9. What is the firm footing for all things? kiṁ ogadhā, sabbe dhammā,
10. What is the complete ending for all things? kiṁ pariyosānā, sabbe dhammā ti.

THE BUDDHA’S 10 ANSWERS (TO THE SECTARIANS’ QUESTIONS):

1. Rooted in desire are all things, chanda, mūlakā, āvuso, sabbe dhammā,
2. Born in attention are all things, manasikāra, sambhavā sabbe dhammā,
3. Arisen through contact are all things, phassa, samudayā sabbe dhammā,
4. Converging in feeling are all things, vedanā, samosaraṇā sabbe dhammā,
5. Concentration is the leader of all things, samādhi-pamukhā sabbe dhammā,
6. Mindfulness is the lord of all things, sati adhipateyyā sabbe dhammā,
7. Wisdom is the highest of all things, paññuttarā sabbe dhammā,
8. Liberation is its essence of all things, vimutti, sārā sabbe dhammā,
9. All things find a firm footing in the death-free, amat ogadhā sabbe dhammā,
10. All things have nirvana as their complete ending, nibbāna, pariyosānā sabbe dhammā ti.

Characteristically, the answers here are unelaborated, but explanations or instructive contexts are found elsewhere, such as in the Majjhima and the Sathiyutta. We shall examine a few key suttas related to the Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta below.

1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE Kiṁ Mūlaka SUTTA TEACHING. The well-known Sinhala monk teacher, Katukurunde Nāṇananda, in the second volume of his Nibbāna-The mind stilled, insightfully discusses the significance of this Sutta (2004:76-92), and his insights have been summarized here and inspired further thought. Firstly, Nāṇananda says that the Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta preserves a list of questions that relate to common views of the non-Buddhists, especially the brahmans.

Such sectarian ideas relate to philosophical and religious theory, such as ontological (the eternal soul view and “thinghood” or the essence of things, thingsness), and cosmology (that everything came from Brahmā, and self is the essence of everything). As such questions are highly speculative, it is difficult for the monks, especially the unawakened ones, to answer them. The Sutta teaches these monks on how to answer such questions.

¹ Kiṁ Mūlaka S (A 8.83) has only the first 8 questions; the full list of 10 questions appears in Bhagavā Mūlaka S (A 10.58/5:106 f) = SD 67.4.

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Ñāṇananda adds that the early commentators have missed out on such deep dimensions and vital developments, and have merely “narrowed down the meaning of the set of answers recommended by the Buddha by limiting its application to wholesome mental states,” such as in Dīgha Porṇa Tikā (ancient sub-commentary) (2004:77). [2.3]

Ñāṇananda’s discussion raises another interesting and important aspect of early Buddhism, that is, its use of non-technical language, which we shall examine below [2].

1.3 RELATED SUTTAS.

1.3.1 Bhagavā Mūlaka Sutta (A 10.58). As we have already noted, while the Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta (A 8.83) lists only eight questions, the Bhagavā Mūlaka Sutta (A 10.58) gives ten questions [1.1]. The last two questions found only in the latter are as follows:

9) What is the footing for all things? (kiṁ ogadhā sabbe dhammā),

10) What is the ending for all things? (kiṁ pariyosānā sabbe dhammā ti),

and their answers:

9) All things find a footing in the death-free, (amat’ ogadhā sabbe dhammā),

10) All things have nirvana as their ending, (nibbāna, pariyosānā sabbe dhammā ti).3

1.3.2 The (Kim Ārammaṇa) Samiddhi Sutta (A 9.14) records how Sāriputta asks the monk Samiddhi a list of nine questions regarding “purposive thinking” (saṅkappa vitakka), and Samiddhi answers them correctly, winning Sāriputta’s endorsement and praise, as follows:

THE PURPOSE OF THINKING (ABRIDGED)

(1) What is the conditional basis (ārammaṇa) of purposive thoughts that arise in a person?4 Name-and-form (nāma, rūpa).

(2) From what does their variety (nānatta) arise? In the elements (dhamma).

(3) What is their origin [arising] (samudaya)? Contact (phassa).

(4) In what do they converge (samasarana)? Feeling (vedana).

(5) What is their leader (pamukha)? Concentration (samādhi).

(6) What is their lord (ādhipeyya)? Mindfulness (sati).

(7) What is their highest (uttara)? Wisdom (pāññā).

(8) What is their essence (sāra)? Liberation (vimmattī).

(9) Where do they find a firm footing (sāra)? In the death-free (amata).

(A 9.14/4:385) = SD 74.8; see AA 4:176

From the above list, it is clear that questions (3)-(9) and their answers have close parallels in the Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta. One thing is clear: it shows that the list of questions is not merely about wholesome and unwholesome states (as construed by the Commentaries), but covers a wider perspective. [2.3]

2 A grammar of spirituality

2.1 SIMPLICITY OF EARLY BUDDHIST TEXTS. The language and ideas of the early Buddhist texts, like all true teachings of the heart, are remarkably simple. Only rarely do we find technical terms, like those that appear in the Commentaries and later writings. This is not to say that the teachings are simplistic; on the contrary, underlying the surface simplicity of the early teachings lie profound yet practical wisdom vital for our personal and spiritual growth.

Although the sutta structure is often that of a ring composition, and where it is repetitive, it is very much like a computer programme, the sutta content itself—the story, the teaching, or both—is rich in its own way. It is always that a word has a fixed sense in the early texts. Often there are metaphors, word-
plays, humour and other images, whose sense we need to tease out. Sometimes, a word is used in one sense at the beginning of the discourse, but takes on a different one at the end of it.

In short, we need to comprehend the discourse’s context: how the words, expressions, images or teachings are used, or their import. And when we comprehend these various contexts are linked, we have a better taste of the essence of the Buddha Dharma.

### 2.2 Words in Context

Andrew Olendzki, a Buddhist scholar and practitioner of our times, remind us with these sobering words:

> As words become more widely used, and especially as they become fashionable, they may often become more difficult to understand. One might think it would be the other way around, but this obfuscation of meaning has generally been the rule with the popularization of Buddhist vocabulary. While each had a precise technical meaning in its original context, terms like zen, yoga, karma, and nirvana can mean almost anything the modern writer wants them to mean. A similar trend may well be underway with mindfulness, and perhaps even with the more general word meditation. Understanding the sense in which these words are used in their original setting should prove to be a worthwhile undertaking as we see them applied in the current creative encounter between psychology and Buddhist thought. (Andrew Olendzki 2009:37)

Olendzki’s remark that, in early Buddhism, words have each “a precise technical meaning in its original context” reflects a similar awareness Nāṇarama is admonished us to cultivate. But let us take a step back, and find out what is it that prompted Nāṇarama’s remark in the first place.

As already stated, the Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta records the Buddha’s statement against the views of an abiding soul and essence of things prevalent in his times, especially amongst the brahmins. But sadly, Nāṇananda notes of the Sutta, its traditional commentators seem to have ignored the deeper philosophical dimensions of the above questions. They have narrowed down the meaning of the set of answers recommended by the Buddha by limiting its application to wholesome states. The occurrence of such terms as chanda, sati, samādhi, and paññā, had probably led them to believe that the entire questionnaire is on the subject of wholesome mental states. But this is a serious underestimation of the import of the entire discourse. It actually does far deeper in laying bare a basic principle governing both skillful and unskillful mental states. (Nāṇananda 2004:77)

Even the very first two verses of the Dhammapada reminds us that there are two sides to a situation or idea, that is to say, unwholesome and wholesome can be said of it. For, the mind precedes mental states; the mind is their chief, mind-made are they (mano,pubbaṅgam dhammā, mano,setthā mano,mayā) (Dh 1+2). If we act with an evil mind, evil will follow; if we act with a good heart, good will follow.

If we examine the eight answers given by the Buddha [§4], we will see them in the same light—that is, they refer to both the unwholesome and the wholesome aspects; or at least they do not refer only to one aspect, as the commentarial tradition would have it.

### 2.3 Commentarial Narrowness

The later works, such as the Attha,śālinī (the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī commentary), for example, always takes chanda in an exclusively wholesome sense, that is, as kusala chanda, “wholesome desire” or “desire in the wholesome,” or kattu,kamyatā chanda, “desire to act.” Sati (mindfulness) wherever it occurs, is taken as sammā,sati (right mindfulness). But, as we shall see, this is only half the story at best.

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6 Nāṇananda quotes only DAṬ 1:138; but see also AA 4:158 (which glosses sabbe dhammā as the 5 aggregates); AA 5:41 (which says that the Sutta relates to the final attaining of remainderless nirvana).

7 Dhs 269/56, 529/108; DhsA 250. Dhs 1097/195, however, mentioned kāma-c,chanda (desire for sense-pleasure), which is unwholesome. See Dhs:R 4 n2.

8 VbhA 289. VbhA:Ñ 1991:1 even translates chanda as “zeal.”
The Buddha’s answer to the first question, “In what are all things rooted?” is that they are “rooted in desire” (chanda,mūlaka). The tone of chanda here is clearly neutral or multivalent, that is, it can refer to either wholesome desire or unwholesome lust, depending on its context. Chanda is clearly negative when it is connected with craving and suffering, such as follows:  

- kāma-c, chanda “desire for sense-pleasures” (a mental hindrance) (M 10.36/1:60),
- chanda, rāga “lustful desire” (DA 3:988; MA 3:146) or “lust and desire” (S 35.232/4:163),
- chanda, ja agha “misery born of desire” (S 1.34/1:22).

Furthermore, chanda arises as a negative mental state with regards to what we see as desirable and cling to, for example,

- the body (kāyasmiṁ chando) S 47.37/5:181;
- sense-objects (rūpesu chando...) S 35.246/4:195;
- sexuality (methunasmiṁ chando) Sn 835;
- the world we live in (lokasmiṁ chando) Sn 866; and
- our continued existence (bhave chandaṁ) Thī 14.

However, when chanda is rooted in any of the three wholesome roots (non-greed, non-hate, non-delusion), it said to be motivated by a wholesome mind (kusala,citta). Once moved by such a wholesome state, we have the desire (chanda) to arouse and direct our efforts to letting go of the evil we have been doing, to keep on avoiding it, and maintain it. Here, chanda is clearly a word for right effort (sammā vāyāma). The Commentaries regard this as a wholesome desire (kusala-c,chanda), a spiritual desire (or Dharma-moved desire, dhamma-c,chanda), the desire (or will) to create wholesome states.

On a more intense level, chanda (as enthusiasm or the desire to act), together with energy (viriya), mind (citta, that is, mental concentration), and investigation (vīmaṁsā), are the predominant support in the cultivation of good (kusalā) in the mundane sphere, culminating in the bases of spiritual power (iddhi,pāda) in the supramundane sphere.

2.4 THE (KOSAMBĪ) UṆṆĀBHA SUTTA (S 51.15) is an important study in the right understanding of the term chanda (desire). The discourse opens with the brahmin Uṇṇābha asking Ānanda, “What, master Ānanda, is the purpose of holy life lived under the recluse Gotama?” Ānanda answers that “It is for the sake of abandoning desire (chanda-p, pahāna attham).” Then the brahmin asks again on how to abandon this desire. Ānanda replies that desire is abandoned by cultivating the “basis of success that possesses concentration due to desire (chanda) and volitional formations of striving.” Ānanda is, of course, referring to the first of the four paths of spiritual power or bases for true success (iddhi, pāda), which he goes on to list.

This however only puzzles the brahmin, who thinks that “the situation without an end,” that desire can end desire. Uṇṇābha says that he is assuming what we are trying to

9 On chanda, see Kāma-c, chanda = SD 32.2 (1.1).
10 See Kāma-c, chanda = SD 32.2 (1.2.3).
11 These are the 4 right efforts: see Mahā Sakul’udāyī S (M 77.16/2:11; A 9.82/4:462).
12 We find kusala dhamme chando (Be We) or kusala, dhamma-c, chando (Ce Ee Se) in Pātubhāva S (A 6.96/-3:441) = SD 63.9. See Pm A 1:168; VV A 116; Dhs A 289, 370.
13 Dhamma-c, chanda is a canonical term see Saññā Nānatta S (S 14.7) where it means “desire for mental state(s)” (S 14.7/2:143) = SD 17.5. See also Pm A 1:168; VV A 116; Dhs A 289, 370.
14 Kusala dhammesu kattu, kamyatā dhamma-c, chando, Nm A 1:17. Such a process is the 12-step learning process described in Caṅkī S (M 95), where the 9th step is where “desire for mindfulness arises” (sati chanda jāyati) (M 95.20/2:173 f) & SD 21.15 (5). See also MA 3:14.
15 Vbh 288; Dhs A 359.
16 Cakka, vatti Śīha, nāda S (D 26.28/3:77) = SD 36.10; Mahā Sakul’udāyī S (M 77.17/2:11) = SD 49.5; Iddhi, pāda Vibhaṅga S (S 51.20/5:276-281) = SD 28.14.
17 S 51.15/5:271-273 = SD 10.10.
18 Volitional formations of striving” (padhāna, saṅkhāra), according to Comy, is a name for energy that accomplishes the fourfold function of right striving (SA 3:255; Pm A 4:343 f; Vbh A 306 f).
prove) where one desire overcomes another, but a desire would still remain. Of course, this would be the problem, if both occurrences of chanda have the same sense, that is, connote the same idea. However, a close study of Ānanda’s reply shows that the sense of chanda depends on the context.

To clarify this vital point—that chanda (desire) must be understood in its right context—Ānanda uses a simple analogy: “What do you think, brahmin, did you earlier have a desire, ‘I will go to the park,’ and after you have gone to the park, did the said desire subside?” The brahmin answers yes. It is then that Uṇṇābha sees that chanda he has in mind refers to “unwholesome desire,” while the chanda of the iddhi,-pāda, which Ānanda speaks of, is of a type of chanda whose purpose is for the abandoning craving. In other words, when we say, “I desire to remove desire,” the former is positive insofar as its purpose is to remove the latter, which is negative desire.

2.5 WHEN DELIGHT IS GOOD

2.5.1 Desiring the good. A similar theme occurs in the (Taṇhā) Bhikkhuṇī Sutta (A 4.159), where Ānanda admonishes a love-struck nun (she had fallen in lust for Ānanda) on how “craving should be abandoned by craving” (taṇhā nissāya taṇhā pahātabbā). That is to say, by our craving for nirvana, we overcome the craving for sense-pleasure. Ānanda explains that on hearing that someone has attained arhathood, we would also be inspired to do so. Such a desire is of course wholesome.

2.5.2 When killing is good. The Chetva Sutta (S 11.21) records a similar case where a negative word is taken in a positive way. It is said that Shakra, the leader of the 33 Devas, asks the Buddha this question, followed by the answer:

939   Kinsu chetvā sukhaṁ seti   Having killed what does one sleep well?
kinsu chetvā na socati   Having killed what does one not sorrow?
 kissassu eka, dhammassa   Of which one thing,
vadhain rocesi gotamā ti.   Gotama, that you approve of killing?

[The Blessed One:]
940   Kodhaṁ chetvā sukhaṁ seti   Having killed anger, one sleeps well.
kodhaṁ chetvā na socati   Having killed anger, one does not sorrow.
 kodhassa visa, mūlassa,   Of anger with its venomous root
 madhur′aggassa vāsava   and honeyed tip, O Vāsava,
vadhain ariyā pasamisanti   the killing the noble ones praise.

(S 11.21/1:237) = SD 68.3

Here, the word chetvā (having killed, slain) is the absolutive of chindati (he kills, slays).21 The figurative sense here is clear enough. Evil should be removed, and in doing so, it is a wholesome act, as it brings about happiness and liberation.

2.5.3 Spiritual restlessness. Another negative term which is sometimes used in a positive sense is uddhacca, “restlessness,” one of the five mental hindrances. More specifically, it appears as dharm′- uddhacca, “Dharma-moved restlessness” or “spiritual restlessness.” It makes a significant appearance in the (Yuganaaddha) Paṭipadā Sutta (A 4.170), where it refers to restlessness in its description of one of the ways to attain final liberation. According to this discourse, we can reach the path that leads to final

19 For the detailed argument, see (Kosambi) Uṇṇābha S (S 51.15.7-10/5:272 f) = SD 10.10.
20 A 4.159/2:144-146 = SD 10.14.
21 Cf Dh 46c. More commonly, chindati has the sense of “he cuts off” (Dh 283c, 346c, 347c, 369c, 397a, 398a).
22 See Uddhacca,kukkucca = SD 32.7 (2.1.4).
23 A 4.170.5/2:157 = SD 41.5.
libration when the mind is under the influence of dhāmman’uddha ca, that is, restlessness related to the Dharma. Once the mind settles down and becomes focussed, the path is attained.

The commentary on this passage and the Paṭissāmabhādha, magga explains that this description refers to the arising of radiance (obbāsā), one of the ten imperfections of insight.24 Not understanding this to be an imperfection and failing to notice its impermanent nature then leads to the arising of restlessness. An alternative interpretation is to take dhāmman’uddha ca as referring to “mental distress brought on by eagerness to realize the Dhamma, a state of spiritual anxiety that sometimes can precipitate an instantaneous enlightenment experience.”25 An example of this is the case of Bāhiya Dāru,čīya’s awakening (U 1.10).

Interestingly, we can see dhāmman’uddha ca in terms referring to spiritual evolution, such as nekhammasita domanassa, “pain [sorrow] of renunciation.” In the Saḷāyatana Vihārīga Sutta (M 13), this kind of pain, a mental discomfort, allows the renunciant to overcome the “pain of household life,” that is, the vicissitudes of lay life.27 This pain of renunciation, in turn, is the restlessness arising from the desire to attain nirvāna. In a sense, negative as it may be, it is a sign of something good. With its subsidence, we go on to realize a higher spiritual level.

2.6 Good Words with Bad Sense. Just as some words usually taken in a bad sense can be used to convey a positive way, the reverse, too, is true: a good word or expression can have a bad connotation, depending on the context. We are familiar with words like sati (mindfulness) and samādhi (concentration) being used in their good senses. Yet we do have many cases of micchā sati (wrong mindfulness) and micchā samādhi (wrong concentration).28 Hence, we need to examine the context carefully to ensure we rightly understand its intention.

All this interesting discussions show how words in the early texts serve as the tools of spiritual change. Although early Buddhism has a huge scripture,29 it is not a religion of the book. Seekers are often warned of not being trapped by words,30 of seeing the forest despite the tree, and yet to cut down the forest, but not the tree.31 For our present purposes, we should understand the meaning of chanda in this spirit, and this spirit should similarly prevail in our understanding of the other key terms of the Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta, which we shall now turn to.

3 The way of all things

Now that we have a better picture of the nature of language, text and context in early Buddhism, we are ready to examine the message of the Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta more closely and thoroughly. The Buddha begins his answer by stating “Rooted in desire, avuso, are all thing” (§4). Nāṇananda makes use of an
instructive figure—the parable of the gem in the rubbish heap (but I have given it a slightly different interpretation).

A man approaches a rubbish heap (a unitary notion) to dispose of it. Suddenly, he sees a gem: it becomes his object of desire and interest. The gem has emerged from what is earlier taken to be a rubbish heap, but his focus is now the gem, which becomes everything, “all things,” to him at that moment. Rooted in desire are all things.32

The man’s desire forces him to direct his attention totally to the gem. Now what is “attention” (manasikāra) here? The texts often define attention as the directing of the mind to “a sign and its details” (nimitta anuvyañjana).33 The Commentaries say that “sign” (nimitta) here refers to a grasping arising through one’s sensual lust (chanda, rāga, vasena) or on account of merely one’s view (diṭṭhi, matta, vasena); “detail” (anuvyañjana) here refers to finding delight by grasping at another’s limb or body part (eyes, arms, legs, etc).34

In this case, the man examines the gem carefully and notices its shape, hardness, lustre, etc, and thinks about its value, and the wealth and pleasures it would bring. And so the gem is born. Thus, the Buddha says: “Born in attention are all things.” An ignorant child or an animal would not know that it is a gem. The man has some concept of “gem” beforehand, a foreknowledge with which perceives the gem. However, whether the gem is genuine or not is another matter.

A mind filled with desire (chanda) is always looking for a sense-object to cling to—like a monkey rapidly swinging from tree to tree, clinging to one branch after another.35 Then, it might be added, when the monkey notice a bright object, it is at once captivated to examine it more closely, and to consume it if it is a sweet ripe fruit. This is how attention works: it draws us to a sense-object. Here the gem-finder is consumed by the gem, as it were.

How does the gem really come to the man’s attention? His eyes see a bright object: it catches his eye. If he had ignored it, and were to go on clearing the rubbish, he would not have bothered about the gem. Hence, it is said, “Arisen through contact are all things.” The “contact” (phassa) here is of course, “eye contact,” or the visual impact of the gem on the man.

Contact (phassa) is the sense-stimulus associated with the element-related thoughts already mentioned.36 The converge on feeling (vedanā), the affective response to the contact or experience, with the tones of pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, which holds together the various aspects of the conscious moment.

When the man sees the gem, he feels excited and bright-eyed: this is a pleasurable feeling. All his attention now focusses on the gem. Hence, it is said, “converging in feeling are all things.” In fact, the man has all but forgotten about the rubbish at that moment. He is fully concentrated on the gem. Hence, “concentration is the leader of all things,” in the sense of playing the key role in building the mind up to its peak. Here, of course, is clearly wrong concentration [2.6].

Further, it is said, “Mindfulness is the lord of all things,” to stress its dominant role in controlling the mind. But this is clearly wrong mindfulness [2.6], because it is rooted in desire (chanda). And it is a very powerful thought; it overwhelms him totally.

The Buddha then says, “Wisdom is the highest in all things.” How does wisdom fit into our parable here? Having got over his initial excitement, the man (assuming he has some wisdom), would, for example, consider carefully how to protect his new found treasure, or how to make use of it. If he is careful and wise in making use of the gem, then he would be rich and live comfortably with his family. His wisdom has brought him wealth and happiness, the highest things in life for an erstwhile rubbish disposer. But this is a worldly consideration.

32 For a similar but more elaborate idea, see the parable of the heap of coins: Vism 14.4-5/437.
33 For a more detailed discussion, see Nimitta & Anuvyañjana = SD 19.14.
34 Nm 2:390; Nc 141, 141; DhsA 400, 402; cf MA 1:75, 4:195; SA 3:4, 394; Nc 1:55; Dха 1:74). On other meanings of nimitta, see SD 13 §3.1a.
35 Assutava S 1 (S 12.61.6-8/2:94 f) = SD 20.2
36 As regards most of the remaining terms, we may be able to find some clarification from the brief Aṅguttara commentary on the (Kim Arammana) Samiddhi Sutta (AA 4:176).

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The purpose of the parable is to point to higher things. The gem is the wisdom that the Three Jewels can give us. It is a wealth which, as it were, we could redeem ourselves from our samsaric debts, our karmic debits. This spiritual wealth is our best tool for rising above craving and ignorance, and leads to the attainment of the supramundane path, that is, true liberation.

4 The essence of all things

4.1 “Liberation is the essence of all things.” Finally, the Buddha declares, “Liberation is its essence of all things,” that is, the goal of the path (which the Commentary identifies as “the fruit of liberation,” phala, vimutti, AA 4:176). Finally, our consciousness, as it were, find a “firm footing” (oga-dha) only in nirvana, the death-free (amata), taking it as its object (in the path and fruition) and because they are “established” in nirvana. Outside of nirvana, as it were, we keep on roaming and wandering on, hindered by ignorance, fettered by craving.

In nirvana, all “things” as we know it come to a complete end, transcending both being and non-being. It is opposite of what we do and what happens in the “real” world. The name-and-form model is useful in show us how we habitually reify our experiences, we “thingify” what are really events and processes. What does this mean?

This has to do with how we make sense of things. When we see a form, say, something yellow, edible and tasty, our minds at once give it a name: “banana!” The mind, of course, works in a more complicated way than this. Immediately upon experiencing a banana, we will detect a sense of pleasure at the eye-door, since we like bananas. (This immediate reaction has been conditioned by our previous banana experiences, so that we perceive yellow bananas as being delicious.) Each time, we respond in this manner, we reinforce our liking for bananas. This is how we accumulate and strengthen our latent tendencies.

4.2 Concepts are not the essence of all things. In the course of our religious history, we have come with interesting, even persuasive, notions to explain how the universe and life began, on the meaning and purpose of our lives, and so on. Out of our habitual fear of death, we introduced the notion of some kind of abiding entity, an enduring soul. Out of our persistent need for security and to explain how “things” began or happened, we resort to a God idea. Religious history regularly records how the God idea lies at the root of colonialism, cultural domination and mental pathology. Such an idea or being can hardly be “essence of all existence.”

But what does “all things” (sabbe dhamma) here mean? The Commentaries seem to take this as referring to “wholesome states” (kusala dhamma). I think the Sabba Sutta (S 35.23) gives a better explanation: all that we have to know with (the instruments or methods of knowing) are our six sense-faculties (the five physical senses and the mind), and all that we can know are the sense-objects. This is the all that we can ever truthfully and usefully claim.

Yet, this is enough. When we closely examine how our sense-faculties work, and the nature of the sense-objects, we know, or at least sense, that our life and world is completely a sense-based and sense-made world. In such a world, we sooner or later realize that how imperfect our senses may be, we are still capable of learning from such imperfections or suffering. The more we learn, the more we adapt, the more we evolve. In an important, we are working to liberate ourselves from the shortcomings of our senses.

As such, it makes better sense (indeed the best sense), to work with the notion that “liberation is the essence of all things” than any theistic speculation or dogma. Speculations keep us in a circular rut. Dogma stops us from thinking for ourselves. The notion of liberation, on the other hand, entails that we evolve into better beings. Just as survival of a species is the essence of biological evolution, the liberation of the individual is at the heart of spiritual evolution.
Indeed, liberation is at the very heart of such discourses as the Mahā Sārūpama Sutta (M 29). The essence of all things is not the heaping up of concepts and dogmas, much less of proving them wrong or right, much less of attracting power, wealth, gain, honour or fame. Hence, the Mahā Sārūpama Sutta closes with these words:

So this holy life, bhikshus, does not have gain, honour, and renown as its benefit, or for the attainment of virtue as its benefit, or the attainment of concentration as its benefit, or knowledge and vision as its benefit.

But it is the unshakable liberation of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood, and its end.

(M 29.7/1:197) = SD 53.8

The Discourse “What is the Root?”

A 8.83/4:338

1 “If, bhikshus, the wanderers of other sects were to ask you thus:

(1) In what are all things rooted? kiṁ mūlakā, āvuso, sabbe dhammā,
(2) In what are all things born? kiṁ sambhavā sabbe dhammā,
(3) In what do all things arise? kiṁ samudayā sabbe dhammā,
(4) In what do all things converge? kiṁ samosaraṇā sabbe dhammā,
(5) What is the leader of all things? kiṁ pamukhā sabbe dhammā,
(6) What is the supreme lord of all things? kiṁ adhipateyyā sabbe dhammā,
(7) What is the highest of all things? kiṁ uttarā sabbe dhammā,
(8) What is the essence of all things? kiṁ sārā sabbe dhammā,

When you asked thus, bhikshus, by the wanderers of other sects, how should you answer?”

2 “Bhante, our teachings are rooted in the Blessed One, guided by the Blessed One, has the Blessed One as refuge. It would be good indeed if the Blessed One were to explain its meaning. Having heard the Blessed One, the monks would remember it.”

“In that case, bhikshus, listen, pay careful attention, I will speak.

“Ye, bhante,” the monks answered the Blessed One in assent.

3 The Blessed One said this:

“If, bhikshus, the wanderers of other sects were to ask you thus:

In what are all things rooted?
In what are all things born?
In what do all things arise?
In what do all things converge?
What is the leader of all things?
What is the supreme lord of all things?
What is the highest of all things?
What is the essence of all things?

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4 When you are asked thus, bhikshus, by the wanderers of other sects, you should answer them thus:

(1) Rooted in desire, avuso, are all things, chanda,mūlakā, āvuso, sabbe dhammā,
(2) Born in attention are all things, manasikāra,sambhavā sabbe dhammā,
(3) Arisen through contact are all things, phassa,samudayā sabbe dhammā,
(4) Converging in feeling are all things, vedanā,samosaraṇā sabbe dhammā,
(5) Concentration is the leader of all things, samādhi-p,pamukhā sabbe dhammā,
(6) Mindfulness is the lord of all things, sat'ādhipateyyā sabbe dhammā,
(7) Wisdom is the highest in all things, paññ'uttarā sabbe dhammā,
(8) Liberation is the essence of all things, vimutti,sārā sabbe dhammā,

When you are asked thus, bhikshus, by the wanderers of other sects, this is how you should answer them.

— evaṁ —

100405; 100409; 100422; 101117