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Asi,bandhaka,putta Sutta

The Discourse to Asi,bandhaka,putta | S 42.6/4:311-314

Also: **Pacchā,bhūmaka Sutta** The Discourse on the Westlanders;
or **Mataka Sutta** The Discourse on the Dead

Theme: Prayers do not affect a person's afterlife destiny

Translated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2012

1 Asi,bandhaka,putta

1.1 HIS NAME. Asi,bandhaka,putta¹ is a headman (*gāmaṇi*) in Kosala² and a follower of the Nigaṇṭhas (S 4:37) but who later takes refuge (as related here). We have four suttas, all in the Saṃyutta [2], related to him. Besides that, we know almost nothing else about him.

The Commentaries are curiously silent on him. The only commentarial reference to him is probably in the Netti-p,pkaraṇa Commentary, which says “Asi,bandhaka,putta is the name of Asi,bandhaka's son, the village headman on account of his seniority” (*asibandhaka,putto'ti asi,bandhakassa nāma putto, gāme jeṭṭhakatāya gāmaṇī*).³

1.2 WORD ANALYSIS. The name *asi,bandhaka* literally means “sword-binder,” but in such words as *assa,bandhaka*, “horse-keeper, groom,”⁴ *bandhaka* has the sense of someone skilled in a particular occupation. As such, it is possible to render *asi,bandhaka* as “swordsmith.”

Now, in the **Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3), we see the phrase, *dīghāsi,baddha*, meaning “armed with a king sword,” which also agrees with the Burmese reading *dīghāsi'vudhaka*, literally meaning, “with a long sword as weapon.”⁵ As such, we could translate *asi,bandhaka* as “sword-bearer” or “swordman,” since he is “strapped with a sword” (*asi,baddhaka*, vl).

The name *asi.bandhaka,putta*, however, has two possible meanings. The first is—taking *putta* to mean “son”—“the son of a swordsman.” However, such a usage applies more to names, such as *sāri,putta*, “the son of Sāri,” or *māluṅkyā,putta*, “the son of Māluṅkyā,” and so on. Here, however, it is more likely—*putta* refers to an “apprentice,” as in *kammāra,putta* (a son of a smith, smith's son)⁶ and *kula,putta*, “a son of (good) family.”⁷ Often here, the person's youthfulness is alluded, but the person could well be a full-fledged smith, etc.

There is also a metaphorical usage of *-putta*, as in *buddha,putta*, “a son of the Buddha,” that is, a worthy monastic, especially one of the saints. In the suttas, this term is usually applied to monastics, but in terms of spiritual attainment, it can also apply to any layman saint.⁸

2 Sutta summary and highlights

The Asi,bandhaka,putta Sutta (S 42.6) tells us that he is one of the western (*pacchā,bhūmaka*) brahmins who believe that lifting up a person who has just died, carrying him out and calling him by name would speed him heavenward. Surely, he argues, since the Buddha is an arhat, he could bring the whole

¹ Ce MSS invariably give it as *asi,baddha,putta*: CPD sv Asibandhaka-putta. There is almost no commentarial information on him, except for NettA:Be 109 & Nettibhāvinī:Be 166 mention here.

² **Kosala**, also called “the kingdom of the Kosalas.” It was divided into northern Kosala (*uttara kosala*) on the banks of the Sarayu river (the modern Gaghara) and extending northward to the foothills of the Himalaya, and southern Kosala (*dakkhiṇa kosala*) extending southward to the Vindhya mountains. During the Buddha's time, Kosala (under king Pasenadi) was the most powerful kingdom in north India, but eventually it was overshadowed by Magadha.

³ NettA:Be 109; cf Nettibhāvinī:Be 166.

⁴ J 2:98, 5:441, 449; DhA 1:392.

⁵ D 3.2.10/1:105,14 = SD 21.3. All MSS read so, except Be which has *dīghāsi,vudha*, which is actually a wr. Technically, foll sandhi rules, it should read *dīghāsīvudha*.

⁶ D 2:126,21 f = 3:207,7 f = A 5:263,3 f = U 81,14 f; D 2:136,9 f = U 85,12; Nc:Be 259 ad Sn 48, which is in turn qu Ap 9,28; Sn 83, 85; J 6:236,30. On *-putta*, see L Alsdorf, *Kleine Schriften*, 1974:587 f.

⁷ V 1:15,1, 350,34; D 1:93,20; M 1:85,31; A 2:249,11; J 2:439,13*, 5:449,6*; Kvu 268,17.

⁸ S 1:192 = Tha 1237; It 101; J 3:211

world to heaven. The Buddha declares that *only a person's karma can determine the state of his rebirth* [§§4-9]. This statement is quoted in the *Netti-p, pakaraṇa* (Nett 45-47).

3 Suttas related to Asi,bandhaka

3.0 SUTTA TITLES. There are only four suttas related to Asi,bandhaka,putta, all found consecutively in **the Gāmaṇi Saṃyutta** (S 42.6-9/4:311-323). The Gāmaṇi Saṃyutta, or “collected discourses” on the headman (*gāmaṇi*). A few of them are initially not followers of the Buddha, and are even hostile to him. In each case, however, the Buddha wins them over with his careful explanations.

The four discourses related to Asi,bandhaka,putta are as follows:

Asi,bandhaka,putta Sutta	S 42.6/4:311-314	SD 39.9;
(Khetta) Desanā Sutta	S 42.7/4:314-317	SD 51.6; abridged, SD 12.1(3.2);
Saṅkha,dhama Sutta	S 42.8/4:317-322	SD 57.9; and
(Asi,bandhaka,putta) Kulā Sutta	S 42.9/4:322-324	SD 7.11.

Besides the Asi,bandhaka,putta Sutta (S 42.6), here are the other three discourses and their key teachings:

3.1 (KHETTA) DESANĀ SUTTA (S 42.7), also known as the Khetṭūpama Sutta, which alludes to its parable of the three fields, the good, the middling and the poor. These are like the three kinds of audiences that the Buddha would teach. Like a wise farmer, he would give the first priority to the good or best field, that is, the renunciants, those who have left the world to dedicate their lives to the teaching and awakening.⁹

3.2 SAṅKHA,DHAMA SUTTA (S 42.8). Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta views that bad deeds bring us to hell while good deeds rewards us with heaven. The Buddha rejects this as being simplistic and deterministic since most of us more frequently do not break the precepts, none of us would go apparently to hell!

Our destiny is moulded by how we *think* about such acts. If we think negatively, we are moved to do more bad deeds and not regret them. Hence, it is vital to turn away from negative thoughts by cultivating the four divine abodes (lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity). We should pervade these qualities everywhere unconditionally like a conch-blower blowing a conch, for the benefit of all beings.¹⁰

3.3 (ASI,BANDHAKA,PUTTA) KULĀ SUTTA (S 42.9). This discourse, **the (Asi,bandhaka,putta) Kulā Sutta**, relates how the Nigaṇṭhas (early Jains) use Asi,bandhaka,putta to ask the Buddha a double-horned question in an attempt to trip the Buddha. Unlike in **the Abhaya Rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M 58) where the Buddha points out to Abhaya that he is asking a double-horned question (and so foiling the deceit), here the Buddha gives a complete discourse in reply—one that impresses Asi,bandhaka,putta who then goes for refuge.¹¹

3.4 IṬṬHA SUTTA (A 5.43). This discourse teaches us not to rely on prayers (not *merely* on them anyway) if we wish for something. The Buddha declares, “I do not teach that they are to be obtained through prayer (*āyācana,hetu*) or through wishing (*patthanā,hetu*).”¹² Whatever we desire, whether it is long life, beauty, happiness, fame, and heaven, instead of wishing or praying for them, we should instead live a life that conduces to these wholesome wishes. Such a conduct entails wholesome practices of charity, moral virtue and mental cultivation.¹³

3.5 BRAHMA,DEVA SUTTA (S 6.3). It recounts how Brahmā Sahampati himself comes down from his heaven and appears before a brahminee (the monk Brahma,deva's mother), who is a Brahmā devotee, admonishing her on the futility of her offerings, since brahmās do not partake of earthly offerings, but subsist on dhyanic joy. More importantly, Brahmā instructs the brahminee that her offerings would yield great fruit if she were to offer them to her own arhat son, Brahma,deva.¹⁴

⁹ For an abridged tr, see **Why the Buddha hesitated?** @ SD 12.1(3.2). For a full tr, see SD 51.6.

¹⁰ S 42.8/4:317-322 = SD 57.9.

¹¹ M 58/1:392-396 = SD 7.12; S 42.9/4:322-324 = SD 7.11.

¹² “Wishing,” *patthanā*, also “desire, request, aspiration, prayer, vow.”

¹³ A 5.43/3:47-49 = SD 47.2. See **Ādiya S** (A 5.41) @ SD 2.1 (3+4). Cf Discourse such as **Sāleyyaka S** (M 43) where “rebirth by aspiration” is mentioned (M 43.15-43/1:285-289 = SD 5.7).

¹⁴ S 6.3/1:140-142 = SD 12.4.

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The Discourse to Asi,bandhaka,putta

S 42.6/4:311-314

Asi,bandhaka,putta's question

1 At one time the Blessed One was staying in Pāvārika's mango grove near Nālandā. [312]

2 Then Asi,bandhaka,putta the headman approached the Blessed One, saluted him, and sat down at one side.

3.1 Seated thus at one side, Asi,bandhaka,putta the headman said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, the brahmins of the western region¹⁵—those who carry water-pots around, wear garlands of water-plants, immerse themselves in water, and worship fire [Agni]¹⁶—are said to direct a dead person upwards, to guide him along, conduct him to heaven.¹⁷

3.2 **But might the Blessed One, the arhat, the fully self-awakened, be able to bring this about, that is to say, with the body's breaking up, after death, *all the world* might be reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world?**¹⁸

The immoral person

4 “In that case, headman, I will question you about this. Answer it as you see fit.

5.1 What do you think, headman? Here, a person

destroys life,
takes the not-given,
commits sexual misconduct,
speaks falsely,
speaks divisively,
speaks harshly,
chatters frivolously,
who covets,

¹⁵ *Brāhmaṇā...pacchā bhūmakā*. In the Buddha's time and his after-centuries, this western region, where the brahmins were more influential and well-established, was prob the region of Surāṣṭra and Aparānta, ie the western coast (north of modern Mumbai), southwest of the central Gangetic plain or the “Middle Country.” For map, see **Puṇṇ'o-vāda S** (M 145) @ SD 20.15 (3).

¹⁶ *Kāmaṇḍalukā sevāla,mālikā udak'orohakā aggī,paricārakā*. A *kāmaṇḍaluka* or *kamaṇḍula* (S 4:312,6 = A 5:-263,8) is one carrying or associated with a *kamaṇḍalu*, a long-spouted water jar used by brahmins and non-Buddhist ascetics (S 1:167,29; Sn p80,4 (in Sundarika Bhāra,dvāja's right hand); J 2:73,13*+15 = *kuṇḍika*, 6:525,28*, 570,4; DhA 3:448). *Sevāla,mālika* here is “one who wears a garland of sevala weeds” (S 4:312; A 5:263; DhA 5:37). *Sevāla* (Skt *śaivala, saivāla*) is *Blyxa octandra* = *Vallisneria spiralis* Linn, a moss, “grassy plant growing in marshlands” (K G Zysk, *Religious Healing in the Veda*, Philadelphia, 1985: 257; repr *Religious Medicine*, 1993). See also **Āghāta Paṭivīnaya S** (A 5.163) @ SD 39.6 3.2. *Udak'orohaka* (M 1:281,35; S 4:312,6) = *udaka* (“water”)+ *orohaka* (“one who descends into”); *udak'orahana*, “a sacred bathe (n), daily baptism,” believed to wash away one's evil. On the nun Puṇṇikā's rebuttal, see Thī 239-244 & ThīA 204; on “the inner baptism,” see **Vatthūpama S** (M 7.19-20/-1:39) = SD 28.12.

¹⁷ The 3 verbs are *uyyāpenti* (Comy: *upari yāpenti*, “supported upwards”), *saññāpenti* (Comy: *sammā ñāpenti*, “rightly made known”), and *saggam okkāmenti*, explained as: “They assemble around him, saying. ‘Go, sir, to the brahma world! Go, sir, to the brahma world!’ make him enter (*pavesenti*) heaven.” (SA 3:104)

¹⁸ *Bhagavā pana bhante araham sammā,sambuddho pahoti tathā kātuṃ yathā sabbo loko kāyassa bhedā param maraṇā sugatim saggam lokam upapajjeyyāti*.

has a heart of ill will,
holds wrong views.

5.2 Then a great multitude were to gather and assemble around him, and they were to send up prayers, recite holy praises, circumambulate him with clasped hand (in lotus gesture), saying:¹⁹

‘With the body’s breakup, after death, may this person be reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world!’

5.3 What do you think, headman?

Because of the great multitude’s sending up prayers, because of their reciting holy praises, because of their circumambulating him with clasped hand (in lotus gesture)—

5.4 would that person, with the body’s breaking up, after death, *be reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world?*”

5.5 “Not at all, bhante!”

Parable of the unfloating rock

6.1 “Suppose, headman, a person were to throw a huge boulder into a deep lake.²⁰

Then, a great multitude were to gather and assemble around it, and they were to send up prayers, recite holy praises, circumambulate it with clasped hand (in lotus gesture), saying:

‘Rise up, good boulder! Float up, [313] good boulder! Float up onto dry ground, good boulder!’²¹

6.2 What do you think, headman?

Because of the great multitude’s sending up prayers, because of their reciting holy praises, because of their circumambulating him with clasped hand (in lotus gesture)—

6.3 would that great boulder rise up, float up, float up onto dry ground?”

6.4 “Not at all, bhante!”

6.5 “Even so, headman, in the case of a person who

destroys life,
takes the not-given,
commits sexual misconduct,
speaks falsely,
speaks divisively,
speaks harshly,
chatters frivolously,
who covets,
has a heart of ill will,
holds wrong views—

6.6 even if *a great crowd of people were to gather and assemble around him, and they were to send up prayers, recite holy praises, circumambulate him with clasped hand (in lotus gesture), saying:*

‘With the body’s breakup, after death, may this person be reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world!’—

6.7 but with the body’s breaking up, after death, he would *still* be reborn in a plane of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell.

¹⁹ *Tam enaṃ mahā,jana,kāyo saṅgama samāgama āyāceyya thomeyya pañjaliko anuparisakkeyya. Pañjalika*, “with clasped hands, with palms together” (S 1:226; Sn 485, 598) = *añjalī = añjalika* (CPD svv). *Anuparisakkeyya*, (pot 3 sg) from *anuparisakkati* (*anu*, “after” + *pari*, “around” + √*ṢVAṢK*. “to go, move”), “he goes round about, escorts”; cf *padakkhiṇaṃ karoti*, “he moves in a sunwise direction,” ie, to move with deference keeping the sacred object or person on one’s right.

²⁰ *Seyyathā’pi gāmaṇi puriso mahatiṃ puthu,silaṃ gambhīre udaka,rahade pakkhipeyya*. Cf *Udaka,rahada S* (A 4.104+105/2:105 f).

²¹ *Ummujja bho puthu,sile uplava bho puthu,sile thalam uplava bho puthu,sile’ti*

The moral person

7.1 What do you think, headman?

Here, a person

refrains from destroying life,
 refrains from taking the not-given,
 refrains from sexual misconduct,
 refrains from false speech,
 refrains from divisive speech,
 refrains from harsh speech,
 refrains from idle chatter,
 is not covetous,
 has a heart free of ill will,
 holds right view.

7.2 Then, a great multitude were to gather and assemble around him, and they were to send up prayers, recite holy praises, circumambulate him with clasped hand (in lotus gesture), saying:

‘With the body’s breaking up, after death, may this person be reborn in a plane of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell!’

7.3 What do you think, headman?

Because of the great multitude’s sending up prayers, because of their reciting holy praises, because of their circumambulating him with clasped hand (in lotus gesture)—

7.4 would that person, with the body’s breaking up, after death, *be reborn in a plane of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell?*’

7.5 “Not at all, bhante!”

Parable of the pot of oil

8.1 “Suppose, headman, a man were to sink a pot of ghee or a pot of oil into a deep lake and then break it.”²²

There, its shards or fragments would sink downwards, but its ghee or its oil [314] would rise upwards.²³

8.2 Then, a great multitude were to gather and assemble around it, and they were to send up prayers, recite holy praises, circumambulate it with clasped hand (in lotus gesture), saying:

‘Go down, good ghee or oil! Sink down, good ghee or oil! Go downwards, good ghee or oil!’²⁴

8.3 What do you think, headman?

Because of the great multitude’s sending up prayers, because of their reciting holy praises, because of their circumambulating it with clasped hand (in lotus gesture)—

8.4 *would it go down, or sink down, or go downwards?*’

8.5 “Not at all, bhante!”

8.6 “Even so, headman, if a person is one who

refrains from destroying life,
 refrains from taking the not-given,
 refrains from sexual misconduct,
 refrains from false speech,
 refrains from divisive speech,
 refrains from harsh speech,
 refrains from idle chatter,

²² *Seyyathā’pi gāmaṇi puriso sappi, kumbhaṃ vā tela, kumbhaṃ vā gambhīre udaka, rahade ogāhetvā bhindeyya.*

²³ *Tatra yāssa sakkharā vā kaṭhalā vā sā adho, gāmī assa; yañ ca khv-assa tatra sappi vā telam vā tam uddham gāmi assa.*

²⁴ *Osīda bho sappi, tela samsīda bho sappi, tela adho gaccha bho sappi, telā’ti*

is not covetous,
has a heart free of ill will,
holds right view.

8.7 Then a great multitude were to gather and assemble around him, and they were to send up prayers, recite holy praises, circumambulate him with clasped hand (in lotus gesture), saying:

‘With the body’s breaking up, after death, may this person be reborn in a plane of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell!’

8.8 But, that person, with the body’s breaking up, after death, would *still* be reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world.”

Asi,bandhaka,putta goes for refuge

9 When this was said, Asi,bandhaka,putta the headman said this to the Blessed One:

“Excellent, bhante! Excellent, bhante! Just as if, bhante,
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, bhante, in numerous ways, the Dharma has been declared by the Blessed One.

I, bhante, go to the Blessed One for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks.

May the Blessed One remember me as a layman who has gone to him for refuge from this day forth for life.”

— evaṃ —

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