10
Bhatt’uddesaka Sutta
The Discourse on the Meal-steward • A 4.20/2:19
Theme: Freedom from the 4 biases

1 Introduction

The Bhatt’uddesaka Sutta lists 4 qualities that make a bad meal-steward, and those of a good meal-steward (bhatt’uddesaka), that is, he is free from bias (āgati) of desire, of hate, of delusion, and of fear.

1.1 Teachings—Implicit and Explicit

1.1.1 Key Phrase. Yathābhataṁ nikkhitto evaṁ niraye, “It would be for him just as if he had been taken and thrown into hell”—this is a difficult sentence. It is rendered following the commentarial gloss: “He will be cast into hell as if carried off and put there by the wardens of hell” (MA 2:32). The context’s provisional tone—“as if” (yathābhataṁ)—should be noted, along with the conditional “thus” (evam). This is a clear hint that both these words work with the same force as pariyāyena, “in a provisional manner.”

1.1.2 In other words, we should not take this in a literal “hell-fire” theological sense—the Buddha is never known to have “cast” anyone down into hell or even cursed anyone. It should be noted that it is not the Buddha who wills such an action (falling into hell or going to heaven), but the results of our own malicious karma brings upon us a hell-like suffering.

1.2 Teachings: the Person-based and the Truth-based

1.2.1 The “behavioural”5 tone of the Sobhana Sutta and many other similar suttas in the Aṅguttara—that the bad find themselves in hell, and the good in heaven—are addressed primarily to the Indian laity and audience who already have such beliefs, on account of popular lore. Such ideas, common to the major religions of the Buddha’s time, as far as early Buddhism is concerned, should be understood as a “person-based” (puggalādhiṭṭhāna) teaching—the personification of mental states.

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1 The PTS tr (A:W, 1932) misunderstood the Pali—chand’āgatiṁ gacchati, dos’āgatiṁ gacchati, moh’āgatiṁ gacchati, bhay’āgatiṁ gacchati—and mistranslated this as “He goes to the no-bourn through desire, ill-will, delusion and fear”!
2 See SD 3.9 (7.5.1), SD 50.25 (1.4) and Pariyāya nippariyāya, SD 68.2.
3 Sadly, a long list of nefarious curses (some 6 pages long) is found in the Lotus Sutra (ch 3) and other Mahāyāna Sutras—attesting to their late unbuddhist polemical provenance. See also Reflection, “The Buddha one and only,” R389, 2015.
4 See Asibandhaka,putta Kula S (S 42.9,11) n, SD 7.11. See also Ānāmoli, The Lion’s Roar: Two Discourses of the Buddha (WH 390/391), rev Bhikkhu Bodhi, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993 n17.
5 “Behavioural” means based on a “behaviorist perspective,” ie, “The psychological perspective primarily concerned with observable behavior that can be objectively recorded and with the relationships of observable behavior to environmental stimuli” (Gerrig & Zimbardo, Psychology and Life, Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2002), esp in terms of a “reward and punishment” (carrot-and-stick) process. This is merely a descriptive and comparative observation, not an endorsement of any psychological basis for the term usage.
6 The major religions of Buddha’s time significantly share a common mythology of heaven and hell. Many of these notions are rooted in the Vedas, and developed, eg, in Jainism and Buddhism.
7 On these 2 ways of teaching (desanā)—the person-based (puggalādhiṭṭhāna) and the truth-based (dhammādhiṭṭhāna), see SD 36.1 (1.11.2); SD 47.20 (1.2.3).
1.2.2 Such a personified mythology is—or should be—the basis for a “truth-based” (dhammadhitthāna) or concept-based understanding of such myths. Technically, both the person-based and the truth-based teachings are based on concepts. However, while the personified ideas are “provisional” (pariyāya), expressing ultimate true reality on the level of conventional virtual reality, the “truth-based” concepts are “non-provisional” (nippariyāya), that is, refer directly to true reality.

1.2.3 We usually understand “true reality” to refer to our down-to-earth daily life, and take the experiences of a sophisticated computer-generated game or scenario as being that of virtual reality.” A normal person would clearly know the difference, even if he thoroughly enjoys the experiences of the digital virtual reality.

We can imagine the sufferings of hell as virtual reality—like a computer-generated setting. In fact, both are “mind-made” (mano,maya) states, as are our reactions to those experiences. However, a normal person is able to distinguish between the two, even while “playing” the game or experiencing such a scenario.

On the other hand, a deluded person—especially one with habitual bad karma—will react to such “games” and scenarios as being truly real. In a significant sense, such a person is unhinged, at least for the duration of that deluded experience. Such a suffering state can last for as long as the person is deluded—and this can be a very long time, especially when he has little experience of true reality, or is unwilling or unable to see it.

1.3 Hell and heaven

1.3.1 Although it is easier to apply this twin approaches—the person-based and the truth-based teachings—to the notions of the hells and the other subhuman suffering states, it is more problematic when applied to the heavens and heavenly beings. They are often taken—perhaps wishfully—as being actual places and actual beings.

1.3.2 Buddhism is, of course, not against the idea of such celestial beings as an early Buddhist imagination of what we today understand as alien species and their worlds in the remote quadrants of outer space. Many such alien beings are conceived in space fiction as more evolved and having greater powers than humans. Or, perhaps the writers of these fictions have based their ideas on religious (such as Buddhist) mythology.

1.4 Teachings: the implicit and the explicit

1.4.1 Ultimately, all our views and understanding of the sutta narratives and statements about heaven and hell should be guided by the teachings of the Neyy’attha Nīt’attha Sutta (A 2.3.5+6). The essence of the teaching of the Sutta is that we should rightly differentiate these 2 kinds of suttas and teachings:

(1) A sutta or teaching whose sense is drawn out (nīt’attha) (that is, an explicit teaching).
(2) A sutta or teaching whose sense is to be drawn out (neyy’attha) (that s, an implicit teaching).

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10 A 2.3.5+6/1:60 (SD 2.6b).
1.4.2 Those suttas or teachings that tell stories, describe ritual acts, or talk of “beings,” “gods,” etc, need to have their meaning drawn out (neyy’attha), as they do not directly refer to true reality. They use the language of conventional terms, metaphors and names, especially in the form of a story or an imagery. Their meaning is indirect or implicit. They are provisional (pariyāya) teachings.

Where and when teachings are given in terms of ideas—such as the 3 roots (greed, hate and delusion), or the 5 aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness)—they are said to have their meaning already drawn out (nīt’attha), that is, a direct or explicit sense. Such teachings point directly to true reality; hence, they are also said to be absolute or ultimate (nippariyāya). 11

1.4.3 Philosophically, we must also note that, in the neyy’attha or implicit scheme of things, it does not matter whether those beings, things or states exist or not—as far as we understand—but they rest on the fact that we conceive or perceive them in our minds. Conversely, in the nīt’attha or explicit scheme of things, we both analyse the true nature of such beings or ideas, and see them in relation to one another and to everything else—we see some common principle underlying all of them, namely, those of the 3 universal characteristics of impermanence, suffering and non-self. 12

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The Discourse on the Meal-steward

A 4.20

1 Bhikshus, when a meal-steward possesses 4 qualities, it would be for him just as if he had been taken and thrown into hell. 13 What are the four? [19]

2 The 4 Biases

(1) One is biased on account of desire. chand’āgatīṁ gacchati
(2) One is biased on account of hate. dos’āgatīṁ gacchati
(3) One is biased on account of delusion. moh’āgatīṁ gacchati
(4) One is biased on account of fear. bhay’āgatīṁ gacchati

3 When, bhikshus, a meal-steward possesses 4 qualities, it would be for him just as if he had been taken and thrown into hell.

4 Bhikshus, when a meal-steward possesses 4 qualities, it would be for him just as if he had been taken and thrown into heaven. What are the four?

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11 Technically, pariyāyena and nippariyāyena, respectively. See SD 33.2 (2.1); Pariyāya nippariyāya, SD 68.2.
12 On the 3 universal characteristics, see SD 1.2 (2); also Dhamma,niyāma S (A 3.134), SD 26.8.
13 Yathābhatam nikkhitto evam nīrye: a well known stock (M 1:71; S 4:325; A 1:8, 105, 292, 297, 2:71, 83; It 12, 14, 26, etc). On yathā + ābhata, see PED: 549 (yathā’bhata). Its converse yathābhatam nikkhitt evam saggio is also very common. The 2 phrases often appear in the same sutta, mostly commonly found in the Aṅguttara, eg, Kotha Peyyāla (A 2.31-35/1:96); Sāvajja S (A 3.142/1:292); Bhatt’uddesaka S (A 4.20/2:19), SD 51.17(3.3); Maccharinī S (A 5.115/3:139 ×2); Niraya S 1 (A 6.81/3:432); Upāsikā S (A 10.203/5:287). See SD 47.3b (2.1) for 4 related suttas. On hell, see (3.5.2).
5  FREEDOM FROM THE 4 BIASES
(1) One is not biased on account of desire.  
   na chand’āgatiṁ gacchati
(2) One is not biased on account of hate.  
   na dos’āgatiṁ gacchati
(3) One is not biased on account of delusion.  
   na moh’āgatiṁ gacchati
(4) One is not biased on account of fear.  
   na bhay’āgatiṁ gacchati

6  Bhikshus, when a meal-steward possesses 4 qualities, it would be for him just as if he had been taken and thrown into heaven.

Closing verses

7  Ye keci kāmesu asaṁñatā janā  
   adhammikā honti adhamma, gāravā  
   chandā dosā mohā ca bhayā gāmino  
   parisa-k, kasāvo ca pan’esu vuccati  
   evam hi vuttam samaṇena jānatā  
   Those people, unrestrained in sense-pleasures,  
   unjust, disrespectful of the Dharma,  
   going by desire, hate, delusion and fear,  
   are indeed called a stained assembly—  
   such is said by the recluse who knows.

8  Tasmā hi te sappurisā pasamisiyā  
   dhamme ṭhitā ye na karonti pāpakām  
   na chanda, dosā na bhayā ca gāmino  
   parisāya maṇḍo ca pan’esu vuccati  
   evam hi vuttam samaṇena jānatāti  
   Therefore, those true individuals, praiseworthy,  
   firm in the Dharma, not doing bad  
   on account of desire, hate[, delusion] or fear,  
   they are called the cream of assemblies—  
   such is said by the recluse who knows. [20]

   — evam —

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14 Only Ce: T asaṁñata ~.
15 Be chandā dosā mohā ca bhayā gāmino; Ce Ee Ke Se chandā ca dosā ca bhayā ca gāmino.
16 Be: King parisa, kato; Ce Ee Ke parisa-k, kasāvo; Be Se parisakasaṭo.
17 Be na chandā na dosā na mohā na bhayā ca gāmino; Ee na chandā dosā na bhayā ca gāmino; Ce Ke Se na chanda, dosā na bhayā ca gāmino.