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Andha,kāra Sutta

The Discourse on the Blinding Dark | S 56.46

Theme: The dark interstices of outer space

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2018

1 Summary summary and highlights

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

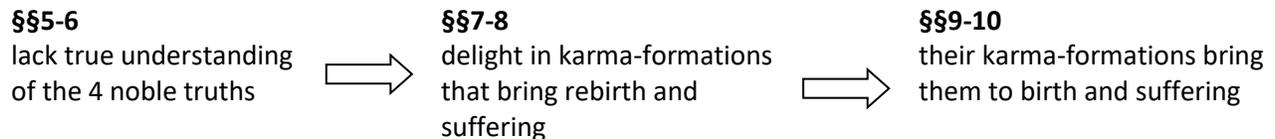
1.1.1 The blind. The **Andha,kāra Sutta** (S 56.46) is a relatively short reflection on the 4 noble truths based on the imagery of **darkness** [1.2]. Those who do not truly understand the 4 noble truths [§§5-6] delight in creating karma that bring about birth and suffering [§§7-8]. With the existence of this karma, they fall into birth, decay, death and suffering [§§9-10].

The clear-sighted. However, those who truly understand the 4 noble truths [§§11-12], do *not* delight in karma that sustains birth and creates sufferings [§§13-14]. With the destruction of karma, they do not fall into any birth, decay, death or suffering [§§15-16].

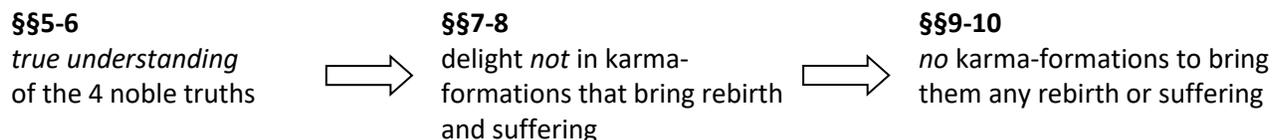
The Buddha closes his teaching by exhorting us to devote ourself to truly understanding the 4 noble truths. [§17]

1.1.2 The blinding pattern

The Andha,kāra Sutta describes the way by which those ignorant of the 4 noble truths are blinded, thus:



The wise practitioners, however, are those who understand the 4 noble truths according to true reality, thus:



1.2 IMAGERY OF DARK AND LIGHT

1.2.1 Blinding darkness

1.2.1.1 The keyword **andha,kāra** literally means “that which makes (*kāra*) blind (*andha*). Hence, it is both an adjective and a noun. As an adjective (mfn),¹ it means “dark, obscure; blinded; blinding.”² More often it appears as a masculine noun (ts),³ meaning “darkness, blindness.”⁴

¹ “Mfn” = “masculine, feminine or neuter” adjective.

The adjective *andha*, “blind,” is both (1) literal and (2) figurative.

(1) Literally, *andha* means “blind (of both eyes).”⁵ Compare *kāṇa*, “one-eyed, blind in one eye”; also used literally and metaphorically. One who is blind is not allowed admission into the sangha (V 1:91,15).

Sometimes it is complemented with *acakkhuka*, “eyeless.” There is a poetic form, *hata,cakkhu*, “whose eyes are destroyed (usually both eyes).”

(2) Figuratively, *andha* means “mentally blind, foolish, unenlightened; confused, bewildered.”⁶

1.2.1.2 The imagery of blinding darkness of **the Andha,kāra Sutta** is found in the passage on the boundless light in both **the Mahāpadāna Sutta** (D 14), **the Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta** (M 123) and **the Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 1** (A 4.127), which states that, with the Bodhisattva’s **conception**, that is, the arising of the Buddha in the world, “even in the groundless abysmal dark, the blinding darkness of the space amongst the worlds, where even the lights of the moon and the sun, so mighty as they are, cannot prevail, a boundless glorious radiance appears, surpassing even the divine glory of the gods.”⁷

1.2.2 Space and darkness

1.2.2.1 While the Commentary on the Andha,kāra Sutta is silent, **the Commentaries** on the Mahāpadāna Sutta (D 14), on the Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta (M 123) and on the Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 1 (A 4.127) give an identical explanation.⁸ Amongst every 3 world-systems, there is an intergalactic space (*lok’antari-ka*) measuring 8,000 yojanas (56,000 mi = 90,123 km). It is like the space amongst 3 cart-wheels or alms-bowls touching one another (DA 2:433,11 = MA 4:177,13 = AA 3:14). [1.2.2.3]

1.2.2.2 The space is said to be *agha* [§1], an interesting word, which as a noun, means “sky, atmosphere, space.”⁹ As an adjective, it means “aerial, without support, baseless,” especially in the compound, “a groundless abysmal dark, a blinding darkness of the spaces amongst the worlds [an intergalactic dark]” (*lok’antarikā ~ā asarṃvutā andhakārā andhakāra,timisā*) [§1].

This dark intergalactic “void” or empty space (*aghā*) is described as being “always open” (*nicca,vivaṭā*). It is “groundless, abysmal” (*asarṃvutā*) in the sense of being “unsupported from below” (*heṭṭhāpi appatiṭṭhā*) (MA 4:177). “A blinding darkness” (*andhakāra,timisā*): it is overcome darkness that blinds on account of the non-arising of eye-consciousness. “Light ... cannot prevail” (*abhā¹⁰ nānubhonti*), they “have no light of their own” (*attano pabhāya na-p,pahonti*).¹¹ It is perpetually dark (*nicc’andhakāra*, VbhA 4,18).

² V 1:79,31 ≈ 4:297,12; J 1:323,11; D 2:12,11 (= *tāma,bhūta*, DA 2:433,16) = M 3:120,10 = A 2:130,26 ≈ S 5:454,17; S 1:51,11* (sv CPD & DP).

³ Ts = tatsama: the word is the same in both P and Skt.

⁴ (Masc) D 3:185,5 (= *tamo*, DA 4:865,35); S 1:211,9, 19; S 4:127,26* = Sn 763; S 5:454,23; Dhs 617 (DhsA 317,31); Miln 42,15. (Neut) Tha 1034; J 1:296,6, 3:475,15. Sv CPD & DP.

⁵ M 3:298,17-19; Tha 321, 501, 1026; J 4:138,24 (cf 137,16), 192,11*, 206,10*, 5:199,25.

⁶ M 2:202,1 *brāhmaṇo ... andha,kārā acakkhukā*; D 1:191,1 ≈ U 67,34 *paribbājakā ~ā acakkhukā*; Tha 316 (= *kāma,-rāgena ~o*, ThaA 2:136,1); Thī 394, 441 (= *kāṇo*, “one-eyed,” ThīA 271,1); A 1:128,16 = Pug 30,26 (*puggalo*; + *eka,cakkhu dvi,cakkhu*, “one-eyed, two-eyed”). Sv CPD + DP.

⁷ D 14,1.17+1.18/2:12 (SD 49.8a); M 123,7/3:120,9 (SD 52.2); A 4.127,2/2:130,26-27 (SD 52.2a).

⁸ DA 2:433,11-26 = MA 4:177,13-178,4 = AA 3:126,14-127,6.

⁹ Dhs §638 = §722 = Vbh 84,3; interpolated in M 1:423,6. On *agha*, cf Mvst index & R Morris, JPTS 3, 1889: 200. See CPD ²agha.

¹⁰ Vl *abhāya*.

¹¹ DA 2:433,11-26 = MA 4:177,13-178,4 = AA 3:126,14-127,6.

1.2.2.3 The ancient teachers must have seen this or envisioned its existence through their meditative powers—they clearly appear to be what we today know as “black holes.” Of the monks, **Anuruddha** is declared by the Buddha to be the foremost with the divine eye (*etad-aggam dubba,cakkhukānam*).¹² Such a power, the result of Anuruddha’s deep meditation, enables him to see objects at great distances, including distant world-systems and other realms of existence, and to see how beings die and rearise according to their karma.¹³ He has a power that surpasses the best telescopes today for seeing distant places!

1.2.3 Intergalactic hell

1.2.3.1 Amongst every triad of world-systems, there is a space measuring 8,000 yojanas (56,000 mi = 90,123 km) across. It is like the space amongst 3 cart-wheels or almsbowls touching one another. Beings are reborn in this “**great interworld hell**” (*lok’antarika mahā,niraya*)—a kind of phantom zone—as a result of some really bad karma. The hell-beings there look like huge bats, three-quarters yojana high,¹⁴ long-clawed, clinging onto the edges of rock-faces (*pabbata,pāde ... laggitvā*).¹⁵

1.2.3.2 What **karma** have those beings done to be reborn therein? They have committed serious and violent misdeeds against their parents and against righteous recluses and brahmins, and through other terrible crimes, like killing living beings day after day—such as the bandit Abhaya and the bandit Nāga in on the island of Tamba,paṇṇī (Sri Lanka).¹⁶

As bats hang in trees, these beings hang by their fingernails on the foot of the world-system mountain (*cakka,vāḷa,pabbata,pāde*).¹⁷ When creeping along, they stay in arm’s length of one another. Then, thinking, ‘We have found food!’ they scurry about, roll over, and fall into the water that supports the world. They are just like honey-fruits (*madhuka,phala*) which, when struck by the wind, break off and fall into the water. As soon as they have fallen therein, they dissolve like a lump of flour in very caustic liquid.¹⁸

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Andha,kāra Sutta

The Discourse on the Blinding Dark

S 56.46

A blinding dark

1 “There is, bhikshus, a groundless abysmal dark, a **blinding darkness of the spaces amongst the worlds** [an intergalactic dark],¹⁹ where even the lights of the moon and the sun, so mighty as they are, cannot prevail.²⁰”

¹² A 1.192/1:23.

¹³ See eg **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,95), SD 8.10. See also SD 27.5a (5.5 + 5.3.2.2).

¹⁴ 3-*gāvuta* = 5.25 mi = 8.45 km. 4 *gāvuta* = 1 *yojana* = 11.25 km or 7 mi.

¹⁵ Excerpts from: DA 2:433,27-434,12 = MA 4:178,5-26 = AA 3:127,7-128,3; VbhA 4,14-31.

¹⁶ Cf DA 2:433,32.

¹⁷ Omitted from VbhA.

¹⁸ DA 2:433,27-434,12 = MA 4:178,5-26 = AA 3:127,7-128,3; VbhA 4,14-31.

¹⁹ On its parallel in **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14,1.18) & **Acchariya,abbhuta S 1** (A 4.127,2), SD 52.2a. Cf **Mahā,vastu** (Mvst 1:35; Mvst:J 1:35).

2 When this was said, a certain monk said to the Blessed One:

“Great indeed, bhante, is that blinding dark! So great indeed, bhante, is that blinding dark!”²¹

3 But, bhante, is there any other blinding dark that is a blindingly darker and more dreadful one?”²²

4 “There is, indeed, bhikshu, a blinding dark that is a blindingly darker and a more dreadful one.”

“But what, bhante, is that blinding dark that is a blindingly darker and a more dreadful one?”

A more blinding dark

5 “Those recluses and brahmins, bhikshu, who
do not understand: “This is **suffering**” according to true reality;
do not understand: “This is **the arising of suffering**” according to true reality;
do not understand: “This is **[455] the ending of suffering**” according to true reality;
do not understand: “This is **the path leading to the ending of suffering**” according to true reality—

6 they **delight** in karma-formations that bring about birth;
they delight in karma-formations that bring about decay;
they delight in karma-formations that bring about death;
they delight in karma-formations that bring about sorrow, lamentation, physical suffering, mental suffering and despair.

7 **Delighting** in karma-formations that bring about birth;
delighting in karma-formations that bring about decay;
delighting in karma-formations that bring about death;
delighting in karma-formations that bring about sorrow, lamentation, physical suffering, mental suffering and despair—

8 they **generate** karma-formation that bring about birth;
they generate karma-formations that bring about decay;
they generate karma-formations that bring about death;
they generate karma-formations that bring about sorrow, lamentation, physical suffering, mental suffering and despair.

9 **Having generated karma-formations** that bring about birth, they fall [over the precipice of karma] into the blinding dark that is birth;²³
having generated karma-formations that bring about decay, they fall into the blinding dark that is decay;
having generated karma-formations that bring about death; they fall into the blinding dark that is death;
having generated karma-formations that bring about sorrow, lamentation, physical suffering, mental suffering and despair, they fall into the blinding dark that is sorrow, lamentation, physical suffering, mental suffering and despair.

²⁰ Atthi bhikkhave lok’antarikā aghā asaṃvutā andha,kārā andha,kāra,timisā,yattham imesaṃ candima,sūriyānaṃ evaṃ mah’iddhikānaṃ evaṃ mahā’nubhāvānaṃ ābhāya nānubhontīti. Be yattham imesaṃ; Ce yatthā’p’imesaṃ; Ee Se yattha’p’imesaṃ. Be Se ābhāya; Ce Ee ābhā. Recurs at D 14,1.18.2/2:12,11 (SD 49.8a) = M 123,7.3/3:120,9 (SD 52.2) = S 56.46/5:454,17 (53.2) = A 4.127/2:130,26 (SD 52.2a). See (1.2.2).

²¹ Mahā vata so bhante andha,kāro, sumahā vata so bhante andha,kāro.

²² Atthi nu kho bhante etamhā andha,kārā añño andha,kāro mah’antataro ca bhayānaka,taro cāti.

²³ This line and the rest: jāt’andhakāram pi (jar’andhakāram pi | maraṇ’andhakāram pi | soka,pari.deva,dukkha,domanass’upāyās’andhakāram pi) papatanti. Cf “The fall over the precipice of birth ... etc.” (jāti,papātam pi papatanti, jarā,papatam pi papatanti, maraṇa,papātam pi papatanti, soka,parideva,dukkha,domanass’upāyāsa,papātam pi papatanti) in **Papāṭa** S (S 56.42), SD 53.15. The vb papatanti is 3 pl of papatati = pa (directional, “down”) + patati (to fall, jump, fall down on; to alight). There is here a subtle play on papāṭa, “cliff, precipice,” ie, falling off a precipice. Alt tr: “... they fall [over the precipice of karma] into the blinding dark that is birth ... etc.”

10 They are not freed from *birth*, from *decay*, from *death*, from *sorrow*, *lamentation*, *physical suffering*, *mental suffering and despair*, I say!

Freedom from the blinding dark

11 But those recluses and brahmins, bhikshu, who
 understand: “This is **suffering**” according to true reality;
 understand: “This is **the arising of suffering**” according to true reality;
 understand: “This is **[455] the ending of suffering**” according to true reality;
 understand: “This is **the path leading to the ending of suffering**” according to true reality—

12 they **do not delight** in karma-formations that bring about birth;
 they do not delight in karma-formations that bring about decay;
 they do not delight in karma-formations that bring about death;
 they do not delight in karma-formations that bring about sorrow, lamentation, physical suffering, mental suffering and despair.

13 **Not delighting** in karma-formations that bring about birth,²⁴
 not delighting in karma-formations that bring about decay;
 not delighting in karma-formations that bring about death;
 not delighting in karma-formations that bring about sorrow, lamentation, physical suffering, mental suffering and despair--

14 they **do not generate** karma-formations that bring about birth;
 they do not generate karma-formations that bring about decay;
 they do not generate karma-formations that bring about death;
 they do not generate karma-formations that bring about sorrow, lamentation, physical suffering, mental suffering and despair.

15 **Not generated karma-formations** that bring about birth, they fall not into the blinding dark that is birth;
 not generating karma-formations that bring about decay, they fall not into the blinding dark that is decay;
 not generating karma-formations that bring about death; they fall not into the blinding dark that is death;
 not generating karma-formations that bring about sorrow, lamentation, physical suffering, mental suffering and despair, they fall not into the blinding dark that is sorrow, lamentation, physical suffering, mental suffering and despair.

16 They are freed from *birth*, from *decay*, from *death*, from *sorrow*, *lamentation*, *physical suffering*, *mental suffering and despair*, I say!

17 Therefore, bhikshus,
 you should devote yourself thus: ‘This is **suffering**’;
 you should devote yourself thus: ‘This is **the arising** of suffering’;
 you should devote yourself thus: ‘This is **the ending** of suffering’;
 you should devote yourself thus: ‘This is **the path** leading to the ending of suffering’.”

— evaṃ —

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²⁴ This whole para with ... *saṅkhāre abhisāṅkharonti* ... recur in **Papāta S** (S 56.42/5:449,23-27), SD 53.15.