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Pariḷāha Sutta

The Discourse on the Burning | S 56.43

Be **Mahā,pariḷāha Sutta** The Discourse on the Great Burning

Theme: Ignorance of the noble truths is worse than the great hell-fire

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1 Sutta summary and highlights

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

1.1.1 The Pariḷāha Sutta (S 56.43) states that our ignorance of the 4 noble truths is greater (more perilous) than the hell-fire known as “the great burning” (*mahā,pariḷāha*), where whatever we sense or think are painful [§§1-2]. Without penetrating the 4 noble truths, we will not be fully liberated [§§3-9]. Only with penetrating the 4 truths are we fully awakened [§§10-15]. Hence, we should constantly reflect on the 4 noble truths [§16].

1.1.2 The Pariḷāha Sutta—and the **Papāṭa Sutta** (S 56.42), SD 53.15—are “mirrored suttas.”¹ The Pariḷāha Sutta’s first half describes how one who has not penetrated the 4 noble truths is *not* fully awakened [§§3-9], while the latter half is on how one who having penetrated the 4 noble truths is **fully awakened** [§§10-15]. The Sutta closes with an exhortation by the Buddha to reflect on the 4 noble truths [§16].

1.2 SUTTA STRUCTURE

1.2.1 The Pariḷāha Sutta (S 56.43) opens with the Buddha speaking to the monks on “a hell name ‘the great burning’ (*mahā pariḷāha*)” where whatever is sensed by the physical senses or thought are “only undesirable ... only unpleasant ... only disagreeable ... ” [§2]. A certain monk asks whether there is anything bigger and more fearsome than this “great burning.” [§3]

The Buddha replies that there is, that is, our ignorance of the 4 noble truths, which prevents us from freedom from suffering, from full awakening [§4]. In the rest of the Sutta, the Buddha instructs the monks present on the significance of his statement.

1.2.2 The Pariḷāha Sutta (S 56.43) then states that it is our **ignorance** of the 4 noble truths that keeps us in suffering [§§4-9]. This existential ignorance, this lack of full understanding, of the truths keeps us delighting in formations (*saṅkhārā*)—karmic activities through body, speech and mind—that conduce to “**birth, decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair**”—in short, suffering [§5].

This “delighting” (craving) generates more formations that conduce to suffering [§§6-9], and so we “burn in the **burning** (*pariḷāha*) that is *birth ... decay ... death ... sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair*” [§9]. Thus, we are not fully freed from suffering, declares the Buddha [§9.2].

The Sutta closes on a positive note. When we have penetrated the 4 noble truths, we no more delight in the formations that generate suffering, and so we do not burn in suffering [§§10-15]. Hence, exhorts the Buddha, we should devote ourselves to reflecting on the noble truths [§16].

¹ See SD 53.15 (1.1.2).

1.2.3 RELATED SUTTAS

1.2.3.1 The Pariḷāha Sutta (S 56.43) is related to the following suttas and should be studied with them:

Papāṭa Sutta	S 56.42	Ignorance of the 4 truths is more perilous than a great precipice	SD 53.15
Pariḷāha Sutta	S 56.43	Ignorance of the 4 truths burns more painfully than hell-fire	SD 53.16
Kūṭāgāra Sutta	S 56.44	The primacy of the 4 noble truths	SD 53.17

1.2.3.2 The Khaṇa Sutta (S 35.135) reprises the passage on the “suffering of the senses” [§2], “the hell called the 6 contact-bases” (*phass’āyatanika nāma niraya*).² Hence, both the Pariḷāha Sutta and the Khaṇa Sutta teach the same theme of how we bring “hell” upon ourself in this very being, here and now. [2]

1.2.3.2 For a more detailed analysis of the key teachings in the Papāṭa Sutta, see SD 53.15:

ignorance	SD 53.15 (3)
the 4 noble truths	SD 53.15 (4)

2 Hell

2.1 The Pariḷāha Sutta refers to a hell named “the great burning” (*mahā,pariḷāha*) [§1], and describes it as a state when all our senses and sensing bring us only pain and suffering [§2]. There is no mention here that it is a place or some spatial dimension. From the tone of the Sutta, it is clear that this refers to our own mental state—a karmic state where what we fear most, what pains us most, will overwhelm us as a private reality when the conditions are right. In this sense, all the hells are our own creation, tailor-made, private and very real.

2.2 The terribly graphic descriptions of tortures and hells as depicted in various suttas are based on the social realities of the Buddha’s days, meant to be object-lessons warning us, in the most serious tone, of the real deprivation and suffering that are the fruits of our bad karma. Clearly, these hells cannot be physical states because no human body can last even the mildest of such hellish torments. They are meant to be mythical depictions of real suffering of which we are the creators and sufferers.³

2.3 The Pātāla Sutta (S 36.4) is instructive here:

Bhikshus, when the uninstructed ordinary person makes the statement:

“In the great ocean there is **a bottomless abyss** (*pātāla*),” he makes such a statement about something that is non-existent and false.

This “bottomless abyss,” bhikshus, is only a designation (*adhivacana*) for painful bodily feelings.⁴ (S 36.4), SD 2.25.

² S 35.135/4:126 (SD 53.24).

³ See SD 2.23 (3); SD 89.10 (1); SD 53.16 (2). For a list of “hell” suttas, see SD 2.22 (1.1).

⁴ *Sārīrikānaṃ kho etaṃ bhikkhave dukkhānaṃ vedanānaṃ adhvācānaṃ yad idaṃ pātālo’ti*. Cf **Ajjuna Tha** (Tha 88bc) & **Deva,sabha Tha** (Tha 89b) for similar figures. See also **Tāla,puṭa Tha** (Tha 1104) & SD 20.9 II:1104 & SD 10.9 (8.4.3).

When “an untutored ordinary person” suffers pain, he grieves and is confused—he is caught in such an “abyss.” But “a tutored noble disciple,” when touched by pain neither grieves nor is confused—he has gained “solid ground.”⁵

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Pariḷāha Sutta

The Discourse on the Burning

S 56.43

1 “There is, bhikshus, a hell named ‘**the great burning**’ (*mahā,parilāha*).

THE SUFFERING OF THE SENSES

2 Therein,⁶

- (1) whatever **form** one *sees* with the eye is only undesirable, [451] not desirable [not wished for].⁷
One *sees* only unpleasant *forms*, not pleasant ones.⁸
One *sees* only disagreeable *forms*, not agreeable ones.⁹
- (2) Whatever **sound** one *hears* with the ear is only undesirable, not desirable.
One *hears* only unpleasant *sounds*, not pleasant ones.
One *hears* only disagreeable *sounds*, not agreeable ones.
- (3) Whatever **smell** one *smells* with the nose is only undesirable, not desirable.
One *smells* only unpleasant *smells*, not pleasant ones.
One *smells* only disagreeable *smells*, not agreeable ones.
- (4) Whatever **taste** one *tastes* with the tongue is only undesirable, not desirable.
One *tastes* only unpleasant *tastes*, not pleasant ones.
One *tastes* only disagreeable *tastes*, not agreeable ones.
- (5) Whatever **touch** one *touches* with the body is only undesirable, not desirable.¹⁰
One *feels* only unpleasant *touches*, not pleasant ones.
One *feels* only disagreeable *touches*, not agreeable ones.
- (6) Whatever **thought** [mind-object] one *knows* with the mind is only undesirable, not desirable.
One *knows* only unpleasant *thoughts*, not pleasant ones.
One *knows* only disagreeable *thoughts*, not agreeable ones.”

3 When this was said, a certain monk asked the Blessed One:¹¹

“Great indeed, bhante, is that burning! Terribly great indeed, bhante, is that burning!

Is there, bhante, any other burning that is greater and more fearsome than that burning?¹²

But what, bhante, is this *other burning that is greater and more fearsome than that burning*?¹³”

⁵ S 36.4/4:206 f (SD 2.25).

⁶ The foll passage recurs in **Khaṇa S** (S 35.135,2), which incl a positive counterpart in a heaven, called “the 6 contact-bases” (*cha,phass’āyatānika nāma saggā*), SD 53.24 (2.1). [1.2.3.2]

⁷ *Tattha yaṃ kiñci cakkhunā rūpaṃ passati, aniṭṭha,rūpaṃ yeva passati, no iṭṭha,rūpaṃ.*

⁸ *Akanta,rūpaṃyeva passati, no kanta,rūpaṃ.*

⁹ *Amanāpa,rūpaṃ yeva passati, no manāpa,rūpaṃ.*

¹⁰ *Yaṃ kiñci kāyena phoṭṭhabbarṃ phusati, aniṭṭha,phoṭṭhabbarṃ yeva phusati, no iṭṭha,phoṭṭhabbarṃ.*

¹¹ *Evam vutte aññataro bhikkhu bhagavantam etad avoca*, lit: “When this was said, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One.”

¹² This question parallels that about the “great precipice” (*mahā,papāṭa*) at **Papāṭa S** (S 56.42,5), SD 53.15.

Those who are *not* fully freed

- 4 “Those recluses or brahmins, bhikshus,
 (1) who do not understand,¹⁴ as it really is, **this is suffering;**¹⁵
 (2) who do not understand, as it really is, **this is the arising of suffering;**
 (3) who do not understand, as it really is, **this is the ending of suffering;**
 (4) who do not understand, as it really is, **this is the path leading to the ending of suffering—**

5 thus
 delight in formations that conduce to **birth;**
delight in formations that conduce to **decay;**
delight in formations that conduce to **death;**
delight in formations that conduce to **sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair.**

6 They,
 delighting in formations that conduce to birth,
delighting in formations that conduce to decay,
delighting in formations that conduce to death,
delighting in formations that conduce to sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair,

7 thus
 give rise to formations that conduce to birth,
give rise to formations that conduce to decay,
give rise to formations that conduce to death,
give rise to formations that conduce to sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair.

8 They,
 having created formations that conduce to birth,
having created formations that conduce to decay,
having created formations that conduce to death,
having created formations that conduce to sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair;

9 thus,
 burn in **the burning** that is birth,¹⁶
burn in the burning that is decay;
burn in the burning that is death;
burn in the burning that is sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair.

9.2 They are not fully freed from birth, from decay, from death, from sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair.¹⁷ They are **not fully freed from suffering**, I say! [§15.2]

Those who *are* fully freed

- 10 “Those recluses or brahmins, bhikshus,
 (1) who understand, as it really is, **this is suffering;**
 (2) *who understand, as it really is*, **this is the arising of suffering;**

¹³ *Katamo pana bhante, etamhā pariḷāhā añño pariḷāho Mahanta, taro ca bhayānaka, taro cāti?*

¹⁴ “Do not understand” (*na-p, pajānanti*): see SD 53.15 (4.2.1).

¹⁵ *Ye hi keci bhikkhu samaṇā vā brāhmaṇā vā idam dukkhan’ti yathā, bhūtaṃ na-p, pajānanti.*

¹⁶ *Jāti, pariḷāhena’pi pariḍayhanti.*

¹⁷ *Te na parimuccanti jātiyā jarāya maraṇena sokehi paridevehi dukkhehi domanassehi upāyāsehi.*

- (3) *who understand, as it really is,* **this is the ending of suffering;**
 (4) *who understand, as it really is,* **this is the path leading to the ending of suffering—**

11 thus

delight <u>not</u> in formations that conduce to	birth;
<i>delight <u>not</u> in formations that conduce to</i>	decay;
<i>delight <u>not</u> in formations that conduce to</i>	death;
<i>delight <u>not</u> in formations that conduce to</i>	sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair.

12 They,

Delighting <u>not</u> in formations	that conduce to <u>birth</u> ,
<i>delighting <u>not</u> in formations</i>	that conduce to <u>decay</u> ,
<i>delighting <u>not</u> in formations</i>	that conduce to <u>death</u> ,
<i>delighting <u>not</u> in formations</i>	that conduce to <u>sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair</u> ,

13 thus

give rise to <u>no</u> formations	that conduce to <u>birth</u> ,
<i>give rise to <u>no</u> formations</i>	that conduce to <u>decay</u> ,
<i>give rise to <u>no</u> formations</i>	that conduce to <u>death</u> ,
<i>give rise to <u>no</u> formations</i>	that conduce to <u>sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair</u> .

14 They,

having created <u>no</u> formations	that conduce to <u>birth</u> ,
<i>having created <u>no</u> formations</i>	that conduce to <u>decay</u> ,
<i>having created <u>no</u> formations</i>	that conduce to <u>death</u> ,
<i>having created <u>no</u> formations</i>	that conduce to <u>sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair</u> ;

15 thus,

burn <u>not</u> in the burning	that is <u>birth</u> ; ¹⁸
<i>burn <u>not</u> in the burning</i>	that is <u>decay</u> ;
<i>burn <u>not</u> in the burning</i>	that is <u>death</u> ;
<i>burn <u>not</u> in the burning</i>	that is <u>sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair</u> .

15.2 They are fully freed from birth, from decay, from death, from sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair. They are **fully freed from suffering**, I say! [§9.2]

EXHORTATION

16 Therefore, bhikshus,

you should devote yourself (to reflecting) thus:	'This is suffering.'
<i>You should devote yourself (to reflecting) thus:</i>	'This is the arising of suffering.'
<i>You should devote yourself (to reflecting) thus:</i>	'This is the ending of suffering.'
<i>You should devote yourself (to reflecting) thus:</i>	'This is the path leading to the ending of suffering.'

— evaṃ —

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¹⁸ *Jāti, pariāhena'pi pariḍayhanti.*