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Paṭhama Tathā Sutta

The 1ST Such Discourse | S 56.20

Theme: On the certainty of the 4 noble truths

Translated by Piya Tan ©2018

1 Sutta significance

1.1 The Paṭhama Tathā Sutta, “the 1st Such Discourse,” is about the certainty of the 4 noble truths. These are natural truths of life and existence since they are not dependent on the Buddha who merely discovers and declares them to the world—such as stated in **the Pavāraṇā Sutta** (S 8.7).¹

1.2 KEY TEACHINGS

1.2.1 The 4 noble truths are said to be “**such, certain, not otherwise**” (*tathā avitathā anaññathā*) or, alternately, “real, not unreal, invariable” [2]. In more ordinary terms, we can describe them as being factual, true and timeless, discovered only by buddhas who are liberated by that discovery, and who clearly define them for our benefit to this day. [2]

1.2.2 The Commentary explains them as follows: **Tathā** means “not abandoning their true nature”; **avitathā** means suffering is spoken of as being just suffering, not empty of true nature (*sabhāva*), and suffering is not called non-suffering; **anaññathā** means that it does not change to a different nature. For, “suffering” does not turn into the nature of “arising,” and so on. The same applies to the other truths.² [2]

1.3 The whole Sutta is quoted in the commentary to **the Mūla,pariyāya Sutta** (M 1; MA 1:49,13-19), and alluded to in **the Visuddhi,magga** (Vism 16.15/494).

2 The Sutta’s key terms

2.0 The (Jāti) Paccaya Sutta (S 12.20), SD 39.5, applies the same 3 terms—“such [2.1], certain [2.2], not otherwise [2.3]” (*tathā avitathā anaññathā*)—to **dependent arising** (*paṭicca,samuppāda*), which is a “vertical” application of the 4 noble truths. These truths themselves are a “horizontal” examination of life and existence, a kind of existential cross-section of true reality. Dependent arising is a “vertical” existential model in the sense that it shows how suffering arises, while dependent ending shows how it can be ended.

2.1 “SUCHNESS” (*tathatā*)

2.1.1 In **the (Jāti) Paccaya Sutta** (S 12.10), SD 39.5, the first sequence—that of dependent arising—closes with the statement: “Thus, bhikshus, is the **suchness** (*tathatā*) therein, the certainty, the invariability, the causal conditionality”³ (S 12.10,5). The Majjhima Commentary explains that “suchness,” etc, is just a

¹ S 8.7 (SD 49.11).

² *Sabhāvāvijāhan’atṭhena tatham̐. Dukkhañ hi dukkham eva vuttam̐ sabhāvassa amoghatāya avitatham̐. Na hi dukkham̐ adukkham̐ nāma hoti. Añña,bhāvānupagamena anaññatham̐. Na hi dukkham̐ samuday’ādi,bhāvaṃ upagacchati; samuday’ādīsu’pi es’eva nayo’ti.* (SA 3:298,29-32).

³ *Iti kho bhikkhave yā tatra tathatā avitathatā anaññathatā idap,paccayatā.*

name for the complete cycle of conditions (*paccay'ākāra*) right from the start of this or that condition so that this or that phenomenon arises; this is suchness.⁴

Paraphrased, it reads: “Such it is here, its not being false, its not becoming something other, its conditions acting as causes.” Only in this context, I think, *idap,paccayatā* should be rendered as “causal conditionality,” that is, as a synonym of *paticca,samuppāda*. Where the former refers to the working of *the individual links*—which is more common—it is best translated as “specific conditionality.”⁵

2.1.2 The 4 noble truths are “such” in the sense that they are certain and invariable, and occur by way of specific conditionality or “causal conditionality,” as a network of causes and effects which in turn become causes creating new effects, and so on. What arises from conditions will end when those conditions are removed or end. Hence, suffering can be ended when we understand the real conditions from which it arises.

2.2 “CERTAINTY” (*avitathatā*)

2.2.1 “Certainty” means that once the conditions are complete, there is no non-occurrence, even for a moment, of the phenomenon that these conditions are capable of.⁶ Technically, this is a rule of necessity, that is, when all the conditions are rightly together, the emergent event must occur. Conversely, this means that if any condition is missing, then there would be no resultant phenomenon or event.⁷

2.2.2 As long as there is life, the 4 noble truths apply. There is no non-occurrence of the first 2 truths—suffering and its arising—which constitute **the meaning of life**. However, the last 2 truths—the ending of suffering and the path to its ending—do not arise in themselves. We have to wisely initiate them. In this sense, they constitute our **purpose of life**: to grow out of suffering and be liberated. This occurs when we understand the nature of conditionality and remove those that bring about the arising of suffering.

2.3 “INVARIABILITY” (*anaññathatā*)

2.3.1 “Invariability” or “not-otherwise-ness” means that there is no occurrence of any phenomenon by some other conditions other than its own.⁸ This rule is a corollary to the previous one [2.2.1], which essentially states that when all the right conditions are present, it *necessarily* produces a certain result. The “invariability” rule means that none of these conditions by *itself* or by some *other* condition can produce a certain phenomenon. That is to say, *no* condition, in itself or by any other than the proper ones in concert, is *sufficient* to produce a result.

⁴ *Tathatā'ti,ādāni paccay'ākārass'eva vevacanāni. So tehi tehi paccayehi anūn'ādhikeh'eva tassa tassa dhammasa sambhavato tathatā'ti* (SA 2:41). By Asoka's time (r 268-232 BCE), and the writing of **Kathā,vatthu**, certain Buddhists or groups had already conceived “suchness” (*tathatā*) as some kind of essence or abiding entity, so as to engender a criticism and rebuttal by Moggalī,putta Tissa: Kvu 19.5/583-585. On a Mahāyāna conception of suchness, see SD 26.11 (7.2).

⁵ See **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16 (6) & **Tathā S 1** (S 56.20) + SD 53.33a (1.3).

⁶ *Sāmaggiṃ upagatesu paccayesu muhuttam pi tato nibbattānaṃ dhammānaṃ asambhavā,bhāvato avitathatāti* (SA 2:41),

⁷ See **Necessity and sufficiency**, SD 35.1.

⁸ *Añña,dhamma,paccayehi añña,dhammānuppattito anaññathatāti* (SA 2:41),

2.3.2 The 3 kinds of suffering

2.3.2.1 The nature of invariability is not at once evident in **the 3 kinds of suffering**: the physical, the emotional and the existential (or spiritual). We have been able to devise many ways and means of overcoming physical pain (including disease, but not mental issues). More often, we are troubled by emotional issues of some kind. Both physical suffering and emotional suffering can somehow be managed or even healed and avoided.

2.3.2.2 It is the 3rd kind of suffering—the existential, that is, the nature of **the 5 aggregates**—that is pervasive throughout our lives as unawakened beings. The 5 aggregates comprise form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. **Form** (*rūpa*) is our body as the 4 elements and the 5 physical senses. The 4 elements—earth, water, fire and wind—are respectively the solid, fluid, decay and mobile aspects of our beings. We need to constantly keep them in harmony, and this is not always easy or even possible.

2.3.2.3 The 5 physical senses are our “world” in the sense that we are what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch. These senses are thus our only sources of knowledge of the external world; but we are not the external world. Our mind (which is an aspect of **consciousness**, *viññāṇa*) forms its own versions, mostly distortions of these sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches, and measuring them by our mental scale of degrees of pleasantness or unpleasantness.

2.3.2.4 Such **formations** (*saṅkhārā*) become us, goading us on to run after what we perceive as pleasant, rejecting what we perceive as unpleasant, and being bored by what is neither. Such **perception** (*saññā*) encapsulates us in a shell of ideas and views, from which very few of us ever outgrow. Indeed, we spend our lives hardening and enlarging this shell like a bipedal mollusk drowned in an ocean of **feelings** (*vedanā*). This is the kind of suffering that is pervasive in our lives but rarely perceptible because our attention is, as a rule, preoccupied elsewhere in the 5 aggregates. This is the suffering that is the 5 aggregates.

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Paṭhama Tathā Sutta

The First Such Discourse

S 56.20

1 Bhikshus, there are these 4 that are **such, certain [inerrant], not otherwise [invariable]**.⁹

What are the four?

- (1) “This is suffering”—this, bhikshus, is such, certain, not otherwise.
- (2) “This is the arising of suffering”—this, bhikshus, is such, certain, not otherwise.
- (3) “This is the ending of suffering”—this, bhikshus, is such, certain, not otherwise. [431]
- (4) “This is the path leading to the ending of suffering”—this, bhikshus, is such, certain, not otherwise.

⁹ *Cattār'imāni bhikkhave tathāni avitathāni anaññathāni. Tathāni avitathāni anññathāni. See (Jāti) Paccaya S (S 12.20/2:26), SD 39.5. See (2).*

2 Therefore, bhikshus,
You should devote yourself (to the reflection):¹⁰ “This is suffering.”
You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the arising of suffering.”
You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the ending of suffering.”
You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the path leading to the ending of suffering.”

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¹⁰ *Idaṃ dukkhan'ti yogo karaṇīyo.*