

2

Mātā Sutta

or **Mātu Sutta** The Discourse on Mothers | S 15.14

Theme: Rebirth—We have been mothers to others before

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2020

1 Summary and sutta titles

1.1 THE ANAMATAGGA SAṂYUTTA

1.1.0 Sutta summary and significance

1.1.0.1 The Mātā Sutta (S 15.14), the discourse on mothers, is a short reflection on the endlessness and cyclic repetitiveness of sentient life, samsara. We have existed for so long that we have been, at some point in our past lives, a mother to all those beings we know today: members of our family, our relatives and friends, people we know and meet, even other non-human sentient beings.

1.1.0.2 This teaching is a hyperbolic metaphor to highlight the nature of samsara—how we have lived before in countless lives, playing different roles: we have our exits and our entrances, and one person in his time plays many parts.¹ In other words, our roles and their conditions change in each of our past lives and in the present one (**impermanence**); we must also bear the uncertainties and vicissitudes on account of those roles, interacting with the people, and suffering their losses (**unsatisfactoriness**); yet, in the end we cannot really say *which* role is the real *us*. We are but evolving roles without any real or fixed personality (**non-self**).

1.1.0.3 The 6 suttas in this related series—on our roles as mother, as father, as brother, as sister, as son and as daughter to others [1.2.1]—are examples of **person-based teachings** (*puggalādhiṭṭhāna desanā*). These are teachings using “conventional” (*sammutti*) language, whose meaning is *implicit* and thus needs “to be drawn out” (*neyy’attha*).

In terms of **truth-based teachings** (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna desanā*), they are instructions in the 3 universal characteristics of *impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self* [1.2.2], which reflect the true reality of samsara in “ultimate” (*param’attha*) language, whose teaching is *explicit*, that is, “has been drawn out” (*nīṭ’attha*).²

1.1.1 Chapter summary

1.1.1.1 The Anamatagga Saṁyutta, the collected teachings on “the undiscernible beginning,” is so called because its theme is the unlimited duration of the cycle of rebirths and redeaths or samsara (*sam-sāra*). The original or precise meaning of **anamataḅga** is forgotten. It is used in somewhat differing senses in the texts of the early Buddhist schools.³

¹ A paraphrase from the “All the world’s a stage” monologue by Jacques in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* (Act 2, Scene 7, line 139 ff: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_the_world%27s_a_stage).

² On teachings that are person-based (*puggalādhiṭṭhāna*) and truth-based (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna*), see SD 36.1 (1.11.-2); SD 47.20 (1.2.3). On the 2 kinds of teachings, implicit (*neyy’attha*) and explicit (*nīṭ’attha*), see **Neyy’attha Nīṭ’attha S** (A 2.3.5+6) SD 2.6b; SD 47.20 (1.3); SD 89.10 (1). On the 2 kinds of languages, conventional (*sammutti*) and ultimate (*param’attha*), see **Anaṅgana S** (M 5,2) n on “persons,” SD 37.7; SD 2.17 (1.1.2); SD 38.3 (5.7.2.2).

³ On the 18 early schools, see E J Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, 1933:37-41; A K Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, 1970:288-351 (ch 9). For a full list of the 18 schools, see Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, 2014:1091 f.

1.1.1.2 From its contexts in the suttas of the Anamatagga Saṃyutta—such as **the Tiṇa,kaṭṭha Sutta** (S 15.1) and also here in **the Mātā Sutta** (S 15.14)—its sense is quite clear. A first point of the rounds of rebirths cannot be discerned. In fact, the purpose of this *Samyutta* is to present the Buddha’s soteriology (teaching of liberation) against its cosmic background by highlighting the immeasurable reality of suffering we have experienced, are experiencing and will experience from life to life in endlessly cyclic time, “fettered by ignorance, obscured by craving” [§2.2].

1.1.1.3 The suttas of **the Anamatagga Saṃyutta**—using an interesting range of metaphors—either depict the incalculable duration of an aeon (*kappa*), or the immeasurable amount and variety of suffering we have gone through (and will go through). The repetitiveness of such suffering should rightly compel us to be *disgusted* (*nibbindati*) with samsara, and to strive for freedom from it. This is, in fact, the enduring theme of **S 15.14** and of this whole Saṃyutta.

1.1.2 Chapter contents

1.1.2.1 Using memorable metaphors, the first 8 suttas (**S 15.1-8**) demonstrate the immeasurable duration of an aeon (*kappa*), as if invoking some theory of probability. **The (Anamatagga) Daṇḍa Sutta** (S 15.9) uses *the parable of a stick thrown into the air* that will surely fall, hitting the ground on its top, side or bottom; even so, we are repetitively born and reborn into some other worlds or back into this world, evoking the unthinkable vastness and cyclic nature of space-time reality of sentient life.

The (Anamatagga) Puggala Sutta (S 15.10) makes us envision *a colossal mountain of bones* that each of us leave behind when we die (only to be reborn) in a single aeon, going through both happiness (**S 15.11**) and sorrow (**S 15.12**). This last sutta (S 15.10) of the Saṃyutta’s 1st subchapter—**Paṭhama Vagga**—closes with some verse.

The Tiṃsa,matta Sutta (S 15.13) dramatically relates how some 30 monks from Pāvā, even as they listen to the Buddha speaking of the terrible dangers of samsara, were able to realize arhathood on the spot! Then, follows a series of 6 suttas, showing how in this “long journeying” (*dīghena addhuna*), we have been *mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters* to one another [**S 15-14-19**—all these have been translated here as **SD 57.2-7** respectively.

The very last text of the Saṃyutta, **the Vepulla Pabbata Sutta** (S 15.20) is a recollection on the conditions of the times of the 3 past buddhas just before our Buddha Gotama (that is, our own time), that is, the buddhas Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana and Kassapa.⁴ The Sutta uses the similes of the time that people took to climb Mount Vepulla (called differently during each buddha’s time) that was gradually sinking over time. The people in the times of the 3 buddhas had relatively longer lifespans (of thousands of years) compared to our lifespan of 100 years or so at best. We are reminded of the shortness of life and the urgency to turning to the path of awakening. This Sutta (S 15.20) closes the whole Saṃyutta with the 2nd subchapter, **Dutiya Vagga**, and, like S 15.10, has verses.

1.1.2.2 Here is a summary list of the suttas of the Anamatagga Saṃyutta (listed under the traditional references, the PTS references, the titles, and the sutta themes respectively):⁵

⁴ These 3 buddhas belong to this world-cycle which has a total of 5 buddhas: Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana, Kassapa, our Buddha Gotama, and the future buddha Metteyya: SD 52.1 (9.1.1.2).

⁵ Note that to distinguish these titles that are also found elsewhere in the Pali canon, each of them will be prefixed with **(Anamatagga)**, their Saṃyutta chapter name, eg, **(Anamatagga) Puggala Sutta** (S 15.10), SD 57.19.

S 2.4.1 Pathama Vagga (the 1st subchapter)

S 2.4.1.1	S 15.1/2:178	Tiṇa,kaṭṭha Sutta	grass and wood	
S 2.4.1.2	S 15.2/2:179	Paṭhavī Sutta	the earth	
S 2.4.1.3	S 15.3/2:179 f	Assu Sutta	tears	SD 10.6(3.1), SD 16.13(3)
S 2.4.1.4	S 15.4/2:180 f	Khīra Sutta	mother's milk	
S 2.4.1.5	S 15.5/2:181 f	Pabbata Sutta	the mountain	SD 2.19(9.2.1.1)*
S 2.4.1.6	S 15.6/2:182	Sāsapa Sutta	the mustard seed	SD 49.8(15.2)
S 2.4.1.7	S 15.7/2:182 f	Sāvaka Sutta	disciples	SD 2.19(9.2.2.2)*
S 2.4.1.8	S 15.8/2:183 f	Gaṅgā Sutta 1	the river Ganges	SD 2.19(9.2.2.3)
S 2.4.1.9	S 15.9 /2:184 f	Daṇḍa Sutta	the stick	= Daṇḍa S 2 (S 56.3)
S 2.4.1.10	S 15.10/2:185 f	Puggala Sutta	person	

S 2.4.2 Dutiya Vagga (the 2nd subchapter)

S 2.4.1.11	S 15.11/2:186	Duggata Sutta	the unhappy	
S 2.4.1.12	S 15.12/2:186 f	Sukhita Sutta	the happy	
S 2.4.1.13	S 15.13/2:187-189	Tiṃsa,matta Sutta	the 30 (monks)	SD 48.3
S 2.4.1.14	S 15.14/2:189	Mātā Sutta	mothers	SD 57.2
S 2.4.1.15	S 15.15/2:189	Pitā Sutta	fathers	SD 57.3
S 2.4.1.16	S 15.16/2:189	Bhātā Sutta	brothers	SD 57.4
S 2.4.1.17	S 15.17/2:189	Bhaginī Sutta	sisters	SD 57.5
S 2.4.1.18	S 15.18/2:190	Putta Sutta	sons	SD 57.6
S 2.4.1.19	S 15.19/2:190	Dhītā Sutta	daughters	SD 57.7
S 2.4.1.20	S 15.20/2:190-193	Vepulla Pabbata S	Mount Vepulla	SD 49.7

[A title with an asterisk * denotes only a summary.]

1.2 THE REBIRTH SUTTAS**1.2.1 Humanity is one family**

1.2.1.1 The 6 related suttas on *the mother, the father and so on*—**S 15.14-19** (SD 57.2-7 respectively)—can be summarized as follows:

“A beginning point of beings roaming and wandering on, fettered by ignorance, obscured by craving, cannot be discerned. It is not easy, bhikshus, to find a being who has not been **a mother ... a father ... a brother ... a sister ... a son ... a daughter** (to one another) before during this long journeying.”

These 6 persons or relationships represent the essence of a *biological family relationship*, that is, being parents, siblings and children within the same human family. To highlight the significance of each of these human relationships, it is laid out in a full sutta template of its own, giving a total of **6 suttas**, as follows:

SD 57.2	S 15.14/2:189	Mātā Sutta	we have been <u>a mother</u> to others	in past lives
SD 57.3	S 15.15/2:189	Pitā Sutta	we have been <u>a father</u> to others	in past lives
SD 57.4	S 15.16/2:189	Bhātā Sutta	we have been <u>a brother</u> to others	in past lives
SD 57.5	S 15.17/2:189	Bhaginī Sutta	we have been <u>a sister</u> to others	in past lives
SD 57.6	S 15.18/2:190	Putta Sutta	we have been <u>a son</u> to others	in past lives
SD 57.7	S 15.19/2:190	Dhītā Sutta	we have been <u>a daughter</u> to others	in past lives

1.2.1.2 Merely reading the above summary of 6 suttas only gives us an intellectual glance of such relationships without really *understanding* and *feeling* them in-depth. There are at least 4 significant points or purposes for reflecting on these 6 suttas or even just any one of them. This forms the basis for our proper Dharma practice, such as reflection on impermanence and meditation.

(1) Each of the 6 suttas is a **reflection** on lovingkindness, on how we are, literally, in the long run (*dīghena addhunā*), intimately related to other living humans as a family. We have been, and continue to be related by way of *the 6 relationships* to practically everyone else. This is a case of the whole truth of the reality of karma and rebirth. This then entails we should treat every human being with *kindness, dignity and love*, since we all have been members of the same family [S 15.14-19]. There is only *one* family: **the human family**. [S 15.1]

(2) Furthermore, each of these 6 suttas is a reflection on **impermanence**, on the unimaginable duration we have been spending together in such a close family relationship [S 15.4]. We have each played a different role connected with every other human being; hence, shared the conduct, duties and concerns of every relationship. Our roles keep changing, but there is always this on-going family connection. Whatever we *are now*, whatever we *do now*, we *were* before and *have* done before, and will repeat them in future lives. These are impermanent roles, but we keep repeating them. [S 15.12, 15.2]

(3) Uncountable are the occasions—during this “long journeying” of samsara [S 15.5-9]—have we welcome the births of others. Hence, we have related to one another in diverse ways, in happiness [S 15.12] and in pain [S 15.3, 15.11], but, for sure, we have had to endure their **deaths**, too, and our own [S 15.10]. These events keep repeating themselves in our current relatively short lifespan [S 15.20]. Now that we can see the “bigger picture,” the samsaric panorama, we should be moved to at least wonder when this painful cycle of play and replay will end.

1.2.1.3 The 4th and most remarkable significance of these 6 suttas is that our connection with others goes beyond the biological family. **Karma and rebirth**, even as doctrines to be taken on faith (as contrasted against the God-idea), inspire us with the vision and reality of the human race as a universal species, **one cosmic family**, rooted in *the value for life* (which is itself rooted in the reality of *death*).

In another significant way, this idea of the cosmic family which *keeps us in samsara* is contrasted with the Buddha’s teaching that offers us a real opportunity to join **the spiritual family**, of those related to one another through walking the path of awakening, as streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners and arhats. While we are *born and reborn* into the cosmic family, we join the spiritual family in only one way: by the gradual **renunciation** of views, craving and ignorance whether as monastics or as laity.

Meantime, as unawakened beings, we should, with our understanding of the Buddha Dharma, relate to others, all of whom have been a part of our universal family. We may even extend this family relationship to other sentient beings [S 15.13], and even to divine beings, beings in other worlds and universes [S 15.9]. Hence, an even bigger picture is that we have not only been family to every other human, but we have been family members with other living beings, too. Indeed, all **sentient life** is a single family! Hence, we can meaningfully aspire: “May all beings be well and happy!”

1.2.2 Related suttas and reflections

1.2.2.1 The reflection on the boundlessness of samsara in time and space reflect the universal and inherent realities of life, that is, those of **the 3 characteristics** of *impermanence*, *unsatisfactoriness* and *non-self* [1.1.0.3]. In this connection, these *characteristics* are reflected in numerous suttas, of which we shall quote just a couple. [Below]

1.2.2.2 REFLECTION ON IMPERMANENCE. The Pāṭibhoga Sutta (A 4.182), on the guarantor, records the Buddha as declaring, thus:

“Against 4 things, there can be no guarantor, be it a recluse, a brahmin, a deva, a Māra, a Brahmā, nor anyone in the world. What are the four?

(1) That what is subject to decay will not decay [grow old].

(2) That what is subject to disease will not be diseased [fall sick].

(3) That what is subject to death will not die.

(4) That and karma will not produce its result.” (A 4.182/2:172), SD 108.13 (abridged)

Considering the universal reality of *decay, disease and death*, the Buddha instructs king Pasenadi, in **the Pabbatūpama Sutta** (S 3.25), the parable of the mountain, to constantly reflect thus:

“Since decay and death are coming down upon me, what else is there to do but to live by Dharma, to live in peace, to do good, to make merits?” (S 3.25/1:102)

Since we are reborn repeatedly in samsara, we will certainly decay, suffer from some disease, and die. The freedom from *decay, disease and death* is to understand samsara as it really is, and with that wisdom comes true freedom.⁶ [1.2.1]

1.2.2.3 REFLECTION ON SUFFERING (UNSATISFACTORINESS THROUGH KARMA). The (Catukka) Sañcetaṇa Sutta (A 4.171), SD 51.20, gives an interesting overview of karma, how it “creates” us as persons of action who suffer the fruits of those actions. It is **karma** that propels us through this long journeying of samsara, and keeps us going on and on. Since we have a **body**, there arise in us bodily pleasure and pain; since we **speak**, there arise in us verbal pleasure and pain; since we **think**, there arise mental pleasure and pain.

These fruits of the 3 karmic doors of body, speech and mind, by way of the pleasure and the pain that we feel are created by our **karma-formations**, that is, the intention or volition behind our actions, speech and thoughts. We create such karma and its potential fruits either consciously (clearly knowing) or unconsciously (without clearly knowing) (such as out of unthinking habit).

We create karma and its fruits by **ourselves** (our own initiative) or by being motivated by **others**. In other words, the bad and the good that others do can affect and infect us, too, when we accept or allow them. Although others may have done the bad or the good karma, and we accept it, then, by our own intention, we create similar bad or good karma for ourselves. In this sense, there is “group karma.”⁷

1.2.2.4 REFLECTION ON NON-SELF. As sentient beings we are not alone, even when we live solitary lives. We have arisen and live on account of a beginningless cycle of interconnections with other humans and sentient beings. In an important sense, we are born of this cosmic **crowd**; we are caught in its crowdedness.

The crowdedness is not only that of numbers in terms of relations and relationships, but also of intensity in terms of the endless repetitiveness of this proliferation of being. When we only see others in terms of *statistics and numbers*, then we are only a crowd. However, when we understand how we are all intimately related and connected, we see only a single reality, that of **life**. In this life-centred cosmic family [1.1.2.3], there are, in reality, no isolated *persons*, only relationships. We exist and live *conditioned by others, relative to others*. This is the principle of **non-self** underlying all life.

We begin to **free** ourselves from the crowd, crowdedness and conditionality of this life-centred reality by understanding and accepting this principle of non-self. As this understanding deepens for us, we learn

⁶ On the significance of the 3 D’s (decay, disease, death) and the 4 sights seen by Siddhattha, see SD 52.1 (7).

⁷ On group karma, see **Aggañña S** (D 27,26), SD 2.19; **Group karma**, SD 39.1.

to let go of our craving (sensual lust) for life, which frees us from **the cosmic crowd**; we let go of becoming, of existence, freeing ourselves from its **crowdedness**; by overcoming ignorance, we are *no more conditioned*, no more “relative beings” existing in terms of others, the crowd. We have then attained **the unconditioned**, nirvana.

— — —

Mātā Sutta

The Discourse on Mothers

S 15.14

1 [*Ekaṃ samayaṃ bhagavā*] Sāvattthiyaṃ viharati [*jetavane anāthapiṇḍikassa ārāme. Tatra kho bhagavā bhikkhu amantesi bhikkhavo'ti. Bhadante'ti te bhikkhu bhagavato paccassosum*].⁸

1 [At one time the Blessed One was dwelling] at Sāvattthī.
[There the Blessed One addressed the monks: “Monks.”
“Bhante,” the monks replied to the Blessed One.]

Samsara is without beginning

2 *Anamat'aggôyaṃ bhikkhave, saṃsāro.*

Pubbā koṭi na paññāyati avijjā, nīvaraṇānaṃ sattānaṃ taṇhā, saṃyojānānaṃ sandhāvataṃ saṃsarataṃ.

2 “Without a knowable beginning⁹ [With neither beginning nor ending],¹⁰ bhikshus, is this samsara [cycle of rebirths and redeaths].

2.2 A beginning point¹¹ of beings roaming and wandering on,¹² shrouded in ignorance, fettered by craving,¹³ cannot be discerned.

REBIRTH AS MOTHERS

3 *Na so bhikkhave satto sulabha, rūpo yo na mātā, bhūta, pubbo iminā dīghena addhunā.*

Taṃ kissa hetu?

Anamataggôyaṃ bhikkhave saṃsāro.

3 It is not easy, bhikshus, to find a being who has not been a **mother** (to one another) before during this long journeying.

Why is the reason for this?

3.2 *Without a knowable beginning, bhikshus, is this samsara.*

⁸ The whole of §1 is supplied from **Tīṇa, kaṭṭha S** (S 15.1/2:178,4-7).

⁹ On *anamatagga*: *an* (negation) + *amata* [or, *ana*, double neg + *mata*, past part of *maññati*, to think, understand, consider; thus, “not to be known”] + *agga*, “foremost (point)” (CPD): DhA 1:11,3. See SD 28.7a (2); SD 48.3 (1.2.3).

¹⁰ On the etym of this sense, see SD 48.3 (1.2.3.4).

¹¹ From this statement—and the lack of a similar one on an “ending point”—it is likely that *anamat'agga*, as used here, means “without a knowable beginning.” See prec n & SD 48.3 (1.2.3).

¹² Cf *aneka, jāti, saṃsāraṃ sandhāvissaraṃ anibbisaraṃ*, “Through numerous births in samsara, have I run without rest” (Dh 153).

¹³ According to **Vijjā, bhāgiya S** (A 2.3.10), while craving “feters” [prevents] liberation, ignorance “shrouds” [hinders] wisdom (*rāg'upakkiliṭṭhaṃ vā ... cittaṃ na vimuccati, āvijj'upakkiliṭṭhā vā paññā na bhāviyati*, A 2.3.10/1:61), SD 3.2(4.2).

*Pubbā koṭi na paññāyati avijjā, nīvaraṇānaṃ
sattānaṃ taṇhā, saṃyojanānaṃ
sandhāvataṃ saṃsarataṃ.*

3.3 *A beginning point of beings roaming and wandering on, shrouded in ignorance, fettered by craving, cannot be discerned.*

The 3 perils

4 *Evaṃ dīgha, rattāṃ vo bhikkhave
dukkhaṃ paccanubhūtaṃ,
tibbaṃ paccanubhūtaṃ,
vyasanaṃ paccanubhūtaṃ kaṭasi, vaḍḍhitā.¹⁴*

*Yāvañ c'idaṃ bhikkhave alam eva
sabba, saṅkhāresu nibbinditum,
alam virajjitum, alam vimuccitun'ti.*

4 *For such a long time, bhikshus, have you thus suffered painfully, suffered severely, suffered disastrously, and filled up the cemetery grounds.*

4.2 *Surely, bhikshus, it is enough to feel revulsed towards all formations [conditioned things]; it is enough to discard them; enough to want to be liberated from them!"*

— evaṃ —

(091009 130520) 200903 200916 201218

¹⁴ *Kaṭasi, vaḍḍhitā = kaṭasī, "cemetery" + vaḍḍhita, "heaping up, swelling." See Sadd 396 n10. Comy explains kaṭasī as "cemetery ground; the earth of the charnel ground" (susānaṃ paṭhavī, SA 2:156,23 = Nc 273,34). See also U 72,1; UA 351,28; cf kaṭasi, vaḍḍhanā (UA 351,30; ItA 1:85,3).*