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 SAṀYUTTA

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. 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” (sammuti) 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” (nīt’attha).

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 (saṁsāra). The original or precise meaning of anamatagga is forgotten. It is used in somewhat differing senses in the texts of the early Buddhist schools.

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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 (nīt’attha), see Neyy’attha Nīt’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).

1.1.1.2 From its contexts in the suttas of the Anamatagga Saṁyutta—such as the Tīṇa,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 Saṁyutta 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 Saṁyutta—using an interesting range of metaphors—either depict the incalculable duration of an aeon (kappa), or the immeasurable amount and variety of suffer- ing 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 Saṁyutta.

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 Saṁyutta’s 1st subchapter—Paṭhama Vagga—closes with some verse.

The Tiṁsa,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 Saṁyutta, 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. 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 Saṁyutta 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 Saṁyutta (listed under the traditional references, the PTS references, the titles, and the suitta themes respectively):5

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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 prefix- ed with (Anamatagga), their Saṁyutta chapter name, eg, (Anamatagga) Puggala Sutta (S 15.10), SD 57.19.
1.2 The rebirth suttas

1.2.1 Humanity is one family

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

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

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 it 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 Pabbatûpama 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) Sañcetana 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 ourself (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 ourself. 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 ourself 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 Aggaña 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 ourself 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.

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Mātā Sutta
The Discourse on Mothers
S 15.14


2 Anamataggayam bhikkhave, sarīsāro.

Pubbā koṭi na paññāyati avijjā, nīvaraṇānam sattānaṁ taṇhā, saṁyojānaṁ sandhāvataṁ sarisarataṁ.

REBIRTH AS MOTHERS

3 Na so bhikkhaye satto sulabha,rūpo yo na mātā, bhūta, pubbo iminā dhīghena addhunā.

Tam kissa hetu?

Anamataggoyam bhikkhave sarīsāro.

2 “Without a knowable beginning” [With neither beginning nor ending], bhikshus, is this samsara.

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

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.

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

9 On anamatagga: an (negation) + amata [or, ano, 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 anya, jati, saṁsārah sandhāvissam anibbisar, “Through numerous births in samsara, have I run without rest” (Dh 153).

13 According to Vijjā,bhāgiya S (A 2.3.10), while craving “fetters” [prevents] liberation, ignorance “shrouds” [hinders] wisdom (rāg’upakkīṭṭhāṁ vā ... cittam na vimuccati, āvijj’upakkīṭṭhā vā paññā na bhāviyati, A 2.3.10/1:61), SD 3.2(4.2).
Pubbā koṭi na paññāyati avijjā, nīvaraṇānaṁ sattānaṁ taṇhā, saṁyojanānaṁ sandhāvataṁ saṁsaratam.

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

The 3 perils

4 Evaṁ dīgha, rattam vo bhikkhave dukkhaṁ paccanubhūtaṁ, tibbaṁ paccanubhūtaṁ, vyāsanaṁ paccanubhūtaṁ kaṭasi, vaḍḍhitā.¹⁴

Yāvañ c’idaṁ bhikkhave alam eva sabbo, saṅkhāresu nibbinditum, alam virajjitum, alam vimuccituṁ.

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!”

— evaṁ —

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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” (susānaṁ 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).

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