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## Tāla,puṭa Sutta

The Tāla,puṭa Discourse | S 42.2

Theme: How an actor-dancer becomes an awakened monk

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2006

### 1 Tāla,puṭa

**1.1** Tālapuṭa or Talapuṭa lived in the time of our Buddha and was trained from his youth as an actor. Steadily, his fame grew until he became the dance manager (*naṭa,gāmaṇī*) of a travelling theatrical troupe of “500 women” (general figure which means a large company), travelling and performing all over ancient India. These 500 gave dramatic performances of great splendour in towns, villages and royal courts, winning much fame, wealth and favour.<sup>1</sup>

It was when Tālapuṭa was in Rāja,gaha that he hears of the Buddha, and decides to visit him. He asks the Buddha if it is true that performers who delight large audiences are reborn among the laughing gods. But the Buddha is reluctant to answer. Only after being asked three times, the Buddha tells Tālapuṭa that those who arouse sensuality in others will be reborn in hell [§7]. Tālapuṭa weeps to think that the older actors should have deceived him [§8]. Having heard the Buddha’s teaching, he enters the order and in due course becomes an arhat.<sup>2</sup>

**1.2** The word *tāla,puṭa* means “palmyra-leaf box.”<sup>3</sup> The Saṃyutta Commentary says he obtained his name from his bright and cheerful facial complexion, like that of a ripe palm-fruit (SA 3:102). In his lay life, he must have been a gifted poet and, with this ability, composed his own inspiring elder’s verses which reflect deep spiritual passion (**Tha 1091-1145**).<sup>4</sup>

### 2 Why some renounce

**2.1** People do not always become monks or nuns for good reasons. Some put on the saffron robe because of love failure, loss of relatives, sickness, or loss of wealth. **The Susīma Sutta** (S 12.70) recounts the time when the order had grown in popularity and wealth, so that outsiders, such as the wanderers, surreptitiously joined the order to find out the “secret” of the Buddha’s success!<sup>5</sup>

**2.2** But there are worse reasons: laziness and desire for wealth, power, comfort, pleasure, or luxury, since a monastic of the world is often well provided with at least the basic necessities of life, and often given monetary and material donations, and feudal piety.<sup>6</sup> There were such monks and nuns even in the Buddha’s latter days, and they are a growing number of them all over the world today, but they have

<sup>1</sup> SA 3:102; ThaA 3:143 f. ThaA summarizes Tāla,puṭa’s story as recorded in S 42.2 (ThaA 3:144).

<sup>2</sup> S 4:306 ff; Tha 1091-1145; ThaA 2:155 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Baskets and cases woven from palm leaves are common in south and southeast Asia. The best known here is the coconut-leaf case for the *ketupat*, a popular boiled rice dumpling from Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei often served during festivities and eaten with local *satay* (grilled diced meat on little sticks). For details & illus, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ketupat>.

<sup>4</sup> SD 20.9.

<sup>5</sup> S 12.70/2:119-128 (SD 16.8).

<sup>6</sup> By “feudal piety,” I mean an unquestioning, even subservient, loyalty and obedience to a person, reflective of a cultish or feudalistic lord-serf relationship. Such a pathological relationship is always rife with problems of psychological transference and a hotbed for various improprieties and scandals. See esp **Bad friendship**, SD 64.17.

become more sophisticated, respectable, and politically influential. Many of them are well-paid, even property-owning, career priests.<sup>7</sup>

**2.3** Tālapuṭa tells us the real reason why he becomes a monk, and, in the process, indirectly refers to some of the wrong reasons for doing so:

**33** Not for lack of luck nor from shamelessness,  
nor on a mere whim, nor from banishment,  
nor for the sake of livelihood, did I go forth—  
therefore I’ve listened to you, O mind. (Tha 1123)

He does not become a monk because he was a failure in lay life; in fact, he was a very successful layman. He is not driven into monkhood because some rajah has banished him, nor because he is a fugitive on account of some crime. It is not that he has a weak mind nor is he at a loss on what to do with his life. It is because he agrees with the wisdom in his own mind and gives up worldly life.

He has seen how difficult it is to practise the Dharma while living a household life. Suffering and pain arise in the mind, and it is right there that it should be worked on and solved. Mindfulness training—observing the true nature of all his actions—is what will calm his mind so that wisdom arises. The most conducive environment to do this is as a member of the spiritual community (*saṅgha*), and so he decides to become a monk.

### 3 Are dancing and acting wrong livelihood?

**3.1** The Tālapuṭa Sutta recounts how Tālapuṭa the dance manager questions the Buddha on the fate of dancers who entertain others. He has heard that such dancers, because they amuse people, are reborn in the heaven of laughing devas [§§3-5]. The Buddha’s answer is very clear:

In the past, manager, when beings are not free from lust, ⟨from hate,⟩ ⟨from delusion,⟩ who are bound by the bondage of lust, ⟨of hate,⟩ ⟨of delusion,⟩ a dancer on stage or in a show would entertain them with lustful ⟨hateful⟩ ⟨delusive⟩ themes arousing greater lust ⟨greater hate⟩ ⟨greater delusion⟩.

Thus, being intoxicated and heedless himself, he intoxicates others and makes them heedless, and having done so, after death, with the body’s breaking up, he arises in the laughing hell!<sup>8</sup>...

For a person of wrong view (that such entertainers will be reborn amongst the laughing devas), there is only one of two destinies: either hell or the animal realm, I say.<sup>9</sup> [§§6-7]

**3.2** The Commentaries take pains to say that the “laughing hell” is not a special hell for actors, but merely a part of Avīci where the foolish actors are tortured by having to replay their parts—like a Sisyphian

<sup>7</sup> See Seneviratne 1999 (on contemporary Sinhala monks); S Chandler 2005 (on contemporary Chinese Buddhism).

<sup>8</sup> “The laughing hell” (*pahāso nāma nirayo*). Comy: There is no separate hell with this name. This is actually a part of the Avīci hell where beings are tortured by replaying their parts as dancers dancing and singing, and “cooked” in the process. (SA 3:103)

<sup>9</sup> See **Kukkura,vatika S** (M 57) for a similar passage, about a wrong view regarding humans *behaving* like animals, leading to like rebirth (M 57,1-6/1:387-389).

task<sup>10</sup>—acting, dancing and singing, and being “cooked” at the same time (SA 3:103). The point is that what we habitually do or think of are what will *become* us.<sup>11</sup>

**3.3** It is important to note here that the guilty party consists of those whose motivation is rooted in greed, hate or delusion, that is, the performers themselves, *and* those who subscribe to such an idea. Implicitly, it means that this excludes those laity (it should be stressed here, only the *laity*, not the monastics) who perform shows or on stage with a mind of charity, lovingkindness and wisdom. (Novices and monastics are bound by the rules that prohibit giving such performances, and even watching them.)<sup>12</sup>

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## Tāla,puṭa Sutta

### The Tāla,puṭa Discourse

S 42.2

**1** At one time the Blessed One was staying in the squirrels’ feeding ground in the Bamboo Grove near Rājagaha.

#### Tāla,puṭa’s question

**2** Then Tāla,puṭa the dance manager approached the Blessed One. Having approached the Blessed One, he saluted him, and then sat down at one side.

**3** Seated thus at one side, Tāla,puṭa the dance manager said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, I have heard it being said amongst dancers in the ancient lineage of teachers, thus, ‘For a dancer on stage or in a show, who entertains and amuses the people with truths and untruths,<sup>13</sup> after death, with the body’s breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the laughing devas.’<sup>14</sup> What does the Blessed One say about that?”

“Enough, manager,<sup>15</sup> let it be! Don’t ask me that.”

<sup>10</sup> A Sisyphean task is one that can never be completed; a samsaric suffering. In Greek mythology, **Sisyphus** (Σίσυφος) was a king, the craftiest of men (who killed guests and divulged secrets of the gods), punished by being chained in Tartarus (an underworld between heaven and earth). Through his wiles, he escaped a number of times, and refused to return to the underworld. When finally caught, he was made to slave in Tartarus by pushing a huge boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll down again, and to repeat the task for eternity. The French author, Albert Camus, in his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), sees Sisyphus as personifying the absurdity of human life, but concludes, “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” as “The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart.”

<sup>11</sup> See an interesting story of **Isi,dāsī**, on the karmic fate of one obsessed with sex: **Why Some Marriages Fail**, SD 3.8(I).

<sup>12</sup> Further, see **Yodh’ājīva S** (S 42.3/4:308 f), SD 23.3 Intro.

<sup>13</sup> Woodward renders *saccālikena* as “by his counterfeiting of the truth” (S:W 4:214). Comy however takes it as a dvandva: *saccena ca alikena ca* (SA 3:103), which is followed by Bodhi (S:B 1333 & 1448 n335).

<sup>14</sup> *Yo so naṭo raṅga,majjhe samajja,majjhe saccālikena janam bhāseti rameti, so kāyassa bhedā param,marañā pahāsānam devānam saavyatam uppajjatī ti.*

<sup>15</sup> *Gamaṇi*, usu tr as “headman,” but here it form part of the cpd *naṭa,gāmaṇi*, “dance manager.”

4 For a second time, Tāla,puṭa the dance manager said this to the Blessed One:

“*Bhante, I have heard it being said amongst dancers in the ancient lineage of teachers, thus, ‘For a dancer on stage or in a show, who entertains and amuses the people with truths and untruths, after death, with the body’s breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the laughing devas.’ What does the Blessed One say about that?*”

“*Enough, manager, let it be! Don’t ask me that.*”

5 For a third time, Tāla,puṭa the dance manager said this to the Blessed One:

“*Bhante, I have heard it being said amongst dancers in the ancient lineage of teachers, thus, ‘For a dancer on stage or in a show, who entertains and amuses [307] the people with truths and untruths, after death, with the body’s breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the laughing devas.’ What does the Blessed One say about that?*”

“*Surely, manager, I’m not getting through to you<sup>16</sup> when I say, ‘Enough, manager, let it be! Don’t ask me that.’ But still, I will answer you.*”

### The Buddha’s answer

6 In the past, manager, when beings were *not free from lust*, who were bound by the bondage of lust, a dancer on stage or in a show would entertain them with lustful themes arousing greater lust.<sup>17</sup>

In the past, manager, when beings were *not free from hate*, who were bound by the bondage of hate, a dancer on stage or in a show would entertain them with hateful themes arousing greater hate.

In the past, manager, when beings were *not free from delusion*, who were bound by the bondage of delusion, a dancer on stage or in a show would entertain them with delusive themes arousing greater delusion.

7 Thus, being intoxicated and heedless himself, he intoxicates others and makes them heedless, and having done so, after death, with the body’s breaking up, he arises in the laughing hell!<sup>18</sup>

But, if he were to hold such a view as this:

‘For a dancer on stage or in a show, entertains and amuses the people with truths and untruths, then after death, with the body’s breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the laughing devas,’

this is a wrong view on his part.

Now, manager, for an individual of wrong view, there is only one of two destinies: either hell or the animal realm, I say.<sup>19</sup>

8 When this was said, Tāla,puṭa the dance manager cried out and burst into tears.

<sup>16</sup> *Addhā kho tyāhaṃ gāmaṇī na labhāmi. ‘alam gāmaṇī tiṭṭhat’etaṃ mā maṃ etaṃ pucchī ti.* The sentence *addhā kho tyāhaṃ gāmaṇī na labhāmi* lit tr something like “I cannot get the way to you.” This cautious response lit tr something like “I cannot get the way to you,” or fig, “You don’t seem to get it!” On a number of other occasions, the Buddha similarly hesitates to answer such questions: see **Tāla,puṭa S** (S 42.2,5/4:305 f), SD 20.8 n; **Yodh’ājīva S** (S 42.3/4:308 f), SD 23.3; **Ass’āroha S** (S 42.5/4:310); by a brahmin youth: **Assalāyana S** (M 93,4.7/2:148), SD 23.11. **Bodhi** notes that here the present tense is required, and suggests we follow Be & Ce *na labhāmi*, where Ee & Se have the aorist is appropriate, *nālatthaṃ*. (S:B 1148 n336). Thus, he tr it as “Surely, headman, I am not getting through to you.” Actually the aorist, if taken as a participle, is also correct, which I have followed.

<sup>17</sup> *Pubbe kho gāmaṇī, sattā avītarāgā rāga,bandhana,baddhā, tesaṃ naṭo raṅga,majjhe samajja,majjhe ye dhammā rajanīyā te upasaṃharati bhiyyo sarāgāya.* “Lustful themes,” *dhammā rajanīyā*. Bodhi has “titillating things.”

<sup>18</sup> “The laughing hell” (*pahāso nāma nirayo*). Comy: There is no separate hell with this name. This is actually a part of the Avīci hell where beings are tortured by replaying their parts as dancers dancing and singing, and “cooked” in the process. (SA 3:103)

<sup>19</sup> See **Kukkura,vatika S** (M 57) for a similar passage, about a wrong view regarding humans *behaving* like animals, leading to like rebirth (M 57,1-6/1:387-389), SD 23.11.

[The Blessed One:] “So, manager, I’ve not got through to you when I say, ‘Enough, manager, let it be! Don’t ask me that.’”

8.2 “Bhante, I am not crying because of what the Blessed One has said to me, but because I have been tricked, cheated and deceived for a long time by those dancers in the ancient lineage of teachers, thus, ‘For a dancer [308] on stage or in a show, entertains and amuses the people with truths and untruths, then after death, with the body’s breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the laughing devas.’

### Tāla,puṭa renounces the world

9 Excellent, Master Gotama! Excellent! Master Gotama! Just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned, were to reveal what was hidden, were to show the way to one who was lost, or were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way, in numerous ways, has the Dharma been made clear by the Blessed Gotama.

I go to the Blessed Gotama for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May I, bhante, receive the going-forth (*pabbajjā*) under the Blessed One; may I receive the ordination (*upasampadā*).”

10 Then Tāla,puṭa the dance manager received the going-forth and the ordination in the Blessed One’s presence.”

### Tāla,puṭa becomes an arhat

11 And, the venerable Tālapuṭa the dance manager,<sup>20</sup>  
not long after being ordained [being given the upasampada],<sup>21</sup>  
dwelling alone, aloof, diligent, exertive, and resolute,<sup>22</sup>

having right here and now realized for himself through direct knowledge,  
dwelt in the supreme goal of the holy life,  
for the sake of which sons of family rightly go forth from the household life into homelessness.

<sup>20</sup> The foll lines: *Acirūpasampanno ca pan’āyasmā tāla,puṭo naṭa,gāmaṇi eko vūpakaṭṭho appamatto ātāpī pahit’atto viharanto na,cirass’eva, yass’atthāya kula,puttā sammad-eva agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajanti tad-anuttaraṃ, brahma,cariya,pariyosānaṃ diṭṭh’eva dhamme sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja vihāsi.* This is the famous arhathood pericope, see **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9,56.3/1:203) n, SD 7.14. Also at: **Acelaka Kassapa S** (S 12.17/2:22), SD 18.5; **Dāru-k,khandhōpama 1** (S 35.241/4:181), SD 28.5; **(Citta) Acela Kassapa S** (S 41.9/4:302), SD 87.7; **Tāla,-puṭa S** (S 42.2,12/3:308), SD 20.8.

<sup>21</sup> The *upasampadā* is the “higher ordination,” given after the going-forth to a qualifying candidate, making him a full-fledged monk.

<sup>22</sup> *Eko vūpakaṭṭho appamatto ātāpī pahit’atto viharanto.* This is stock: V 2:258; M 1:177; A 2:258, 3:218; U 24. The first word, “alone” (*eka*) refers to bodily aloneness and physical solitude; “aloof” (*vūpakaṭṭha*) is mental solitude; often this word alone refers to a practitioner’s effort to rid the mind of sensual thoughts (M 36/1:246f = 85/-2:93); “exertive” (*ātāpī*) is putting forth both physical and effort; “resolute” (*pahit’atta*), “mentally resolute” by absence of longing regarding the body or life itself (MA 1:180). Also as *ekā vūpakaṭṭhā appamattā ātāpino pahit’attā vihareyya* (V 2:258; A 3:218 (Ke Se ekeka...), 4:280). Sometimes the initial *eka* is omitted in the pericope.

12 He directly knew:<sup>23</sup>

“Birth is destroyed,  
the holy life has been lived,  
done what is to be done,  
there is no more of this state of being.”

And the venerable Tāla,puṭa the dance manager, became one of the arhats.

— evaṃ —

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<http://www.vipassana.com/canon/khuddaka/theragatha/thag19.php>.  
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<sup>23</sup> He knows all this by “review knowledge” (*paccavekkhaṇa,ñāṇa*). “**Birth is destroyed**” (*khīṇā jāti*) ie, he knows if he had not fully cultivated the path, that 1, 4 or 5 of the aggregates would arise (ie he would be reborn, respectively, as a non-conscious being, or a formless being, or a form being, or a sense-world being); “**the holy life has been lived**” (*vsitaṃ brahma,cariyaṃ*): the 7 learners (*sekha*) and the good worldling are said to “be living the holy life,” but he has *lived* it because he has destroyed his influxes; “**done what is to be done**” (*katam karaṇīyaṃ*): he has understood the noble truths in all their 16 aspects, ie, their full understanding, abandonment, realization, and cultivation by the four paths; “**there is no more for this state of being**” (*nāparaṃ itthattāya*): he does not have to complete his understanding of the truths any more, and beyond the present aggregates, there are none, for they are like fire without fuel (DA 1:225 in detail; MA 1:180 f in brief). For a full tr of Comy and Subcomy here, see Bodhi (tr), *The Discourse on the Fruits of Recluseship*, 1989: 165-168.