

# Time and Time Again

## Reflections on cyclic life

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### Udaya Sutta

The Discourse to Udaya | S 7.12/1:173 f

Theme: The repetitive cycle of life

At Sāvattḥī.

Then, in the morning, the Blessed One, having dressed, and taking bowl and robe, approached the brahmin Udaya. Then the brahmin Udaya filled the Blessed One’s bowl with boiled rice.

A second time,<sup>1</sup> in the morning, the Blessed One, having dressed, and taking bowl and robe, approached the brahmin Udaya. And a second the brahmin Udaya filled the Blessed One’s bowl with boiled rice.

A third time, in the morning, the Blessed One, having dressed, and taking bowl and robe, approached the brahmin Udaya. And a third time the brahmin Udaya filled the Blessed One’s bowl with boiled rice, after which he said this to the Blessed One:

“This nuisance of the ascetic Gotama keeps coming again and again!”<sup>2</sup>

[The Blessed One:]

Again and again, they sow the seeds;  
Again and again, down comes the rain;<sup>3</sup>  
Again and again, the farmers plough the fields;  
Again and again, the land yields grain;

*Punappunam c’eva vapanti bījam  
punappunam vassati deva,rājā  
punappunam khettaṃ kasanti kassakā  
punappunam aññaṃ upeti raṭṭhaṃ*

Again and again, the beggars beg;  
Again and again, the master givers give;  
Again and again, when the master givers’ given,  
Again and again, they find a place in heaven;

*punappunam yācakā yācayanti  
punappunam dāna,patī dadanti  
punappunam dāna,patī daditvā  
punappunam saggam upeti ṭhānaṃ*

Again and again, the milkers milk the cows;  
Again and again, the calf goes to its mother;  
Again and again, you struggle and suffer;  
Again and again, the foolish finds the womb;

*punappunam khīranikā duhanti  
punappunam vaccho upeti mātaraṃ  
punappunam kilamati phandati ca  
punappunam gabbham upeti mando*

Again and again, he is born and he dies;  
Again and again, they take him to the cemetery.  
But when one has found the path to no more rebirth,  
One great in wisdom, is not born again and again!

*punappunam jāyati miyyati ca  
punappunam sīvathikaṃ haranti  
maggāñ ca laddhā apunabbhavāya  
na punappunam jāyati bhūri,pañño ti<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Comy says that the Buddha visited Udaya on three separate consecutive days (SA 1:257). This is actually self-evident, as Bodhi notes, “Although the text itself conveys the impression that the Buddha went to the same house for alms three times on the same morning, this would be contrary to proper monastic etiquette, so [SA] must be reliable on this point.” (S:B 451 n464).

<sup>2</sup> *Pakaṭṭhako yaṃ samaṇo Gotamo punappunam āgacchatī ti. Pakaṭṭhaka*, from Skt *prakarṣaka*, “harasser, disquieter (name of the god of love),” from *prakarṣ*, to trouble, to disturb” (SED 654cd). The Buddha’s humour is evident here, as he gives a higher meaning to “again and again” (*punappunam*).

<sup>3</sup> *Puna-p,punam vassati deva,rājā*, lit “again and again the rain-gods rains down.”

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to compare **Udaya S** with Ecclesiastes, esp **Ecc 3.1-8**: “To everything *there is* a season, | A time for every purpose under heaven: || 2 A time to be born, | And a time to die; || A time to plant, | And a time to pluck *what is* planted; || 3 A time to kill, | And a time to heal; || A time to break down, | And a time to build up; || 4 A

When this was said, the brahmin Udaya said to the Blessed One:  
“Marvellous, Master Gotama! Marvellous, Master Gotama! Venerable sir,  
just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned,  
or were to reveal what was hidden,  
or 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, the Dharma has been made clear by the Blessed Gotama.  
Let Master Gotama remember me as a lay follower who from today has gone for refuge for life.”

— evam —

Now, here is a contemporary version of this poem:

## **Singapore Again and Again** (A contemporary sutra)

Again and again, we study hard;  
Again and again, the exams come;  
Again and again, the results show;  
Again and again, we look for jobs.

Again and again, we get hired;  
Again and again, we face the day;  
Again and again, the traffic jams;  
Again and again, we're late for work;  
Again and again, we get fired.

Again and again, we are born, and then we die;  
Again and again, we're buried, burned or drowned;  
Again and again, back to earth, fire, water and wind  
Again and again, our loved ones pray and cry;  
Again and again, we are born and reborn;  
Like plants we grow, like animals we move:  
Who really see change are truly happy and free.

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time to weep, | And a time to laugh; || A time to mourn, | And a time to dance; || 5 A time to cast away stones, | And a time to gather stones; || A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing; || 6 A time to gain, | And a time to lose; || A time to keep, And a time to throw away; || 7 A time to tear, | And a time to sew; || A time to keep silence, | And a time to speak; || 8 A time to love, | And a time to hate; || And a time of war, | And a time of peace (NKJV). Such passages evoke a cycle of fleeting vanity or purposelessness in life. Ecc is also greatly concerned with death. It however proposes that until God decides what to do next, or while man lives, he should enjoy life, work and companionship. Ecc is an Old Testament book, and reflects little of the novel New Testament notions, esp of resurrection. In fact, **the Jewish Encyclopedia** notes, “had it not been adopted before the doctrine of the Resurrection became popular, it is probable that the author's views on that subject would have caused his book to be excluded therefrom.” Another interesting point is that the Hebrew name for God is not found in Ecc, and it probably had as its source an outside text or teaching. Most scholars agree that Ecc was compiled around 250 BCE (well after the Buddha, during Asoka's time).

Notice how real the feeling is with this updated version. You may laugh—that is because it is an irony: we work hard, play life games, and yet they all finally come to nothing as it were, but only to repeat like Sisyphus' labour!

## Ultimate language

Traditional examples of the use of **ultimate or Dharma language**—or *logos*—are found, for example, in the exposition of the four noble truths and the noble eightfold path in the First Discourse,<sup>5</sup> or in the verse spoken by Assaji to Sāriputta the first time they met.<sup>6</sup> Often enough the Buddha would follow up with analogies and illustrations of what he has expressed in the Dharma language (for example, the **Assu Sutta**, S 2:180).

## SD 10.6(3)

## Assu Sutta

The Discourse on Tears | S 15.3/2:179 f

Theme: The true nature of cyclic life

1 At Sāvatti...

2 “Bhikshus, this cycle of life and rebirth (*samsāra*) is with neither beginning nor end.<sup>7</sup> A first point is not to be discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving.

3 What do you think, bhikshus, which is more: the stream of tears you have shed as you roamed and wandered through this long course, weeping and wailing from being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable—this, or, the waters in the four great oceans?”

4 “As we understand the Dharma taught by the Blessed One, venerable sir, *the stream of tears we have shed as we roam and wander through this long course, weeping and wailing from being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable*—this alone is more than the waters in the four great oceans.”

5 “Good, good, bhikshus! It is good that you understand the Dharma taught by me in such a way.

6 This stream of tears you have shed as you roamed and wandered through this long course, weeping and wailing from being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable, is more than the waters in the four great oceans.

7 (1) For a long time, bhikshus, you have experienced the death of a mother.

As you have experienced this, weeping and wailing because of being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable, the stream of tears that you have shed is more than the waters in the four great oceans.

8 (2) For a long time, bhikshus, you have experienced the death of a father.<sup>8</sup>

As you have experienced this, weeping and wailing because of being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable, the stream of tears that you have shed is more than the waters in the four great oceans.

9 (3) For a long time, bhikshus, you have experienced the death of a brother.

As you have experienced this, weeping and wailing because of being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable, the stream of tears that you have shed is more than the waters in the four great oceans.

10 (4) For a long time, bhikshus, you have experienced the death of a sister.

<sup>5</sup> See **Dhamma, cakka-p, pavattana S** (S 56.11/5:420-424) = SD 1.1.

<sup>6</sup> See V 1:40; J 1:85; Mvst 3:60 (cf Mvst 3:328), & Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, 2004:5.11.

<sup>7</sup> “With neither beginning nor end,” *anamatagga*: see **Gaddula, baddha S 1** (S 22.99) = Intro (2.1).

<sup>8</sup> §§7bcd omitted in PTS ed, but found in other MSS.

As you have experienced this, weeping and wailing because of being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable, the stream of tears that you have shed is more than the waters in the four great oceans.

**11** (5) For a long time, bhikshus, you have experienced the death of a son.

As you have experienced this, weeping and wailing because of being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable, the stream of tears that you have shed is more than the waters in the four great oceans.

**12** (6) For a long time, bhikshus, you have experienced the death of a daughter.

As you have experienced this, weeping and wailing because of being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable, the stream of tears that you have shed is more than the waters in the four great oceans.

**13** (7) For a long time, bhikshus, you have experienced the loss of relatives.

As you have experienced this, weeping and wailing because of being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable, the stream of tears that you have shed is more than the waters in the four great oceans.

**14** (8) For a long time, bhikshus, you have experienced the loss of wealth.

As you have experienced this, weeping and wailing because of being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable, the stream of tears that you have shed is more than the waters in the four great oceans.

**15** (9) For a long time, bhikshus, you have experienced loss through illness.

As you have experienced this, weeping and wailing because of being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable, the stream of tears that you have shed is more than the waters in the four great oceans.

**16** What is the reason?

Because, bhikshus, this cycle of life and rebirth is with neither beginning nor end. A first point is not to be discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving.

**17** Surely, bhikshus, this is enough to feel revulsion towards all formations, enough to become dispassionate towards them, enough to be liberated from them.”

— evam —

The experiential part of the Discourse on Tears (“weeping and wailing...”) is in ultimate language because the truth reference is a direct one, that is, the discourse relates personal experience. The imagery portion (“the four great oceans...”, “death of a mother...” etc) uses the conventional language of the world.

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## Bibliography

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