

17

Araka Sutta

The Discourse on Araka | A 7.70/4:136-139

Theme: Life is short: it's time to awaken!

Translated by Piya Tan ©2006

1 60,000-year lifespan

1.1 HUMAN LIFESPAN. In practical terms, this is an important sutta teaching the perception of impermanence. It has two parts; the first is the ancient religious teacher Araka's teaching on impermanence, comprising seven delightful similes [§§1-2], and the second is the Buddha's own admonitions, comprising of a statistical analysis of impermanence in seven parts [§3] and his famous call to meditation [§4].

The sutta says that Araka (meaning "wheel-wright") lived at a time when the human lifespan was 60,000 years, a time when the human metabolism was so low that a woman was "ripe for marriage" (*alam, pateyya*) when she was 500 years old [§3a]! The 60,000-year lifespan is in fact that of the time of Vessabhū Buddha, but we are not told whether he lived during that Buddha's time. In the **Mahāpadāna Sutta** (D 14), the Buddha mentions the lifespans of the six past Buddhas, as follows:

Vipassī	80,000 years;
Sikhī	70,000 years;
Vessabhū	60,000 years;
Kakusandha	40,000 years;
Konāgamaṇa	30,000 years;
Kassapa	20,000 years.

Then, the Buddha goes on to declare,

My own lifespan now, monks, is trifling and short, quick to pass. One who lives long (here) lives only for more or less a hundred years.

Mayham bhikkhave etarahi appakam āyu-p, pamāṇam parittam lahasam, yo ciram jīvati so vassa, satam appam vā bhiyyo.
(D 14.7/2:3 f) = SD 49.8

In the **Vepulla Pabbata Sutta** (S 15.20), the Buddha says exactly the same of "the lifespan of the Magadhans." The phrase "more or less a hundred years" (*vassa, satam appam vā bhiyyo*) is stock.¹

The Cakka, vatti Sīha, nāda Sutta (D 26) however speaks of a time when the human lifespan will be 80,000 years, and women would be ripe for marriage at 500, and when only three afflictions are known, namely, greed (*icchā*), hunger (*anasana*), and old age (*jarā*), during a period of urban crowding, so that "this Jambu, dvīpa [India], like Avīci, will be crowded with people just as the jungle is thick with reeds and rushes."²

1.2 THE INDIAN SEASONS. The Araka Sutta records the Buddha as mentioning three seasons—winter (*hemanta*), summer (*gimhāna*) and rains (*vassāna*)—in his statistical analysis of impermanence [§3b]. Here is a table of the Indian seasons and calendar with their Pali names,³ and with the Sanskrit names and number of days:⁴

¹ D 14.7/2:4 (SD 49.8) = S 4.9/1:108 = 15.20/2:192; qu at DA 2:413.

² D 26.23/3:75 = SD 36.10. The Araka S below mentions 6 afflictions: cold, heat, hunger, thirst, voiding, peeing [§3a], a list which recurs at A 10.49/5:88, A 10.60.7/110, where the latter gives a fuller list of diseases.

³ Foll Vism 621 & its Ṭikā (based on Ñāṇamoli's *A Pali-English Glossary of Buddhist Technical Terms*, 1994).

⁴ For the Indian year, see **Ānāpāna Sati S** (M 118.3/3:79) n on Uposatha = SD 7.13. On the monsoons, see **Vāsi, jaṭa S** (S 22.101.20/3:155) n on "the cold season" = SD 15.2a.

Season	Sub-season	Month	Sanskrit	Days	Equivalent
Hemanta (cold)	Hemanta (winter)	Māga,sira	Mārga,śīrśa	30	Nov-Dec
		Phussa	Puṣya or Pauṣa	30	Dec-Jan
	Sisira (cool)	Māgha	Maghā	30	Jan-Feb
		Phagguna	Phālguna or Phaggu	30	Feb-Mar
Gimhāna (heat)	Vasanta (spring)	Citta	Caitra	30	Mar-Apr
		Vesākha	Vaiśākha	31	Apr-May
	Gimha (summer)	Jeṭṭha	Jyaiṣṭha	31	May-Jun
		Āsālha	Āṣāḍha	31	Jun-Jul
Vassāna (rains)	Vassanā (rains)	Sāvana	Śrāvaṇa	31	Jul-Aug
		Poṭṭha,pāda	Proṣṭha,pada/Bhādra,pada	31	Aug-Sep
	Sārada (autumn)	Assa,yuja	Āśva,yuja	30	Sep-Oct
		Kattika	Kārttika	30	Oct-Nov

[Note: The Indian month begins on the first day of the waning moon and ends on the full moon.]

2 Araka's seven similes

The Araka Sutta begins with the Buddha recounting how an ancient religious teacher, Araka, “who was free from sensual pleasures” (*kāmesu vīta,rāgo*) and “had many hundreds of disciples” discourses to them on the impermanence of human life, using seven graphic similes, each of which is connected with the four elements, thus:⁵

	<u>The 7 similes</u>	<u>the elements</u> ⁶
[§2b]	a dewdrop on the tip of a grass-blade	water
[§2c]	a water-bubble	water
[§2d]	a line, drawn on the water, with a stick	water
[§2e]	a river flowing down the mountains, its currents going far and fast, carrying everything with it	water wind (motion)
[§2f]	a strong man, making a gob of spit at his tongue-tip, would spit it out with little effort	water wind (motion)
[§2g]	a piece of meat thrown into an iron pan, heated all day long, that quickly vanishes	earth fire
[§2h]	a cow, taken for slaughter, with every step it takes, draws closer to the slaughter, into the presence of death.	earth wind (motion)

There is the **Araka Jātaka** (J 169), about a religious teacher of the same name, who similarly has overcome lust, and has many disciples. One day, he admonishes them to cultivate immeasurable loving-kindness⁷ in preparation for rebirth in Brahmā's realm, where he is himself then reborn and lives for seven world cycles. The Jātaka ends by saying that Araka was the Buddha himself in a past life. Neither the Araka Sutta nor the Araka Jātaka, however, mentions any connection between them, other than a few incidental similarities in details.

3 The Buddha's statistical analysis of impermanence

As a novel way of reflecting on impermanence, the Buddha gives seven statistical analyses of the fleeting nature of human life:

⁵ See also **Phena Piṇḍa S** (S 22.95/3:140-143) = SD 17.12 Intro

⁶ On the relationship of the 4 elements to the human body, see **Mahā Rāhul'ovāda S** (M 62.8-12/1:421-423) = SD 3.11.

⁷ See (**Puñña**) **Mettā S** (A 7.58a) = SD 2.11 Intro.

human life at present lasts for more or less	100 years;	[§3b]
the total number of <u>seasons</u>	300 seasons;	
the total number of <u>months</u>	1,200 months;	
the total number of <u>fortnights</u>	2,400 fortnights;	
the total number of <u>days</u>	36,000 days;	
the total number of <u>meals</u> (average of 2 meals a day)	72,000 meals;	

excluding occasions when we take no meals:

that is, when angry, suffering (dissatisfied), ill, keeping the fast day, and when food is unobtainable (such as during a famine). [§7]

All this goes to show how limited and fleeting human life is. The Buddha closes the discourse reminding us of our own spiritual practice, that is, meditation, lest we later regret for suffering the pains of spiritual failure.

4 Well-known similes on impermanence

Although, as a set, the seven similes of the Araka Sutta are not found elsewhere, many of the individual similes are well known and found in other suttas, some of which are mentioned here. **The Indriya Bhāvanā Sutta** (M 152), the last discourse of the Majjhima Nikāya, teaches “the supreme cultivation” (*anuttara indriya, bhāvanā*) of the sense faculties—reflecting on how rapidly they arise and fade away—and each is given a simile, thus:⁸

seeing a form with the eye	opening and shutting the eye;
hearing a sound with the ear	a strong man snapping his fingers;
smelling a smell with the nose	raindrops on a slightly sloping lotus leaf;
tasting a taste with the tongue	a strong man making a gob of spit of his tongue-tip, would spit it out with little effort [§2f];
sensing a touch with the body	a strong man flexing or bending his arm;
cognizing a mind-object with the mind	two or three drops of water falling onto an iron pan, heated all day long [cf §2g].

The Pheṇa Piṇḍa Sutta (S 22.95) gives a simile for each of the five aggregates:⁹

form	a great lump of froth;
feeling	a water-bubble [§2c];
perception	a shimmering mirage;
mental formations	the trunk of a large plaintain tree;
consciousness	a magical illusion.

The Salla Sutta (Sn 3.8) of the Sutta Nipāta is a very ancient sutta giving an inspiring teaching on the mindfulness of death and the perception of impermanence, and its similes include the following:

Sn 576	ripe fruits that are always in danger of falling;
Sn 577	clay vessels that end up in being broken;
Sn 580	a cow being led to the slaughter [§2h].

Buddhaghosa, in his study of the mindfulness of death (in the section on mental concentration), in **the Visuddhi, magga**, refers to the Araka Sutta by name,¹⁰ besides other related suttas. According to Buddha-

⁸ M 152.4-9/3:299 f = SD 17.13.

⁹ S 22.95/3:140-143 = SD 17.12.

¹⁰ Vism 8.35 f/237.

ghosa,¹¹ when one understands the true nature and dynamics of dependent arising,¹² formations appear to one as constantly renewing, thinking, “So these states, it seems, not having previously arisen, arise; having arisen, they end.” And they are not only constantly renewing, but they are also short-lived (*paritta-t,thāyi*):

A 4:137	like dew-drops at sunrise,	[§2b]
S 3:141	like a bubble on water,	[cf §2c]
A 4:137	like a line drawn on water,	[§2d]
Nm 42	like a mustard seed on an awl-tip;	

and they are coreless and without essence (*asāra nissāra*),

S 3:141	like a magical trick,
Dh 46	like a mirage,
Sn 807	like a dream,
[]	like circle of a whirling firebrand (<i>alāta,cakka</i>),
[]	like a phantom city (<i>gandhabba,nagara</i>),
Dh 46	like froth,
S 3:142	like a plaintain trunk.

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The Discourse on Araka

A 7.70/4:136-139

Araka’s teaching

1 Long ago, bhikshus, there was a teacher called Araka, a founder of a religion [a ford-maker],¹³ who was free from sensual pleasures. And, bhikshus, Araka had many hundreds of disciples. The teacher Araka taught this teaching to his disciples, thus:

2.1 “Short, brahmins, is the life of humans, limited and brief, full of suffering, full of trouble. One should understand this wisely.¹⁴ [137]

The wholesome should be done, the holy life should be lived. For one who is born, there is no freedom from death [there is no immortality].¹⁵

2.2 (1) Brahmins, just as a dewdrop on the tip of a grass-blade¹⁶ quickly vanishes with the sun’s rising and does not last long,

even so, brahmins, the life of humans is like a dewdrop—limited and brief, full of suffering, full of trouble. One should understand this wisely.

¹¹ Vism 20.104/632 f

¹² See SD 5.16.

¹³ “Religious teacher,” *tīttha,kara*, lit “ford-maker,” usu a sect founder or religious leader, esp a Jain: D 1:47, 116; M 1:198; Sn pp 90, 92; Miln 4, 6. Here I follow A:ÑB.

¹⁴ *Appakaṃ brāhmaṇa jīvitam manussānam parittam lahukaṃ bahu,dukkham bahūpāyāsam. Mantāya bodhabbaṃ. Comy glosses mantāya bodhabbaṃ as paññāya jānitabbaṃ*, “should be known through wisdom” (AA 4:66; cf VvA 262). This last line and the foll para (see foll n) recurs at **Mahā Govinda S** (D 19), where when Mahā Govinda, wishing to renounce the world, was told by six nobles to hold on (for 7 years, and so on, until for a fortnight), replies: “Sirs, a fortnight is far too long, I cannot wait for a fortnight! One is bound for the next world, *one should understand this wisely. One should do what is wholesome, one should live the holy life. For one who is born, there is no freedom from death [there is no immortality].*” (D 19.51/2:246 f).

¹⁵ *Kattabbaṃ kusalam, caritabbaṃ brahma,cariyam, n’atthi jātassa amaraṇam.*

¹⁶ *Tīn’agge ussāva,bindu.* Cf J 4:122; Vism 231, 633; SnA 458.

The wholesome should be done, the holy life should be lived. For one who is born, there is no freedom from death.

2.3 (2) Brahmins, just as when the rain falls in large drops, and a bubble on the water¹⁷ quickly vanishes and does not last long,

even so, brahmins, the life of humans is like a water-bubble—limited and brief, full of suffering, full of trouble. One should understand this wisely.

The wholesome should be done, the holy life should be lived. For one who is born, there is no freedom from death.

2.4 (3) Brahmins, just as a line, drawn on the water, with a stick,¹⁸ quickly vanishes and does not last long,

even so, brahmins, the life of humans is like a line, drawn on the water, with a stick—limited and brief, full of suffering, full of trouble. One should understand this wisely.

The wholesome should be done, the holy life should be lived. For one who is born, there is no freedom from death.

2.5 (4) Brahmins, just as a river flowing down the mountains, its currents going fast and far, carrying everything with it,¹⁹ so that it pauses not²⁰ for even a moment, an instant, a second,²¹ but moves on, rushes on, flows on,

even so, brahmins, the life of humans is like a river flowing down the mountains—limited and brief, full of suffering, full of trouble. One should understand this wisely.

The wholesome should be done, the holy life should be lived. For one who is born, there is no freedom from death.

2.6 (5) Brahmins, just as a strong man, making a gob of spittle at his tongue-tip, would spit it out with little effort,²²

even so, brahmins, the life of humans is like a gob of spit—limited and brief, full of suffering, full of trouble. One should understand this wisely.

The wholesome should be done, the holy life should be lived. For one who is born, there is no freedom from death.

2.7 (6) Brahmins, just as **[138]** a piece of meat thrown into an iron pan, heated all day long,²³ quickly vanishes and does not remain long,

even so, brahmins, the life of humans is like a piece of meat—limited and brief, full of suffering, full of trouble. One should understand this wisely.

The wholesome should be done, the holy life should be lived. For one who is born, there is no freedom from death.

2.8 (7) Brahmins, just as a cow, taken for slaughter, with each and every²⁴ step it takes, draws it closer to the slaughter, into the presence of death,²⁵

¹⁷ *Udaka, bubbulam*. Cf S 3:141; Dh 170; qu at Vism 20.104/633. A positive imagery of being “well-shaped like a water-bubble” (*udaka, bubbulam iva susaṅṭhāno*) is used at Vism 3.99/109.

¹⁸ *Udake daṇḍa, rāji*. Cf J 1:48; Vism 633.

¹⁹ *Nadī pabbateyyā dūraṅgamā sīghayam hārahārini*. “Carrying everything with it,” (*hāra, hārini*), such as trees, reeds, bamboos (AA 4:66). Cf S 3:64; J 5:445; Vism 231.

²⁰ “Pauses not,” *āramati* (Be *āvattati* & *āvattati*; Ce *dharati*), see CPD: *āramati* 2, & DP, sv.

²¹ “A moment, or an instant, or a second,” *khaṇo vā layo vā vā muhutto vā*. The Chinese pilgrim **Xuanzang**, in his Xiyuji (bk 2.4), makes this interesting note on the Indian conception of time: The shortest portion of time is called a *kṣana*; 120 *kṣanas* make a *taṅṣana*; 60 of these make a *lava* (sic); 30 of these make a *muhūrta* [see DPL: *muhutta*]; five of these make “a period of time” (*kāla*); six of these make a day and night (*ahorātra*). See 大唐西域記, *Si-yu-ki* [Xiyuji]: *Buddhist Records of the Western World* [Xuanzang], tr Samuel Beal. London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1884:71.

²² *Balavā puriso jivh’agge khela, piṇḍam saññūhitvā* [= *samyūhitvā*] *appa, kasiren’eva vameyya*. As at **Indriya, bhāvanā S** (M 152.7/3:300); J 1:34.

²³ *Divasa, santatte ayo, kaṭāhe maṃsa, pesī pakkhittā*. Brief version at Vism 14.162/468. Cf “two or three drops of water on a red-hot iron plate”: **Laṭukikōpama S** (M 66.16/1:453); **Indriya Bhāvanā S** (M 152.7/3:300); S 4:190.

even so, brahmins, the life of humans is like a cow taken for the slaughter—limited and brief, full of suffering, full of trouble. One should understand this wisely.

The wholesome should be done, the holy life should be lived. For one who is born, there is no freedom from death [there is no immortality].”

When human lifespan was 60,000 years

3.1 Now, at that time, bhikshus, the human lifespan was 60,000 years,²⁶ and women at 500 were ripe for marriage.²⁷ In those days, they had only six afflictions: cold, heat, hunger, thirst, voiding, peeing.²⁸

Bhikshus, even though humans then lived so long, with so few afflictions, that teacher Araka taught the teaching to his disciples, thus:

“Short, brahmins, is the life of humans, limited and brief, full of suffering, full of trouble. One should understand this wisely.²⁹

The wholesome should be done, the holy life should be lived. For one who is born, there is no freedom from death [there is no immortality].”³⁰

Vital statistics of impermanence

3.2 Today, bhikshus, one speaking rightly would say:

“Short, brahmins, is the life of humans, limited and brief, full of suffering, full of trouble. One should understand this wisely.

The wholesome should be done, the holy life should be lived. For one who is born, there is no freedom from death [there is no immortality].”

3.3 REFLECTION ON OUR DAYS.

(1) Now, bhikshus, one lives long but for only a hundred years or a little more.³¹

(2) And though, bhikshus, one lives for a hundred years,
one lives for only 300 seasons:
for only a hundred winters [cold seasons], a hundred summers [hot seasons], a hundred rains.³²

(3) And though, bhikshus, one lives for three hundred seasons,
one lives for only 1,200 months:
for only 400 months [139] of winters, 400 months of summers, 400 months of rain.³³

(4) And though, bhikshus, one lives for twelve hundred months,
one lives for only 2,400 fortnights:
one lives for only 800 fortnights of winter, 800 fortnights of summer, 800 fortnights of rain.³⁴

²⁴ “With each and every,” *yañ ñad eva* (Be *yañ yad eva*) = *yañ yam eva*.

²⁵ *Gāvī vajjhā āghātanam niyyamānā yañ ñad eva pādam uddharati santike ‘va hoti vadhassa santike ‘va maraṇassa.* See **Salla S: Sn 580.** Cf the Bible: Proverbs 7:22.

²⁶ “60,000 years,” *saṭṭhi, vassa, saḥassāni*. This was the lifespan of Vessabhū Buddha: see Intro 1.

²⁷ “Ripe for marriage,” *alam, pateyya* or *alam, pateyya* (fr Skt **alam patye*), D 3:71,17, 3:75,5 = A 4:138,13.

²⁸ **Cakka, vatti Sīha, nāda S** (D 26) speaks of a time when the human lifespan will be 80,000 years, and women would be ripe for marriage at 500, and when only 3 afflictions are known, namely, greed (*icchā*), hunger (*anasana*), and old age (*jarā*) (D 26.23/3:75): see Intro 1.

²⁹ *Appakam, brāhmaṇa, jīvitaṃ manussānam parittaṃ lahuḥkaṃ bahu, dukkhaṃ bah’upāyāsaṃ mantāyaṃ boddhabbhaṃ,*

³⁰ *Kattabbaṃ kusalam, caritabbaṃ brahma, cariyam, n’atthi jātassa amaraṇan’ti.*

³¹ *Etarahi, bhikkhave, yo ciram jīvati so vassa, satam appam vā bhīyyo.*

³² *Vassa, satam kho pana, bhikkhave, jīvanto tīṇi yeva utu, satāni jīvati: utu, satam hem’antānam, utu, satam gimhānam, utu, satam vassānam:* the closing half, lit “a hundred seasons of winter, a hundred seasons of summer, a hundred seasons of rain.” On the Indian seasons, see Intro 1.2.

³³ *Tīṇi kho pana, bhikkhave, utu, satāni jīvanto dvā, dasa yeva māsa, satāni jīvati: cattāri māsa, satāni hem’antānam, cattāri māsa, satāni gimhānam, cattāri māsa, satāni vassānam.*

³⁴ *Dvā, dasa kho pana, bhikkhave, māsa, satāni jīvanto catu, vīsati-y-eva addha, māsa, satāni jīvati: aṭṭh’addha, -māsa, satāni hem’antānam, aṭṭh’addha, māsa, satāni gimhānam, aṭṭh’addha, māsa, satāni vassānam*

(5) And though, bhikshus, one lives for twenty-four hundred fortnights,
one lives for only 36,000 days:
one lives for only 12,000 days of winter, 12,000 days of summer, 12000 days of rain.³⁵

(6) And though, bhikshus, one lives for thirty-six thousand days,
one eats but 72,000 meals:
one eats only 24,000 meals in winter, 24,000 meals in summer, 24,000 meals in the rains. This includes mother's milk and when food is unobtainable.³⁶

3.4 These are the obstacles to meals:

when angry,	one takes no food, or
when suffering,	one takes no food, or
when ill,	one takes no food, or
when keeping the fast day,	one takes no food, or
when food is unobtainable,	one takes no food.

3.5 Thus, bhikshus, have I reckoned the lifespan of humans who live for a hundred years, by season, by month, by fortnight, by day and night,³⁷ by meals, and by obstacles to meals.

Admonition to meditate

4.1 Bhikshus, whatever a teacher should do out of compassion for the good of disciples, for the sake of their welfare, it has been done to you by me.

4.2 These, bhikshus, are the foot of trees;³⁸ these are empty houses.³⁹ Meditate,⁴⁰ bhikshus! Be not heedless! Regret not later!

This is our instruction to you.⁴¹

— evaṃ —

060422; 070926a; 111025; 120325

³⁵ *Catu, vīsati kho pana, bhikkhave, addha, māsa, satāni jīvanto cha-t, tiṃsaṃ-y-eva ratti, saḥassāni jīvati: dvā, dasa ratti, saḥassāni hem'antānaṃ, dvā, dasa ratti, saḥassāni gimhānaṃ, dvādasa ratti, saḥassāni vassānaṃ.*

³⁶ The whole section: *Cha-t, tiṃsaṃ kho pana, bhikkhave, ratti, saḥassāni jīvanto dve, sattati-y-eva bhatta, saḥassāni bhuñjati catu, vīsati bhatta, saḥassāni hem'antānaṃ, catu, vīsati bhatta, saḥassāni gimhānaṃ, catu, vīsati bhatta, saḥassāni vassānaṃ saddhim mātu, thaññāya saddhim bhatt'antarāyena.*

³⁷ *Ratti'pi saṅkhātā, divā'pi saṅkhātā*, here there is a split cpd (*rattin, diva* as *ratt'p...divā'pi*), which is tr into idiomatic English as “day and night.”

³⁸ “Those are the foot of trees,” *etāni rukkha, mūlāni*. “Foot” here is an adv, like “bottom,” and as such always singular. Bodhi curiously has “the feet of trees” here (S:B 1372).

³⁹ Sometimes rendered as “empty place”.

⁴⁰ “Meditate!” *jhāyatha*, lit “cultivate *jhāna*” (M 1:45, 118; S 4:133, 4:359, 361, 362, 368, 373; A 3:87, 89, 4:139, 392). Syn *bhāvētha* (2nd pl). “cultivate!”

⁴¹ This section [§4.2] is stock: **Sallekha S** (M 8.18/1:46), **Dvedhā, vitakka S** (M 19.27/1:118), **Āneñja, sappāya S** (M 106.15/2:266 f), **Indriya Bhāvanā S** (M 152.18/3:302), **(Nava Purāṇa) Kamma S** (S 35.146/4:133) = SD 4.12; **Kāya S** (S 43.1/4:359) = SD12.21, all suttas in the same **Asaṅkhata Saṃyutta** (S 43.2-44/4:360-373); **Bhikkhu'upassaya S** (S 47.10/5:157), **Dhamma, vihāri S 1** (A 5.73/3:87), **Dhamma, vihāri S 2** (A 5.74/3:89), **Vinaya, dhara S** (A 7.70.4/4:139), **Araka S** (A 22.70.4/3:139); cf **Mahā Palobhana J** (J 507). The sentence “regret not later” (*mā pacchā vippaṭṭisārino ahuvattha*), in the second para, also occurs at **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16.5.19 + 20/2:147), (D 16.6.5/2:155 x3, the Buddha's last words) = **Kusinārā S** (A 4.76/2:79 f); **Devatā S** (A 9.19/4:392). For comy, see MA 1:195 f, SA 3:111 f, 266 f.