

(Gati) Mahānāma Sutta 1

The First Discourse to Mahānāma on His Destiny

[A true follower will not die in vain]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 55.21/5:369-371)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008

Introduction

Mahānāma¹ is a model lay Buddhist, often questioning the Buddha about the Dharma and lay practice. Of all such questions, understandably Mahānāma seems to be preoccupied with one: *death*. The (Gati) Mahānāma Sutta 1 (S 55.21) is the first of two similarly named discourses on the same topic: the other discourse is **the (Gati) Mahānāma Sutta 2** (S 55.22).² Both Suttas opens identically with Mahānāma telling the Buddha that he (Mahānāma) finds difficulty keeping mindfulness, and thus worries about his spiritual destiny should he die unmindfully. [§§1-3]

In **the (Gati) Mahānāma Sutta 1** (S 55.21), the Buddha reassures Mahānāma by saying that since he has the fivefold noble growth (*ariya, vaddha*) [§§4-5], he should have not fear of a good rebirth [§6]. What is interesting is that only in this Sutta does the Buddha specifically tell Mahānāma that his mind “has for a long time been fully developed” on the fivefold noble growth.

In **the (Gati) Mahānāma Sutta 2** (S 55.22), the Buddha simply states and defines of the four limbs of a streamwinner (*sotāpannassa aṅgāni*), that is, the qualities of a streamwinner of the path. The Sutta simply closes with the Buddha saying that just as a tree that leans to the east, when cut, would fall to the east, “even so, Mahānāma, the four states bends towards nirvana, slopes towards nirvana, tends towards nirvana.”

Apparently, especially since the two Suttas have identical openings, expressing the same sentiment and asking the same question, they probably formed a single sutta, but become separate in time. Alternatively, Mahānāma’s meeting with the Buddha as recorded in the (Gati) Mahānāma Sutta 1 occurs first (where he is simply reassured that he would not die in vain), and later on he approaches the Buddha again, as recorded in the (Gati) Sutta 2 (where he is told that he would attain nirvana in due course).

A related discourse is **the (Mahānāma) Gilāyana Sutta** (S 55.54), which closes with a very significant remark that if a dying wise layman has

directed [his mind] to the cessation of self-identity—then, Mahānāma, there is no difference between a lay follower who is thus liberated in mind and a monk who has been liberated in mind for a hundred years, that is, there is no difference between the one liberation and the other.

(S 55.54/5:410) = SD 4.10

This means that the layman dies an arhat.³

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¹ For more information on Mahānāma, see **(Mahānāma) Gilāyana S** (S 55.54) = SD 4.10 Intro (1).

² S 55.22/5:371 = SD 23.1b.

³ There are only two canonical cases of layman arhats, viz, Yasa (who later ordains, V 1:17) and Bāhiya Dāru-cīriya (who dies shortly). Bāhiya Dāru,cīriya (U 1.10/6-9; Ap 2:475 ff; AA 1:282; DhA 2:209 ff; UA 77 ff). The **Kathā,vatthu** (Kvu 4.1/267) mentions Yasa, Uttiya the householder and Setu the brahmin youth as examples of layman arhats. The **Milinda,pañha** (Miln 264-266; cf 242 ff, 246 ff), too, states that a lay person can become an arhat, but adds that a layman who attains arhathood either renounces the world that day or passes away into final nirvana (Miln 266). MA mentions Santati the privy councillor, Uggasena the seth’s son, and the boy Vīta,soka as examples of layman arhats (MA 3:196). [“Seth” is the modern Indian cognate for *sethī*, and is found in the OED, def as “a leading Hindu merchant or banker,” where *Hindu* clearly is non-religious, but means simply “native Indian.”] In **Tevijja Vaccha,gotta S** (M 71), when Vacchagotta asks, “Master Gotama, is there any householder who, without abandoning the householder’s fetters, when the body has broken up, makes an end of suffering?” the Buddha answers there is none (M 71.11/1:483). Cf Dh 142.

The First Discourse to Mahānāma on His Destiny (S 55.21/5:369-371)

[369]

1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in Nigrodha's Monastery in Sakya country.

Mahānāma is concerned about his dying

2 Then Mahānāma the Sakya approached the Blessed One, saluted him, and sat down at one side. Seated thus at one side, Mahānāma the Sakya said this to the Blessed One:

3 "Bhante, this Kapila, vatthu is wealthy and prosperous, belonging to the people, well-populated, thickly crowded [massed with troops].⁴

Bhante, in the evening, after visiting the Blessed One or a monk worthy of esteem, as I was entering Kapila, vatthu, I would come across an erratic elephant, an erratic horse, an erratic person (hurrying about aimlessly).⁵

At that time, bhante, my mindfulness towards the Blessed One is truly muddled. My mindfulness towards the Dharma is truly muddled. My mindfulness towards the Sangha is truly muddled.

The thought then occurred to me:

'If I were to die at this very moment, what would be my destination, what my future course?''⁶

4a "Fear not, Mahānāma! Fear not, Mahānāma! Your death will not be a bad one; your passing will not be a bad one."⁷

The fivefold noble growth⁸

4b Mahānāma, even for a person whose mind has for a long time been fully developed in faith, fully developed in moral virtue, fully developed in learning, fully developed in charity, and fully developed in wisdom,

right here, crows, vultures, hawks, dogs, jackals, or various worms and bugs eat his body,⁹ which is form made up of the four primary elements,¹⁰ born from mother [370] and father, built up on rice and porridge, subject to impermanence, rubbing, pressing, breaking up, and crumbling.¹¹

⁴ *Iddhañ c'eva phītañ ca bāhu, jaññañ ākiñña, manussañ sambādha, vyūham:* S 2:106 (with *vuddhi, vepulla-p, -pattam* in place of *sambādha, vyūham*), 5:369, 371; Nett 133. ... *ākiñña, manussañ:* M 2:71+72; S 3:215. Cf D 2:113, 219, 3:136-138; S 2:107, 4:311, 5:262; U 64. Comy seems to suggest that *vyūha* are major roads (*magga*), which are said to be "congested" (*sambādha*) with traffic of beings and transport (S 3:287). The phrase *sambādha, vyūha* however can also mean "massed with troops," meaning the city is well guarded.

⁵ *Bhantena*, from *bhamati* ("it whirls about," Dh 371: *bhamassu*). Comy glosses *bhantena* as "wandering erratically about here and there, roaming restlessly" (*ito c'ito ca paribbhamantena uddhata, cārinā*, SA 3:287).

⁶ *Imehi cāham samaye kālam kareyyam kā mamassa gati, ko abhisamparāyo' ti?*

⁷ At this time, Mahānāma is at least a streamwinner, probably a once-returner, hence the Buddha reassures him that his death would not be in vain. (S:B 1957 n338)

⁸ *Ariya, vaḍḍhi*, which (**Sāvika**) **Vaḍḍhi S 1** (S 37.34/4:250 = SD 3.4 Intro 3.3), (**Sāvaka**) **Vaḍḍhi S** (A 5.63 = SD 3.4 Intro 3.3) and (**Sāvika**) **Vaḍḍhi S 2** (A 5.64 = SD 3.4 Intro 3.4) say, when cultivated by the noble disciple (male or female), they "will grow in the noble growth [ie walk the path to awakening], gain the essence, win the best of the body (ie the restraint of body and speech in terms of mindfulness)" (*ariyāya vaḍḍhiyā vaḍḍhati sār'ādāyī ca hoti var'ādāyī ca hoti kāyassā ti*, A 5.63-64/3:80). On more detailed meaning of "the body" (*kāya*) here, see (**Sāvaka**) **Vaḍḍhi S** (A 5.63.2/3:80) = SD 3.4 Intro (3). On the opp of these 5 qualities, see **Entering the Stream** = SD 3.3 (5.3). A simpler set of qualities—minus "learning" (*suta*)—taught to Mahānāma is that of the 4 qualities of a lay follower—(1) moral virtue, (2) faith, (3) charity, and (4) wisdom—found in (**Upāsaka, sampadā**) **Mahānāma S** (S 55.37/5:395) = SD 6.2.

But his mind that has for a long time been
 fully developed in faith,
 fully developed in moral virtue,
 fully developed in learning,
 fully developed in charity, and
 fully developed in wisdom—
 goes upwards, goes to distinction.¹²

5 THE SUBMERGED POT OF GHEE. Mahānāma, just as a strong man were to submerge a pot of ghee or a pot of oil in a deep pool of water, and then break it. All of its shards and pieces would sink downwards, but its ghee or oil would float upwards, go to the top;¹³

even so, Mahānāma, the mind that has for a long time been
 fully developed in faith,
 fully developed in moral virtue,
 fully developed in learning,
 fully developed in charity, and
 fully developed in wisdom—
 goes upwards, goes to distinction.

Mahānāma is reassured

6 Now, Mahānāma, your mind has for a long time been
 fully developed in faith,
 fully developed in moral virtue,
 fully developed in learning,
 fully developed in charity, and
 fully developed in wisdom— [371]

Fear not, Mahānāma! Fear not, Mahānāma! Your death will not be a bad one; your passing will not be a bad one.”

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⁹ “Right here, crows...eat this body,” *taṃ (kāyaṃ) idh’eva kākā vā khādanti, gijjhā vā khādanti, kulalā vā khādanti, sunakhā vā khādanti, sigālā vā khādanti, vividhā vā pāṇaka,jātā khādanti*: see V 3:105; D 2:295 = M 1:58; S 5:370; Sn 201; J 1:500, 6:246; Kvu 136 = 271.

¹⁰ The 4 great (or primary) elements (*mahā,bhūtā*): earth, water, fire, wind: see **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62.8-11/1:421-423) = SD 3.11; also D 1:214 Vism 11.27 Abhs 154.

¹¹ “This body...and dispersal,” *ayaṃ kāyo rūpī cātum,mahā,bhūtiko mātā,pettika,sambhavo odana,kummāss-ūpacayo anicc’ucchādana,parimaddana,bhedana,viddhaṃsana,dhammo*: **D 2.83 f/1:76 (×2) = M 109.9/2:17; M 7.29/2:17 (×2), 23.4/1:144, 74.9/500; S 35.105/4:83 = A 9.15.2/4:386; S 55.21/5:369 f; Nigrodha,miga J 12/1:146. Cf śatana,patana,vikiraṇa,vidhvamsanā,dharmatā** (Divy 112.6).

¹² *Taṃ uddhaṇ,gāmi hoti visesa,gāmi*. We see here the mind (*citta*) here is “existential consciousness,” ie, a personal continuity that survives the body’s death, bringing with it the being’s karma and its fruits. The disciple “goes to distinction” (*visesa,gāmi*) by attaining streamwinning or higher, and thereby attaining better rebirth culminating in nirvana.

¹³ This simile of the pot is found in **Asi,bandhaka,putta S** (S 42.6/4:313 f) in a different context.