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Yodh'ājīva Sutta

The Discourse to Yodh'ājīva | S 42.3

Theme: The mercenary killer's karma

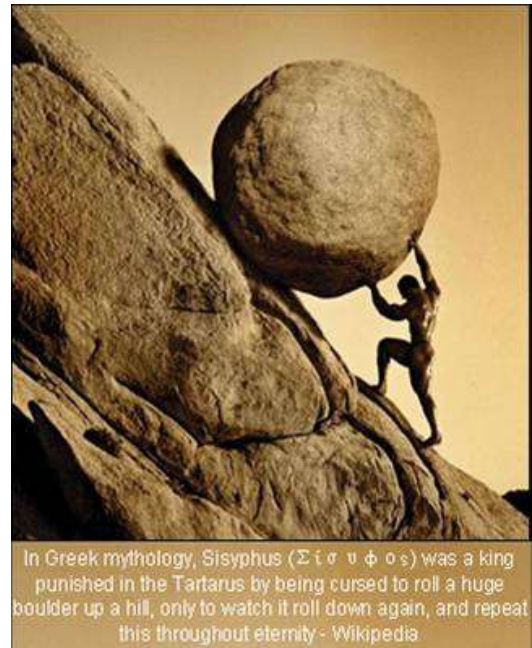
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2006

1 Suffering and enjoying it!

1.1 Like the **Tāla,puṭa Sutta** (S 42.2),¹ the **Yodh'ājīva Sutta** (S 42.3) (which follows it in the Gāmaṇi Sāmyutta), is about the karmic fruit of wrong livelihood. In either case, the protagonist asks the Buddha a question about their livelihood, but he is reluctant to answer, as it would not be spiritually helpful. However, the effect of the teaching here is not in the actual answer, but in the delaying of the answer, until the third round, which emphasizes on the negative *aspects* of the work (as in the Tāla,puṭa Sutta), and the negative *nature* of the job itself (as in the Yodh'ājīva Sutta).

In the **Tāla,puṭa Sutta** (S 42.2), the Buddha explains to Tāla,puṭa that if the stage-acting is rooted in greed, or hate or delusion, and arouses even more of these unwholesome roots in the audience, the actor creates bad karma, resulting in rebirth in a “laughing hell.” Although the Commentaries take pains to say that this 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 task²—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.³

1.2 The **Yodh'ājīva Sutta** (S 42.3) is a warning against violent livelihood, and the worst kind is being a mercenary, that is, earning a living from killing other humans on a massive scale. Even then, the Sutta is careful to show that a person is not his job, but *what he actually does*. So here, a mercenary “strives and exerts himself in battle” (*saṅgāme ussahati vāyamati*) [§3 etc]. In doing so habitually, he is reborn in the “hell of fallen warriors,” presumably a Valhalla-like⁴ hell where they fight and suffer pains interminably, like Prometheus⁵ bound to the rocks.



¹ S 42.2/4:306-308 @ SD 20.8.

² 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.”

³ See an interesting story of **Isi,dāsī**, on the karmic fate of one obsessed with sex: **Why some marriages fail**, SD 3.8(I).

⁴ Valhalla (properly, “Val-hall,” from Old Norse *Valhöll*, “hall of the slain”). In Norse (Viking) mythology, everyday, the slain warriors will assist Odin in Ragnarök, the gods’ final conflict with the giants. Having armed themselves, they ride forth by the thousands to battle on the plains of Asgard. Those who die fighting will be brought back to life. At night, they return to Valhalla to feast on the boar Sæhrímnir and enjoy intoxicating drinks. Although this is regarded as a mythical heaven, the cyclic nature of its events suggests a samsaric existence.

⁵ In Greek mythology, **Prometheus** (ancient Greek, Προμηθεύς, “forethought”), was a Titan, known for his cunning, who stole fire from Zeus and gave it to mortals. For this, Zeus punished him by chaining him to a rock, where a vulture daily comes and eats his liver, which regenerates in the night. Although Prometheus is said to come from

1.3 Both the Suttas give a similar warning that even to *consider* such wrong conduct to be right livelihood is unwholesome, “for an individual with wrong view, there is one of two destinies, either hell or an animal birth.”⁶ This is understandable, as it is the thought that leads to the act, which becomes a habit.

Both Tāla,puṭa the dance manager and Yodh'ājīva the headman weep at the end of the Buddha's admonition, regretting how they have been misled by their respective gurus. Tāla,puṭa becomes a monk, but Yodh'ājīva only goes for refuge. It is therefore clear that Tāla,puṭa has switched to *the* right livelihood, that of renunciation. However, we are not told what new livelihood that Yodh'ājīva turns to.



Prometheus by Elsie Russell
(1994)

The Discourse to Yodh'ājīva

S 42.3

1 [At one time the Blessed One was staying in the squirrels' feeding-ground in the Bamboo Grove near Rājagaha.]⁷

The mercenary's question

2 Then the headman Yodh'ājīva [the mercenary]⁸ 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, the headman Yodh'ājīva said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, I have heard it being said amongst mercenaries in the ancient lineage of teachers, thus, ‘For a mercenary who strives and exerts himself in battle, after death, with the body's breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the fallen-warrior⁹ devas.’¹⁰ What does the Blessed One say about that?”

“Enough, headman, let it be! Don't ask me that.”

Gk *pro* (before) + *manthano* (learn), this is actually folk etymology. Its root is clearly in the Proto-Indo-European from which comes Vedic *pra* √MATH or MANTH, meaning “to tear or strike off, drag away (indirectly, to steal).” The Vedic myth of fire's theft by Mātari,śvan (ie Agni or a divine being close to him, usu the messenger of Vivasvat, who brings down the hidden fire to the Bhṛgus) is an analogue to the Greek account. (See B Fortson, *Indian European Language and Culture*, 2004:27; G S Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany*, 2004:214 f). Cf *pramantha*, the rubbing stick used to create fire. Also possible is the connection of Prometheus to Skt *pra* (before) + √MAN, “to think.”

⁶ 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).

⁷ Following the preceding text, **Tāla,puṭa S** (S 42.2/4:306), SD 20.8.

⁸ Comy: “Yodh'ājīva means one who earns his living through warfare” (*Yodh'ājīvo ti yuddhena jīvikam kappanako*), and that it given by the elders of the Dharma redactors (*dhamma,saṅgahaka-t,therehi evam gahita,nāmo*) (SA 3:103). As such, we do not know the protagonist's name. *Yodh'ājīva* simply means “mercenary,” which is here used as a nickname. It is awkward to render *yodh'ājīvo gāmaṇī* as “the headman mercenary” or “the mercenary headman.”

⁹ Be *parañjitā*; Ce *sarañjitā*; Ee *sārañjitā*; Se *parañjitā*.

¹⁰ *Yo so yodh'ājīvo saṅgāme ussahati vāyamati, tam enaṃ ussahannaṃ vāyamannaṃ vāyamantaṃ pare hananti pariyaṇḍenti, so kāyassa bhedaṃ param,marañā sarañjitānaṃ devānaṃ saḥavyataṃ upapajjati ti.*

4 For a second time, the headman Yodhājīva said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, I have heard it being said amongst mercenaries in the ancient lineage of teachers, thus, ‘For a mercenary who strives and exerts himself in battle, after death, with the body’s breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the fallen-warrior devas.’ What does the Blessed One say about that?”

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

5a For a third time, the headman Yodhājīva said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, I have heard it being said amongst mercenaries in the ancient lineage of teachers, thus, ‘For a mercenary who strives and exerts himself in battle, after death, with the body’s breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the fallen-warrior devas.’ What does the Blessed One say about that?” [309]

5b “Surely, headman, I’ve not got through to you¹¹ when I say, ‘Enough, headman, let it be! Don’t ask me that.’ But still, I will answer you.

The Buddha’s answer

6a Headman, for a mercenary who strives and exerts himself in battle, his mind is already debased, depraved, misdirected, even before that, thinking: ‘Let these beings be slain, or slaughtered, or destroyed, or exterminated!’

If, while he is striving and exerting himself, and others slay him or seize him, then with the body’s breaking up, *he is reborn in the fallen-warrior hell!*¹²

6b If, however, he has the view thus, ‘For a mercenary who strives and exerts himself in battle, after death, with the body’s breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the fallen-warrior devas’: this is a wrong view.

Now, headman, for an individual with wrong view, there is one of two destinies, either hell or an animal birth.¹³

7 When this was said, the headman Yodhājīva cried out and burst into tears.

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

“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 mercenaries in the ancient lineage of teachers, thus, ‘For a mercenary, who strives and exerts himself in battle, after death, with the body’s breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the fallen-warrior devas.’”

Yodhājīva takes refuge

8 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 the Blessed Gotama remember me as a lay follower who has gone for refuge, from this day forth, for life.”

— evaṃ —

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¹¹ *Addhā kho tyāhaṃ gāmaṇī na labhāmi. ‘alaṃ gāmaṇī tiṭṭhat’etaṃ mā maṃ etaṃ pucchī ti.* The cautious response, *addhā kho tyāhaṃ gāmaṇī na labhāmi* 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; **Yodhājīva 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.

¹² Comy says that this is not a separate hell, but a section of Avīci where beings appear as warriors fallen in battle (SA 3:104).

¹³ See Intro.