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Ruṇṇa Sutta

The Discourse on Lamentation | A 3.103/1:261
 Theme: The way of the world is not for monastics
 Translated by Piya Tan ©2007, 2011

1 Highlights of the Ruṇṇa Sutta

1.1 SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

1.1.1 The group of six monks. The Ruṇṇa Sutta (A 3.103), says the Commentary, records the Buddha's reprimand of the "group of six monks" (*cha-b, baggiya*) for their misconduct (*anācāra*). It is said that they were misconducting themselves by singing, dancing and laughing (AA 2:366).¹ The Vinaya records how, on numerous occasions, they miscondacted themselves, doing things that should not be done, neglecting the training-rules and ever exploiting loopholes in the monastic rules.² As such, they were called "bad shameless monks."³

Besides the offences of the group of six, their leaders, Assaji and Punabbasu, were also the occasions for the introduction of numerous Vinaya rules and disciplinary actions.⁴ They used to grow flowers, make wreaths and garlands, and send them to girls and women of respectable families and also to slave girls, to have affairs with such women, and disregard the precepts regarding the eating of food at the wrong time, using perfumes, dancing, playing music, singing, visiting shows, and playing various kinds of games—violating altogether eighteen precepts (VA 3:625).⁵

Their abandoned ways, however, made them popular with the lay people, and virtuous monks who did not belong to their group, were not welcomed by the people of their area.⁶ The Commentaries (eg, DA 2:525) mention the Assaji-Punabbasuka monks as an example of those who disregarded all the precepts that they had undertaken to observe.⁷

The group of six, as such, is the epitome of those who, although they have themselves taken up monastic vows, break practically every rule in the book. As a result, they become quite popular with those with little or no knowledge or experience of the Dharma, and so perceive them as being "compassionately liberal" or keeping up with the times. In this sense, many of us today in the Buddhist fold tend to be just like the group of six, or their supporters. Such an attitude, if widespread enough or strong enough, would severely weaken, even destroy, the teaching.⁸

1.1.2 The moralities. In an ancient pericope, called "the moralities" (*sila*), found in all the first thirteen suttas of the Dīgha Nikāya, and which enumerates the moral virtues of a true monastic, it says that "the recluse Gotama abstains from dancing, singing, music and from watching shows."⁹ This shows that even before the Pāṭimokkha was codified, any such conduct is regarded as improper.

The Bhikkhuṇī Pāṭimokkha prohibits nuns from watching any performance of dancing, singing, or music, breaching which entails an offence of expiation (*pācittiya*).¹⁰ The "training" (*sekhiya*) rules are common to both the orders. *Sekhiya* rules 11 & 12 say that a monk or a nun should not "laugh loudly"

¹ See eg Mv 5.3.1 = V 2:108. On this group of 6 monks, see **Kiṭṭā, giri S** (M 70) @ SD 11.1 (3.1).

² V 2:107 f, 3:179-184, 4:267; VA 3:613 f ≠ V 2:9; DhA 2:108 ad Dh 77 = Tha 994, cf ThaA Ce 2:115; AA 165; V 2:171; DA 2:252.

³ *Pāpaka alajjino bhikkhū* (1:91,28); V 1:91; *alajjino ime, āvuso, cha-b, baggiyā bhikkhū*, "Avuso, this group of six monks is shameless." (V 4:140).

⁴ V 2:8-15 (that main account), 2:107 f, 3:179-184, 4:267; VA 3:613 f ≠ V 2:9; DhA 2:108 ad Dh 77 = Tha 994, cf ThaA Ce 2:115; AA 165; V 2:171; DA 2:252.

⁵ V 2:9-10.

⁶ V 2:10-12.

⁷ See further **Kiṭṭā, giri S** (M 70) @ SD 11.1 (3.1).

⁸ See the dangers from the wrong kinds of teachers, see **Cult Buddhism** = SD 34.5. See also **Dharma-ending age** = SD 1.10.

⁹ **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1.10(10)/1:5) = SD 25.2: also in D 2-13 ad loc.

¹⁰ Bhī Pāc 10 = V 4:267, 29 f.

(*ujjagghikā*)¹¹ whether going or sitting “among houses” (that is, in an inhabited area).¹² Although the breach of the *Sekhiya* rules does not entail any offence, its purpose is to remind monastics that their demeanour should be calm, restrained and mindful so as to inspire faith in the laity and non-Buddhists.¹³

1.2 MODERN SIGNIFICANCE

1.2.1 Sensual pleasure as a wholesome experience. It is important to understand what the Ruṇṇa Sutta is *not* saying. It does not say that singing, dancing and laughing are bad or that lay Buddhists should not enjoy themselves in such a manner. The historical context of the Sutta, as we have noted, is that of the group of six monks misbehaving themselves [1.1.1].

In the **Nibbedhika (Pariyāya) Sutta** (A 6.63), the Buddha declares that sense-objects are not in themselves pleasurable (or unpleasant), but we (our minds) make them so, depending on how we perceive them, thus:

The thought of passion is a person’s sensuality:

There is no sensuality in what is beautiful (*citra*) in the world.

The thought of passion is a person’s sensuality:

What is beautiful in the world remains as they are.

So here the wise remove the desire for them.¹⁴

(A 6.63.3/3:410 f) = SD 6.11

All Buddhist cultures have evolved their own Buddhist art forms celebrating the truth and beauty of the teaching. As a rule, such Buddhist paintings, chants, music, even rituals, understood and used in a wholesome way, can help us in becoming more mindful, and even work to inspire us to go on to study the Dharma or to meditate. The key idea here is to consistently apply some meditation, especially the perception of impermanence (*anicca saññā*), in the course of such activities.¹⁵

Singing and dancing for the Dharma, especially as a wholesome expression of the energies and creativity of Buddhist youths, can serve to build up their fellowship so that they mature socially to turn to deeper Dharma in due course. As long as such exuberance is expressed within the spirit of the five precepts, it is unlikely to have any negative consequences. In fact, **the Mahā Vaccha, gotta Sutta** (M 73) even speaks of lay disciples, dressed in white, enjoying sense-pleasures (*gihī odāta, vasano kāma, bhogī*),¹⁶ who are streamwinners.¹⁷ That is, as long as we keep up our perception of impermanence.¹⁸ Furthermore, we have the case of a monk, Nāga, samāla, who awakened as an arhat on seeing a dancing woman! [2]

1.2.2 We are not always our job description. There are at least two suttas on livelihood telling us that we are not defined by our occupation but what we actually *do*. Someone may be a “fisherman,” for example, but he does not fish all his waking life. It is when he consciously or habitually traps and kills the fishes that he is creating bad karma. Similarly, even if we are not fishermen or butchers by profession, when we do fish or sell meat, we are doing wrong livelihood and accumulating bad karma.

¹¹ *Ujjagghikā* (f; cf BHSD *uccagghati* & *ujjāṅkika*), loud laughter, laughing loudly; der from *ujjagghi* from *ujjagghati* (*ud* + √JAGGH [cf Skt √JAKS, to laugh] + *a*), “laughs loudly, laughs at” + suffix *-ikā* = ins of attendant circumstances in fem sg. See Nānatusita 2008: 255. In the origin-story, “laughing a loud laughter” (*mahā, hasitam hasanto*, V 4:187) is faulted. Just a gentle smile is sufficient response when there is an occasion for laughter (*hasanīyasmim vatthusmim mihita, mattam karoti*, V 4:187). Other forms incl *an-pa-jagghati*, “to laugh at, to make fun of” (A 1:192,20); *anu-jagghati* or *anu-jagghati*, “to laugh at, to ridicule” (*anujagghantā mamam*, D 1:91,18).

¹² Sekh 11-12 = V 4:187,16 f.

¹³ On how Sāriputta, when he was still a wanderer, was inspired by Assaji’s demeanour (V 1:40), see *Upāya* = SD 10.8 (2.2.6.4).

¹⁴ This verse, which explains the previous prose sentence, “plays upon the double meaning of *kāma*, emphasizes that purification is to be achieved by mastering the defilement of sensuality, not by fleeing [from] sensually enticing objects.” (A:ÑB 1999:302 n34). An almost identical verse (without line c) is found in **the Na Santi Sutta** (S 1.34). See also **Mine: The nature of craving** = SD 19.3 (1.2).

¹⁵ See **Entering the stream** = SD 3.3.

¹⁶ M 73.10/1:491 = SD 27.4.

¹⁷ On **sex & marriage**, see **Sexuality** = SD 31.7 (4.2).

¹⁸ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1/3:225) = SD 16.7.

From the Tāla,puṭa Sutta (S 42.2),¹⁹ we learn that it is important to note here that the guilty party consists of those whose motivation is rooted in greed, hate or delusion, 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, loving-kindness and wisdom. (Novices and monastics are bound by the rules that prohibit giving such performances, and even watching them.)²⁰

The Yodh’ājīva Sutta (S 42.3), on the other hand, is a warning against *violent* livelihood, and the worst kind is that of a mercenary, that is, one earning a living by killing other humans, especially on a massive scale. Even then, the Sutta is careful to show that a person is not his job description, but *what he actually does*. So here, a *mercenary* “strives and exerts himself in battle” (*saṅgāme ussahati vāyamati*).²¹ In doing so habitually, he is reborn in the “hell of fallen warriors,” presumably a Valhalla-like²² hell, where they fight and suffer pains interminably, like Prometheus²³ bound to the rocks.²⁴

There are times when we are thrown into an occupation, as it were. It could be a family trade (such as butchering) or a well paying jobs (such as working in the army). If the habitual tasks that our occupations demand are karmically negative, then we should cut them down to a minimum, or find ways of mitigating the negative impact of what we are doing. At the same time, we should watch out for opportunities for a more wholesome occupation. Otherwise, whenever we have the opportunity, we should cultivate deeds of merit and practise mindfulness or meditate.

There is hope even for those in the most unwholesome or violent of livelihoods. A good example is that of **Tamba,dāṭhika Cora,ghātaka** (DhA 8.1), Coppertothe public executioner, who after a bloody career as a bandit, killed his own comrades and then became executioner of criminals for fifty years. He met the elder Sāriputta whose teachings uplifted his mind, lightening the burden of his evil karma so that he attained heavenly rebirth. (DhA 8.1/2:202 ff)²⁵

2 Nāga,samāla Thera,gāthā

The elder Nāga,samāla is an example of a monk who awakened to arhathood under rather a quaint circumstance. It is said that *he sees a dancing woman*, and as a result, he awakens (Tha 267-270). However, it is not the mere fact of seeing an external event here that brings about his liberation. It is how he *sees* the vision before him.

During the time of the Buddha Padumuttara,²⁶ Nāga,samāla was born in a good family. On reaching adolescence,²⁷ he saw the Buddha walking in the burning hot sun during the hot season. With a mind bright in faith, he offered the Buddha an umbrella. On account of that karma, he went through cycles of lives amongst the gods and humans.

¹⁹ S 42.2/4:306-308 = SD 20.8, esp (3) “Are dancing and acting wrong livelihood?”

²⁰ Further, see **Yodh’ājīva S** (S 42.3/4:308 f) = SD 23.3 Intro.

²¹ S 42.3.3/4:308 & passim = SD 23.3.

²² Valhalla (properly, “Val-hall,” from Old Norse *Valhöll*, “hall of the slain”). In Norse (Viking) mythology, the slain warriors will daily 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.

²³ 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. See S 42.3 @ SD 23.3 Intro n.

²⁴ S 42.3/4:308 f = SD 23.3.

²⁵ See **Mahā Kamma Vibhaṅga S** (M 136) @ SD 4.16 (2).

²⁶ Ie the 16th Buddha before our Buddha Gotama: see **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14) = SD 49.8 (2).

²⁷ *Viññutam patto*, ie came of age. *Viññuta* actually has 2 senses: (1) “puberty or adolescence, ie marriageable age” (V 1:269, 2:278; J 1:231, 3:437; C 3.10.6/32; ThaA 1:81; PvA 3); (1) “intelligence” (CA 238), which is rare.

Born into a royal Sakya family, he is named Nāga,samāla. When he comes of age, out of faith, he renounces the world and becomes an attendant of the Buddha.²⁸ One day, after entering the city on his almsround, he sees a certain well-dressed-up dancing girl dancing to music on the main road.

Reflecting thus: “This twisting about of the karma-generated body on account of the pervasion of the wind element acting on the mind—impermanent, indeed, are formations!” He establishes his mind on decay and change, arousing insight, and attains arhathood²⁹ (ThaA 2:110). Rejoicing in his attainment, he utters these verses:

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|---|--|--|-----------------------|
| 1 | <i>Alaṅkatā suvasanā
mālinī candan’ussadā
majjhe mahā,pathe nārī
turiye naccati naṭṭakī</i> | Bedecked, well-dressed,
garlanded, anointed with sandalwood,
a woman in the middle of the highroad,
a dancing girl, dancing to music. | Tha 267 |
| 2 | <i>Piṇḍikāya pavitṭho ’ham
gacchanto nam udikkhisam
alaṅkataṃ suvasanaṃ
maccu,pāsaṃ va oḍḍitaṃ</i> | For alms, I had entered (the city).
As I was going, I saw her,
bedecked, well-dressed,
like death’s snare laid out. | Tha 268 |
| 3 | <i>Tato me manasīkāro
yoniso udapajjatha
āḍḍīnavo pāturahu
nibbidā samatiṭṭhatha³⁰</i> | Then wise attention
arose in me;
the danger is clear—
revulsion was established. | Tha 269 |
| 4 | <i>Tato cittaṃ vimucci me
passa dhamma,sudhammataṃ
tisso vijjā anuppattā
kataṃ buddhassa sāsanān ti.</i> | Then my mind was liberated:
see, the true goodness of the Dharma!
The three knowledges have been attained,
done is the Buddha teaching. | Tha 270 ³¹ |

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The Discourse on Lamentation

A 3.103/1:261

- 1 *Runṇam idaṃ, bhikkhave, ariyassa vinaye yad idaṃ gītāṃ.*
 2 *Ummattakam idaṃ, bhikkhave, ariyassa vinaye yad idaṃ naccāṃ.*
 3 *Komāarakam idaṃ, bhikkhave, ariyassa vinaye yad idaṃ ativelāṃ danta,vidaṃsaka,hasitaṃ.*
 4 *Tasmā-t-īha, bhikkhave, setu,ghāto gīte, setu,ghāto nacce, alaṃ vo dhamma-p,pamoditānaṃ
sataṃ sitaṃ sita,mattāyāti.*

- 1 In the noble ones’ discipline, bhikshus, this is wailing, that is to say, *singing*.
 2 In the noble ones’ discipline, bhikshus, this is madness, that is to say, *dancing*.

²⁸ Nāga,samāla is one of the Buddha’s personal attendant—the others were Upavāna, Nāgita, Meghiya—during the first 20 years of the Buddha’s ministry (MA 2:53; UA 425; VA 1:178).

²⁹ *Ayaṃ citta,kiriya,vāyo,dhātu,vipphāra,vasena karaja,kāyassa tathā tathā parivatti, aho aniccā saṅkhārāti kha-ya,vayaṃ paṭṭhapetvā vipassanaṃ ussukkāpetvā arahattaṃ pāpuṇi.*

³⁰ Ka *samatiṭṭhatha*. On *samatiṭṭhatha*, see Tha:N 173 n269.

³¹ See Ñāṇananda 2004:129 & 197.

3 In the noble ones' discipline, bhikshus, this is childishness, that is to say, *excessive laughter, showing one's teeth*.³²

4 Therefore, bhikshus, destroy the bridge to singing! Destroy the bridge to dancing! Enough for you, if you are pleased in the Dharma, to just mindfully smile.

— evaṃ —

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111012; 111014; 111227; 120414; 120415; 120427

³² Cf J 3:222.