

15

(Catukka) Sīha Sutta

The Lion Discourse (the Fours) | A 4.33

Theme: Even the gods fear impermanence

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2009, 2013

1 Sutta highlights

1.1 THE NATURE OF EXISTENCE. The (Catukka) Sīha Sutta (A 4.33) is a reflection on impermanence, or more exactly, on impermanence and its universality: even the gods in their high heavens, no matter how long-lived, by the very fact that they live, would one day die. The rationale is very simple: whatever exists (in the real, not mythical or imaginary or hypothetical senses) must exist in time. Therefore, whatever exists is necessarily impermanent.

1.2 SUTTA THEMES. Structurally, the (Catukka) Sīha Sutta (A 4.33) is identical to the (Anicca) Sīha Sutta (S 22.78),¹ but they differ in their essential teachings. While the (Anicca) Sīha Sutta teaches the impermanence of the 5 aggregates [§7.2], the (Catukka) Sīha Sutta teaches a 4-noble-truth model of the personal existence (*sakkāya*) [2].

1.3 As already noted [1.2], our Sutta here (A 4.33) differs from the (Anicca) Sīha Sutta (S 22.78) only in their respective teachings. While the (Catukka) Sīha Sutta (A 4.33) teaches a 4-noble-truth model of self-identity (*sakkāya*) [§7.2],² the (Anicca) Sīha Sutta (S 22.78) teaches the impermanence of the 5 aggregates.³ A detailed description on how to reflect on the 5 aggregates has been given in the Introduction to the (Anicca) Sīha Sutta translation.⁴

2 Sakkāya

2.1 THE KEY LINE of the (Catukka) Sīha Sutta declares that even the gods “**are impermanent, unstable, ephemeral, all stuck in self-identity**” (*aniccā addhuvā asassatā sakkāya,pariyāpanna*) [§8.3]. The phrase, “all stuck in self-identity” (*sakkāya,pariyāpanna*) is a free translation to bring out the full sense of *sakkāya*, where the phrase is resolved as *pari* (all around) + *āpanna* (“attained, reached, got into, fallen into”). This is the main theme of the (Catukka) Sīha Sutta (A 4.33/2:33 f).

Jolted into the reality uncovered by the Buddha’s teaching [§8.2], as such, the gods reflect thus: “It seems, sirs, that we are impermanent, unstable, ephemeral, all stuck in self-identity” [§8.3]. This is of course an unawakened view. This is confirmed by what the Buddha says in the closing verse 12 and the words of the gods themselves in verse 14.

For, it is the self-identity view (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*) [2.2.3] that fetters us to this world, where what goes up must also come down. Even the highest gods themselves, when their good karma is exhausted, often fall right down into suffering states, like a cosmic “snakes and ladders” game.⁵

2.2 DEFINITION OF SAKKĀYA

2.2.1 Etymology & definitions. Scholars today generally agree that *sakkāya* (BHS *sat,kāya*) is not *sva-kāya* (“own body or person”), as suggested by R C Childers (*A Dictionary of the Pali Language*, 1875: 418) on the authority of a Sinhala scholar, Subhuti. *Sak-kāya* is *sat* + *kāya*,⁶ meaning “real, existent, body; individuality, personality” (BHSD 553); or “the body in being, the existing body or group (= -*nikāya* qv)” (PED 660 f); and as a technical term in Pali psychology almost equal to “personhood” or “individuality.”⁷

¹ S 22.78/3:84-86 = SD 42.10.

² On self-identity view (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*), see **Nakula,pitā S** (S 22.1) @ SD 5.4 (4).

³ S 22.78,7.2/3:85 = SD 42.10.

⁴ S 22.78 @ SD 42.10 (2).

⁵ See (**Nānā,kaṛaṇa**) **Puggala S 1** (A 4.123/2:126-128), SD 23.8a. On self-identity (*sakkāya*), see (**Catukka**) **Sīha S** (A 4.33) @ SD 42.15 (2).

⁶ W Geiger (rev ed K R Norman), *A Pali Grammar*, 2000: §14 n3 & PED: *sakkāya* for details of scholarly refs.

⁷ See **The person in Buddhism**, SD 29.6b.

The suttas define *sakkāya* as the 5 aggregates, such as in **the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44) and **the Sakkāya Sutta** (S 22.105).⁸ The Therī,gāthā Commentary, too, glosses *sakkāya* as the five aggregates.⁹

2.2.3 Sakkāya,diṭṭhi or “self-identity view” is a belief in an abiding self or soul, a wrong view of permanent, unchanging personality, a speculation as to the eternity or otherwise of one’s own individuality.¹⁰ In these passages this is explained as the belief that in one or other of the aggregates there is a permanent entity (*attā*).

The self-identity view is reflected in the phrase “All stuck in self-identity” [§8]. The Sutta’s Commentary explains the phrase, “all stuck in self-identity” (*sakkāya,pariyāpanna*), as referring to the 5 aggregates (*sakkāya,pariyāpannāti pañca-k,khandha,pariyāpannā*, SA 2:288). **The self-identity view** (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*) is a wrong view that in one or other of the aggregates (*khandha*), there is a permanent entity, an attā.¹¹

The same explanation, at greater length, is found in **the Diṭṭhi Kathā** or “Talk of Views” (Pm 1:143-151). As delusions about the self or soul can arise from any of 4 fixations (*abhinivesa*) concerning each of the 5 aggregates, we have 20 kinds of “self-views” (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*).¹² Fifteen of these are based on “self-identity-based eternalist views” (*sakkāya,vatthukā sassata,diṭṭhi*), and five are based on annihilationist views (*sakkāya,vatthukā uccheda,diṭṭhi*).¹³

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The Lion Discourse (on Impermanence)

A 4.33

- 1 Originating in Sāvattihī.
- 2 There the Blessed One addressed the monks and said this:

The parable of the lion

3 “The lion, bhikkhus, king of the beasts, in the evening emerges from his lair. Having emerged, he stretches himself, surveys the four quarters all around, roars his lion-roar thrice, and then leaves for his hunting-ground.

4 Bhikkhus, when the animals and creatures hear the roar of the lion, the king of the beasts, they, for the most part, are struck with fear, urgency,¹⁴ and trembling.¹⁵

Those that live in holes, enter their holes; the water-dwellers head into the waters; the forest-dwellers, seek the forests; winged birds resort to the skies.¹⁶

⁸ Respectively, M 44,2/1:299 = SD 40a.9 & S 22.105/3:159 = SD 42.18. Also A 2:34; Thī 165, 199, 339; DhsA 348; see also D 3:216 (cf D:RD 3:216,1); A 3:293, 401; Nm 109.

⁹ *Sakkāyasmin ti khandha,pañcake* (ThīA 170 ad Thī 199); *upādāna-k,khandha,pañcake* (ThīA 239 ad 339).

¹⁰ M 1:300 = 3:17 = Dhs 1003; S 3:16 f.

¹¹ For a detailed study of “self-identity view,” see **Emotional independence @ SD 40a.8 (3)**. See also ItA 2:-118 (cf 1:155). Cf “self-theory” (*atta,vāda*): **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22,23/1:137), SD 3.13.

¹² Dhs 1214-1217.

¹³ Pm 1:149, 150; SA 2:254 f. On self-identity view (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*), see **Nakula,pitā S** (S 22.1) @ SD 5.4 (4).

¹⁴ On “urgency” (*saṃvega*), usu (in human contexts), tr as “sense of urgency, spiritual urgency.” In the context here, that of animals, this emotion is that of fearful apprehension. See SD 9 (7f).

¹⁵ *Ye hi keci bhikkhave tiracchāna,gatā pāṇā sīhassa miga,rañño nadato saddaṃ suṇanti, yebhuyyena bhayaṃ saṃvegaṃ santāsaṃ āpajjanti*. The term “trembling” (*santāsa*) here might refer, amongst other things, to “delirium tremens” (DT), which usu includes extremely intense feelings of “impending doom.” Other symptoms are severe anxiety and feelings of imminent death.

¹⁶ *Bilaṃ bilāsayaṃ pavisanti, dakaṃ dakāsayaṃ pavisanti, vanaṃ vanāsayaṃ pavisanti, ākāsaṃ pakkhino bhajanti*.

5 Bhikshus, those royal elephants bound by stout bonds, in the villages, market towns and capitals —they break and burst their bonds, and flee about in terror, defaecating and urinating.

6 Bhikshus, so greatly powerful is the lion, the king of the beasts, amongst the animals and creatures, of great might and great majesty.

The Buddha's advent

7.1 Even so, bhikshus, when there arises in the world the Tathagata, the worthy, fully self-awakened, accomplished in knowledge and conduct, well-farer, knower of worlds, peerless guide of persons to be tamed, teacher of gods and humans, awakened, blessed.

7.2 He teaches the Dharma, thus:¹⁷

'This is self-identity.

iti sakkāyo

This is the arising of self-identity.

iti sakkāya, samudayo

This is the ending of self-identity.

iti sakkāya, nirodho

This is the way to the ending of self-identity.

iti sakkāya, nirodha, gāminī, paṭipadā

The Dharma's effects

8.1 Bhikshus, those devas [heavenly beings], long-lived, beautiful, great in joy, long dwelling in their divine mansions—

8.2 hearing the Tathagata's Dharma teaching, for the most part, are struck with fear, urgency, and trembling, thus:

8.3 'It seems, sirs, we are but impermanent, when we thought we were permanent!

It seems, sirs, we are but unstable, when we thought we were stable!

It seems, sirs, we are but ephemeral, when we thought we were eternal!

It seems, sirs, that we are impermanent, unstable, ephemeral, all stuck in self-identity.¹⁸

9 Bhikshus, so greatly powerful is the Tathagata, of such great might, such great majesty, in the world with its devas.

10 The Blessed One said this. Having said that, the Teacher, the well-farer, further said this: [34]

11 *Yadā buddho abhiññāya
dhamma, cakkam pavattayi
sa, devakassa lokassa
satthā appaṭipuggalo*

When the Buddha, through direct knowledge,
turned the wheel of truth
in this world with its devas,
the teacher, without a rival, (teaching)

12 *Sakkāyañ ca nirodhañ ca
sakkāyassa ca sambhavam
ariyañ c'atthangikam maggam
dukkhūpasama, gāminam*

the ending of self-identity,
and the arising of self-identity,
and the noble eightfold path,
the way to the stilling of suffering,

13 *ye pi dīgh'āyukā devā
vaṇṇavanto yasassino
bhītā santāsam āpāduṃ
sīhass'ev'itare migā*

even the long-lived devas
beautiful, of great fame,
are terrified, struck with trembling,
just as the other beasts hearing the lion's roar, saying:

¹⁷ In structure, our Sutta here (A 4.33) is identical to (Anicca) Sīha S (S 22.78), except for this teaching on the 4-noble truth model of self-identity (sakkāya), (Anicca) Sīha S teaches the impermanence of the 5 aggregates (A 4.33/-2:33 f), SD 42.10.

¹⁸ *Mayam pi kira bho aniccā adbhuvā asassatā sakkāya, pariyaṭpannāti*. "All stuck in self-identity" is a free tr to bring out the full sense of *sakkāya pari* (all around) + *āpanna* ("attained, reached, got into, fallen into"). This is our Sutta's main theme. On the term "self-identity" (*sak, kāya*), see Intro (2).

14 *Avītivattā sakkāyaṃ
aniccā kira bho mayāṃ
sutvā arahato vākyāṃ
vip̐pamuttassa tādino 'ti.*¹⁹

“We’ve not overcome self-identity;
we’re impermanent, sir, it seems,” (they say,
when they heard the word of the arhat,
the liberated, one who is such.

— evaṃ —

130228; 130310; 131111

¹⁹ Cf Dh 95; U 3.8/31. On *tādino*, see **Sabba Kamma Jaha S** (U 3.1.12/21) + SD 39.3 (1.4).