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(Kamma) Mallikā Sutta

The Discourse to Mallikā (on Karma) | A 4.197/2:202-205

or **Mallikā,devī Sutta** The Discourse to Queen Mallikā

Theme: Beauty, wealth and power as karmic fruits.

Translated by Piya Tan ©2009, 2012

1 Nature of karma

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY. The **(Kamma) Mallikā Sutta** (A 4.197) is a straightforward account of queen Mallikā’s¹ visit to the Buddha and questioning him on karma [§1.2] that would often be on the mind of many people, that is, why we “are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, in the heavens, in the suffering states”—we are faring in accordance with their karma.²

This opening is close to that of **the Cūḷa Kamma Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 135.3), but the latter deals with karma in greater detail. Only those passages of the (Kamma) Mallikā Sutta dealing with anger and irritability [§§2.1, 3.1] and lack of them [§§4.1, 5.1], jealousy [§2.3, 4, 5.3] and lack of it [§3.3, 5.3], generosity [§§2.2, 3.2, 5.2] and lack of it [§§3.2, 4.2], have close parallels there.³

The (Kamma) Mallikā Sutta deals only with beauty, influence and wealth. The theme of the Buddha’s teaching to Mallikā is that we are rooted in our past conduct [§§2-6].

If we had been habitually angry and easily angered, then we would be reborn ugly in some form. If we had been habitually jealous of others, we would not be influential. If we have been selfish and ungenerous, we would be reborn poor.

On the other hand, if we were not easily angered, then we would be reborn beautiful. If we had not been habitually jealous, we would be reborn with great influence. If we have been generous to others, we would attain great wealth when reborn.

When the Buddha finishes his instructions, Mallikā thus declares how she must have fared karma-wise in her past lives [§§7-14]. She then declares how she would conduct herself thenceforth [§15-18], and finally goes for refuge [§19].

1.2 THE TWO ASPECTS OF KARMA. The karmic model presented in the (Kamma) Mallikā Sutta is consequentialist, which emphasizes on the *results* of the action. In simple terms, this means that an action is worth doing if its result is good, but should be avoided if it is bad. This is in fact the basis of the pre-Buddhist notion of karma [2.2], that is, merit (*puñña*). This is the conception of karma that is that popular in the worldly sense, and which the Buddha accepts, insofar as it serves as a bridge towards the truly Buddhist conception of karma.

The essentially Buddhist conception of karma can be said to be that of “virtue ethics,” that is, it contributes to a better person and a happier life.⁴ This is in fact another way of looking at ethical training, the first of the three Buddhist trainings.⁵ But, in a strict Buddhist context, it should also include mental training (mindfulness and meditation): while the first training encompasses the discipline of *body* and *speech*, the second training is about *the mind*. These three—body, speech and mind—are the three karmic doors, the avenues of human actions.⁶

The proper training of three doors are famously laid out in the model of **the ten wholesome courses of action** (*kusala kamma, patha*), that is, three of the body (refraining from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct), four of speech (refraining from lying, from divisive speech, from harsh speech, from frivolous chatter), and three of the mind (refraining from covetousness, from ill will, from wrong views).

¹ On queen Mallikā, see **(Piya) Mallikā S** (S 3.8/1:75 = U 5.1/47) @ SD SD 38.7 (1).

² See eg **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.95-98/1:81-83) = SD 8.10.

³ Ie at M 135.9-14/3:204 f = SD 4.15.

⁴ See **Virtue ethics** = SD 18.11.

⁵ **The 3 trainings** (*ti, sikkhā*) are trainings in moral virtue, in mental concentration and in wisdom: see **Sīla samādhi paññā** = SD 21.6.

⁶ See **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41/1:285-290) & SD 5.7 (2.2.2).

Unlike the “merit” or *puñña* model, which is mostly external, dealing mostly with our physical and social being or “material happiness,” the “wholesome” or *kusala* model covers all the three doors, that is, the body, speech, and the mind. The focus, however, is on the last, the mind, as it is through mental cultivation that we finally and fully attain awakening and liberation.

2 Related suttas on karma

2.1 ISAYO SAMUDDAKA SUTTA (S 11.10). Here we are tempted to have a simplistic view of karma that seems to work by way of a trade-off as “good begets good, bad begets bad” or “as we sow, so we shall reap,” as stated, for example, in the **Isayo Samuddaka Sutta** (S 11.10).⁷ This is in fact seemed to be the popular notion of karma outside of Buddhism, even in the Buddha’s time, which is, for example, taught by Nigaṇṭha Nāta,putta [2.2].

According to an ancient Indian story, this famous saying on karma is actually part of a curse used by some seaside rishis placed on the asura leader, Sambara, for destroying their dwelling every time the asuras battled the devas. In fact, it has nothing to do with karma as we know it in Buddhism. The rishis’ curse worked on its own, it seems, and hurt the asuras as planned by the rishis.⁸

2.2 SAṆKHA, DHAMA SUTTA (S 42.8). Nigaṇṭha Nāta,putta views that anyone at all who kills, steals, commits sexual misconduct, or lies, is bound for hell. The Buddha rejects this as being simplistic and deterministic since it seems as if it is the frequency of an action that would destine us for hell. Since we more frequently do none of these things, none of us would go apparently to hell!

It is how we regard such unwholesome actions, that is, enjoying them and habitually doing them, that would propel us into a suffering state. However, if we examine such actions of ours, realizing their negativity, regretting them, and aspire to rise above them, we would be able to turn away from the suffering states.

This happiness is ascertained when we cultivate the four divine abodes (lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity). We should pervade such a wholesome state everywhere unconditionally like a conch-blower blowing a conch, and its sound pervading all around.⁹

2.3 LOṆA, PHALA SUTTA (A 3.99) stands as a very vital counterpoint of the early Buddhist teaching on karma against that of the brahminical sacrificial efficacy. The Sutta, in fact, opens with the Buddha’s outright rejection of the notion that ‘Whatever karma a person performs, he would experience *that same karma*.’ Good does *not* beget good, not in kind or same measure anyway.¹⁰

This is actually common sense. Say, I have done a kind deed to you: does that mean you owe me that same kind deed which needs to be repaid? Karma is not something that is really within our control, and yet there is a natural justice about it. I may not get an exact recompense from you for my good deed to you, but the good that I have done *adorns* me: it *makes* me good. In other words, I *am* my deeds.

Here, it is easy for us to see the vital difference between being and having. A powerful man may *have* much wealth, a lot of things and many friends, but a lone simple money-free monastic *is* still most truly happy even without them, or *because* he is free of them. We may be *measured* by what we have, but we are *defined* and *liberated* by what we are.

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⁷ Also called **Sambara Samuddaka S** or simply **Samuddaka S**: see S 11.10/1:22 f = SD 39.2. See also **Loṇa, phala S** (A 3.99/1:249-253) @ SD 3.5 (1).

⁸ See **Loṇa, phala S** (A 3.99/1:249-253) = SD 3.5.

⁹ S 42.8/4:317-322 = SD 57.9.

¹⁰ A 3.99/1:249-253 = SD 3.5.

The Discourse to Mallikā (on Karma)

A 4.197/2:202-205

1.1 At one time the Blessed One was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika's park in Jeta's grove near Sāvattihī. Then, queen Mallikā approached the Blessed One, saluted him, and sat down at one side. Seated thus at one side, queen Mallikā said this to the Blessed One: [203]

Queen Mallikā's question

- 1.2** (1) "What is the reason, bhante, what is the cause, that here a certain woman is ugly and deformed, of very mean appearance, and poor, having few things, of little wealth, and of little influence?¹¹
- (2) What is the reason, bhante, what is the cause, that here a certain woman is ugly and deformed, of very mean appearance, but rich, with great riches, with great wealth, and of great influence?¹²
- (3) What is the reason, bhante, what is the cause, that here a certain woman is very beautiful and pleasant-looking, supremely charming, accomplished in beauty of complexion,¹³ but poor, having few things, of little wealth, and of little influence?
- (4) What is the reason, bhante, what is the cause, that here a certain woman is very beautiful and pleasant-looking, supremely charming, accomplished in beauty of complexion, and rich, with great riches, with great wealth, and of great influence?"

(1) A woman who is both ugly and unfortunate¹⁴

2.1 "Here, Mallikā, a certain woman, is **angry, often irritable**.¹⁵

Even over a trivial remark, she is cross, shaken, vexed, stubborn, and shows her temper, anger and sulkiness.¹⁶

2.2 She is **not a giver** of food, drinks, cloth, vehicles, garlands, scents, ointments, beddings, dwelling or lightings, to recluses or brahmins.¹⁷

2.3 Furthermore, she is **jealous in her heart**; jealous of others' receiving gains, honour, respect, esteem, homage and worship; she is vengeful and holds grudges.¹⁸

2.4 If she thereupon dies and returns to such a state, wherever she is reborn, she is ugly, deformed, of very mean appearance,

¹¹ Whole para: *Ko nu kho bhante hetu ko paccayo, yena midh'ekacco mātu, gāmo dubbaṇṇā ca hoti durūpā supā-pikā dassanāya daliddā ca hoti appassakā appa, bhogā appêsakkhā ca? Mātugama* (m) can mean either collectively as "womenfolk" (M 1:448) or individually as "a woman" (as here, where Comy glosses as "a female," *itthī*, AA 3:-183) depending on the context. Although its gender is masc, it refers to women, and is traditionally conjugated as feminine. However, only Ee has masc conjugation for it here.

¹² *Aḍḍhā ca hoti maha-d, dhanā mahā, bhogā mahesakkhā ca?*

¹³ Whole para: *Ko nu kho bhante hetu ko paccayo yena midh'ekacco mātugāmo abhirūpā ca hoti dassanīyā pāsā-dikā paramāya vaṇṇa, pokkharatāya samannāgatā.*

¹⁴ For parallels, see **Cūḷa Kamma Vibhaṅga S** (M 135.9/3:204) = SD 4.15; **Vajirūpama S** (A 3.24/1:124,4); **Jiguchitabba S** (A 3.27/1:126,30) = Pug 3.5/30,5, 3.14/36,25; Nm 2:231 f; ItA 2:164. Cf **Dukkathā S** (A 5.157/3:-181 f).

¹⁵ *Idha mallike ekacco mātu, gāmo kodhanā hoti upāyāsa, bahulā.*

¹⁶ *Appam pi vuttā samānā abhisajjati kuppatti vyāpajjati patitthīyati, kopaṇ ca dosaṇ ca appaccayaṇ ca pātukaroti.*

¹⁷ *Sā na dātā hoti samaṇassa vā brāhmaṇassa vā annam pānam vattham yānam mālā, gandha, vilepanam seyyāva-satha, padīpeyyam.*

¹⁸ *Issā, manikā kho pana hoti para, lābha, sakkāra, garu. kāra, mānana, vandana, pūjanāsu issati upadussati issam bandhati.*

and she is poor, having few things, of little wealth and little influence.

(2) A woman who is ugly but fortunate

3.1 Furthermore, here, Mallikā, a woman is **angry, often irritable**.

When told even a little, she is cross, shaken, vexed, stubborn, and shows her temper, anger and sulkiness.

3.2 But she is **a giver** of food, drinks, cloth, vehicles, garlands, scents, ointments, beddings, dwelling and lightings, to recluses or brahmins.

3.3 Furthermore, she is **not jealous in her heart**; not jealous of others' receiving gains, honour, respect, esteem, homage or worship; she is neither vengeful nor holds any grudge.

3.4 If she thereupon dies and returns to such a state, wherever she is reborn, she is ugly, deformed, of very mean appearance, *but* she is rich, with great wealth, with much affluence and great influence.

(3) A woman who is beautiful but unfortunate

4.1 Furthermore, here, Mallikā, a certain woman is **not angry, not often irritable**.

When told even much, she is not cross, not shaken, not vexed, not stubborn, and does not show her temper, anger or sulkiness.

4.2 But she is **not a giver** of food, drinks, cloth, vehicles, garlands, scents, ointments, beddings, dwelling or lightings, to recluses or brahmins.

4.3 Furthermore, she is **jealous in her heart**; jealous of others' receiving gains, honour, respect, esteem, homage and worship; she is vengeful and holds grudges.

4.4 If she thereupon dies and returns to such a state, [204] wherever she is reborn, she is very beautiful and pleasant-looking, supremely charming, accomplished in beauty of complexion, *but* she is poor, having few things, of little wealth, and of little influence.

(4) A woman who is both beautiful and fortunate¹⁹

5.1 Furthermore, here, Mallikā, a certain woman, is **not angry, not often irritable**.

When told even much, she is not cross, not shaken, not vexed, not stubborn, and does not show her temper, anger or sulkiness.

5.2 And she is **a giver** of food, drinks, cloth, vehicles, garlands, scents, ointments, beddings, dwelling or lightings, to recluses or brahmins.

5.3 Furthermore, she is **not jealous in her heart**; not jealous of others' receiving gains, honour, respect, esteem, homage or worship; she is neither vengeful nor holds any grudge.

5.4 If she thereupon dies and returns to such a state, wherever she is reborn, she is very beautiful and pleasant-looking, supremely charming, accomplished in beauty of complexion, *and* she is rich, with great wealth, with much affluence and great influence.

Summary

- 6** (1) This is the cause, Mallikā, this is the reason, that here a certain woman is ugly and deformed, of very mean appearance, and poor, having few things, of little wealth and little influence.
- (2) This is the cause, Mallikā, this is the reason, that here a certain woman is ugly and deformed, of very mean appearance, but rich, with great wealth, with much affluence and great influence.
- (3) This is the cause, Mallikā, this is the reason, that here a certain woman

¹⁹ For parallels, see **Cūḷa Kamma Vibhaṅga S** (M 135.10/3:204) = SD 4.15. Cf **Dukkathā S** (A 5.157/3:182 f).

is very beautiful and pleasant-looking, supremely charming, accomplished in beauty of complexion, but poor, having few things, of little wealth and little influence.

- (4) This is the cause, Mallikā, this is the reason, that here a certain woman is very beautiful and pleasant-looking, supremely charming, accomplished in beauty of complexion, and rich, with great wealth, with much affluence and great influence.”

Mallikā’s lion-roar

7 When this was said, queen Mallikā said this to the Blessed One:

“Now then, bhante, surely in some other life ***I was angry, often irritable,***

8 when told even a little, I was cross, shaken, [205] vexed, stubborn, and showed my temper, anger and sulkiness—

9 that this I here, bhante, *am ugly, deformed, of very mean appearance!*²⁰

10 Now then, bhante, surely in some other life ***I was a giver*** of food, drinks, cloth, vehicles, garlands, scents, ointments, beddings, dwelling and lightings, to recluses or brahmins—

11 that this I here, bhante, *am rich, with great wealth, with much affluence!*

12 Now then, bhante, surely in some other life ***I had no jealousy in my heart;*** not jealous of others’ receiving gains, honour, respect, esteem, homage and worship; not vengeful; did not hold any grudge—

13 that this I here, bhante, *have great influence!*

14 Furthermore, bhante, there are in this royal family, kshatriya maidens, and brahmin maidens, and houselord maiden, but I wield supreme authority over them!

15 From this day forth, bhante, I will not be angry, nor will I often be irritable;

16 even when told much, I will not be cross, not shaken, not vexed, not stubborn; I will not show my temper, anger or sulkiness;

17 and ***I will be a giver*** of food, drinks, cloth, vehicles, garlands, scents, ointments, beddings, dwelling and lightings, to recluses or brahmins.

18 Furthermore, ***I will have no jealousy in my heart;*** not be jealous of others’ receiving gains, honour, respect, esteem, homage and worship; I will be neither vengeful nor hold any grudge.

Mallikā goes for refuge

19 Excellent, bhante! Excellent, bhante! Just as if, bhante,
 one were to place upright what had been overturned, or
 were to reveal what was hidden, or
 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, bhante, in numerous ways, the Dharma has been declared by the Blessed One.

I, bhante, go to the Blessed One for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks.

May the Blessed [Gotama]²¹ remember me as a laywoman [upasika] who has gone to him for refuge from this day forth for life.”²²

— evaṃ —

120510; 120511; 120521; 120601; 120605a

²⁰ *Sāham, bhante, etarahi dubbaṇṇā durūpā supāpikā dassanāya.* It is clear from this statement that either she is not beautiful or she considered herself plain.

²¹ Ce adds *gotamam*.

²² Mallikā’s going-for-refuge formula is different from most others. Her addressing the Buddha mostly by respectful titles reflects her deep faith in him.