

13

Mada Sutta

The Discourse on Intoxication | A 3.39/1:146 f
Theme: The 3 kinds of intoxication
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2012, 2013

1 Related teachings

1.1 The Mada Sutta (A 3.39), according to the Pali text Society (Ee) manuscript forms a separate sutta. The Burmese (Be) and Sinhala (Ce) editions, however, treat this text as a continuation of the preceding **Sukhumāla Sutta** (A 3.38), which opens with the Buddha’s recollecting of his delicate youth.¹

The Mada Sutta explains points to the roots of unwholesome conduct, why we commit bad deeds and their consequences. The unwholesome roots or main motivating factors behind our bad actions are greed, hate and delusion (*akusala mūla*), which are themselves lurking in our unconscious as latent tendencies (*anusaya*) as lust, aversion and ignorance.

1.2 The Mada Sutta present the 3 intoxications (*mada*)—those with youth, health and life—as the underlying conditions for our committing unwholesome deed through the three karmic doors (*dvāra*) of body, speech and mind. These three are the psychological conditions rooted in the fear of decay, disease and death, the “3 Ds” of existence.

1.3 The (Ānanda) Jarā Sutta (S 48.41) records how the aged Buddha, with his complexion discoloured, tells Ānanda that “youth is subject to decay, health is subject to illness, life is subject to death.”² Decay, disease and death are universal, so that we can call them as “the 3 great bads.”³

1.4 Discourses such as **the Alabbhanīya Sutta** (A 5.48) and **the (Mallikā Kāla,kata) Kosala Sutta** (A 5.49) gives us spiritual reflections on these 3 “great bads” that comes as a package deal with life. According to these Suttas, both the untutored worldling and the wise noble disciple are subject to decay, disease and death. So what is the difference?⁴

While the untutored worldling sorrows and reacts negatively to the 3 great badness, taking them *personally* (that is, in terms of “I,” “me” and “mine”),⁵ the wise noble disciple sees them in an existential context, that is, as worldly phenomena. They are all a natural part of our existence. In other words, we have a choice in how we respond to them and as such are untroubled by their effects.

1.5 The Buddha’s teaching, in essence, is

- (1) understanding and accepting these badness as they are,
- (2) seeing the condition for their arising, that is, ignorance,
- (3) envisioning an ideal state of true happiness, that is, the destruction of the 3 badness, and
- (4) working towards freeing ourselves from the 3 badness.

This is, of course, a restatement of the four noble truths.

2 Mental intoxication in contemporary society

2.1 THE UNATTAINABLES. Both **the Alabbhanīya Sutta** (A 5.48) and **the (Mallikā Kāla,kata) Kosala Sutta** (A 5.49), besides listing the inevitability of decay, disease and death in sentient existence, gives two additional inevitabilities, that is, those of destruction and failure. “For as long as there are the coming and going, passing away and rebirth of beings” (*atha kho yāvatā sattānaṃ āgati gati cuti upapatti*)—that is, in any existence —we are subject to these 5 conditions:

- (1) we are subject to decay, *jarā,dhamma*

¹ A 3.38/1:145 f = SD 5.16(19.4.2) (abr), SD 63.7 (full). On the term *mada*, see SD 42.22 (2.2.2).

² S 48.41,4/5:217 = SD 42.5.

³ This is actually not a neologism, but a revived archaicism, recorded in OED: “bad” (B2), first recorded in 1592. See **Beyond good and evil**, SD 18.7 (3.4).

⁴ Respectively, A 5.48/3:54-56 = SD 42.1 & A 5.49/3:57 = SD 42.14.

⁵ See “**I**” **The nature of identity**, SD 19.1, “**Me**” **the nature of conceit**, SD 19.2, “**Mine**” **The nature of craving**, SD 18.3.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| (2) we are subject to disease, | <i>vyadhi,dhamma</i> |
| (3) we are subject to death, | <i>maraṇa,dhamma</i> |
| (4) we are subject to destruction, | <i>khaya,dhamma</i> |
| (4) we are subject to failure. | <i>nassana,dhamma</i> |

These are, to use the Sutta term, the “five unattainable states” (*pañca alabbhanīya thāna*). They are so called because it is impossible to get rid of them. However, we can choose how to respond to them. While the foolish neither understand or accept them, and as such are both bodily and mentally affected by them. The wise, on the other hand, understand that they are existence itself, and in accepting them, are *mentally* unaffected by them.

2.2 THE UNATTAINABLES AND THE INTOXICATIONS. The set of 5 “unattainables states” (*alabbhanīya thāna*) refers the “3 D’s” of decay, disease and death, and the universal conditions of destruction and failure. It is our natural tendency to age or decay (we start decaying from the day we are born!). We are also likely to fall sick. Even if we might be physically well all our lives, no unawakened beings can claim to be mentally healthy so long as they have greed, hate or delusion. Either way—no matter how long we live or how healthy we are—we must all die one day.⁶

Modern learning, medicine and technology may today give us better control of our bodies, but we still do not fully understand our minds, much less to truly control them so that we can understand and accept decay, disease and death, and as such, to be liberated from suffering. In other words, the roots of greed, hate and delusion are still fully working in the unawakened minds. As such, we are still somehow troubled by decay, disease and death. And because we have distanced ourselves more greatly from them, their occurrences are more likely to impact us even more traumatically.

2.3 INTOXICATION WITH NUMBERS

2.3.1 A “fourth” intoxication. In the context of our societies and human culture today, it is meaningful and purposeful to speak of a *fourth* intoxication. Modern knowledge, medicine and technology, in remarkable ways, might be able to delay or prevent our bodily decay in some way; prevent, cure or even destroy diseases; and delay death or prolong life [2.2.1]. However, these 3 kinds of badness still persist amongst us, even if we are better at dealing with them.

Furthermore, we still have to deal with two other “unattainable states,” that is, those of being free from destruction (*khaya*) and failure (*nassana*) [2.1]. While the first three “unattainables” [2.1] refer to what we *are* (impermanent, subject to illness, destined for death), the last two refer also to what we *have*. Here “**destruction**” (*khaya*) generally refers to the fact that we can be deprived of whatever we have in various ways, as stated in **the Dīgha,jānu Sutta** (A 8.54):

- kings would not seize it,
- thieves would not steal it,
- fire would not burn it,
- water would not wash it away,
- unloving heirs would not take it away.⁷

Or, we could lose our possessions simply through usage, decay, malfunction or breakage.

2.3.2 “Destruction” and “failure.” Failure (*nassana*) here clearly refers to less tangible factors, especially how we view the 8 winds of gain and loss, fame and ill-fame, blame and praise, and joy and pain.⁸ The Pali word *nassana* (n), “loss, disappearance, perishing,” comes from the verb *nassati* (*naśyati*), “is lost; is lost from sight; perishes, disappears, goes away; comes to nothing; is lost from the memory, is forgotten.”

Hence, while **destruction** (*khaya*) applies to physical objects, “failure” (*nassana*), which also has a sense of “destruction,” but in a mental sense. Hence, I have rendered it as “failure,” since it refers to a sit-

⁶ (Dve) Roga S (A 4.157/2:142 f), SD 5.4(5) (abr), SD 42.16 (in full).

⁷ A 8.54,5/4:281 f = SD 5.10. For a list of destruction of families, see (Asi,bandhaka,putta) Kulā S (S 42.9,10/4:324), SD 7.11. Cf Cūḷa Dukkha-k,khandha S (M 14.9/1:92), SD 4.7. For greater surety of our wealth, see Sappurisa Dāna S (A 5.148), SD 22.15 (2(5)).

⁸ Loka,dhamma S (A 8.5/4:156 f), SD 42.2.

uation when something “come to naught,” or when our plans are destroyed, our hopes lost, and so on. If “destruction” here refers to *things*, then “failure” refers to *values* that we have or desire, but which we fail to obtain or enjoy.

2.3.3 *Kati,mada

2.3.3.1 Here, we can reflect both these two conditions—destruction [2.2.2.2] and failure [2.2.2.3]—as results of another kind of intoxication, “**the intoxication with numbers**” (**kati,mada*).⁹ For, what we see as having been “destroyed” are always measurable things or something of value to us. In this sense, we value numbers: the more the better.

2.3.3.2 This is a **power-mode** of work and living: we have the notion that the *more* things we have the “richer” we are; the more friends we have the more “famous” we are; the more titles or qualifications we have, the more “qualified” we are, the more “respect” we have, and so on. If this is the direction we take, then it is likely to lead to personality conflicts and worldly strife.

When things do not work out, when the numbers are not big enough, or they do not tally with our hopes and wishes, then we see ourselves as “failures” (*nassana*). In other words, people and things become measurable. This is a sign of falling into an asura mentality.¹⁰

2.3.3.3 Significantly, we can also include **gambling** here, because the feeling, consciously or unconsciously, is that they more we win, the “luckier” we feel.¹¹ But in gambling, as in any power-mode existence, we are only digging a bigger and deeper hole to fall into. This is a sign of falling into the preta mentality.¹²

2.3.3.4 Even Buddhism is seen as *measurable*—it becomes “merit-making,” rituals (eg karma purification) and fetishes (eg relic worship).¹³ Buddhist work becomes a collecting and registration of members, of busy worldly activities and keeping up with what is seen as success in other religions and system—rather than inspiring ourselves and others in personal cultivation and joyful fellowship.

2.3.3.5 As a result, we taste no Dharma, because we have been imprisoned by our own self-limiting ideas of good and measured views of success in terms of numbers, and not in terms of unconditional love and meaningful joy. We need to turn to the love-mode of working and living.¹⁴

— — —

The Discourse on Intoxication

A 3.39/1:146 f

- 1 Bhikshus, there are these three kinds of intoxication. What are the three?
- 2 (1) The intoxication of youth. *yobbana,mada*
 (2) The intoxication of health. *ārogya,mada*
 (3) The intoxication of life *jīvita,mada*

⁹ This is a neologism, where *kati* means “how many.”

¹⁰ On the asura mentality, see **The body in Buddhism**, SD 29.61 (4.1.4) It is difficult to remain human; **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 (1.3.3) Momentary beings.

¹¹ On the Buddha’s admonitions against gambling, see **Sigal’ovāda S** (D 31/182 f) §§7, 11, 12.

¹² On the preta mentality, see n above on asura mentality.

¹³ See **Love**, SD 38.4 (3.1.2) Love and its objects.

¹⁴ See **Love**, SD 38.4.

- 3 Intoxicated with youth, bhikshus, an untutored worldling
 does a bad deed with the body,
 does a bad deed with speech,
 does a bad deed with thought.
- 4 Having done a bad deed with the body,
 having done a bad deed with speech,
 having done a bad deed with thought,
 when the body breaks up, after death, he is reborn in deprivation, a suffering state, the downfall, hell.
- 5 Or, intoxicated with health, bhikshus, an untutored worldling
 does a bad deed with the body,
 does a bad deed with speech,
 does a bad deed with thought.
- 6 *Having done a bad deed with the body,
 having done a bad deed with speech,
 having done a bad deed with thought,*
 when the body breaks up, after death, he is reborn in deprivation, a suffering state, the downfall, hell.
- 7 Or, intoxicated with life, bhikshus, an untutored worldling
 does a bad deed with the body,
 does a bad deed with speech,
 does a bad deed with thought.
- 8 *Having done a bad deed with the body,
 having done a bad deed with speech,
 having done a bad deed with thought,*
 when the body breaks up, after death, he is reborn in deprivation, a suffering state, the downfall, hell.
- 9 Intoxicated with youth, bhikshus, a monk gives up the training and reverts to the inferior life.
 Intoxicated with health, bhikshus, a monk gives up the training and reverts to the inferior life.
 Intoxicated with life, bhikshus, a monk gives up the training and reverts to the inferior life.
- 12 *Vyādhi,dhammā jarā,dhammā,
 atho maraṇa,dhammino.
 Yathā,dhammā¹⁵ tathā,santā
 jigucchanti puthujjanā.* Subject to disease, subject to decay,
 subject to death, too—
 that's the nature of things, that's the way it is—
 that worldlings feel disgust (to this).
- 13 *Ahañ ce taṃ jiguccheyyam
 evaṃ,dhammesu pāṇisu.
 Na m'etaṃ patirūpassa
 mama evaṃ vihārino.* If I were to feel disgust to this,
 in beings of such a nature,
 that would not be proper for me,
 for I, too, dwell in the same way.
- 14 *Sōham evaṃ viharanto
 ñatvā dhammaṃ nirūpadhiṃ
 ārogye yobbanasmiñ ca
 jīvitasmīñ ca ye madā.* While I am dwelling so,
 having known the acquisition-free state.
 In intoxication with health, with youth,
 and with life, too—
- 15 *Sabbe made abhibhosmi¹⁶
 nekkhamme daṭṭhu khematam
 tassa me ahu ussāho
 nibbānam abhipassato.* all intoxications have I overcome.
 Having seen security in renunciation,
 there is zeal for me,
 as I directly see nirvana.

¹⁵ Ke *Byādhi,dhammo jarā,dhammo | atho maraṇa,dhammiko || Yathā dhammo.*

¹⁶ Ke *atīto'smi.*

16 *Nāham bhabbo etarahi
kāmāni paṭisevitum.
Anivatti bhavissāmi
brahma.cariya,parāyaṇôti .*

Now no more am I capable
of partaking of sensual pleasures:
never will I turn back,
having crossed over to the holy life.

— evaṃ —

130303; 130305; 130503r