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(Catukka) Agga-p,pasāda Sutta

The (Four) Discourse on the Foremost Faith | A 4.34

Theme: Four aspects of true faith leading to awakening

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2014

1 Sutta highlights

1.1 The (Catukka) Agga-p,pasāda Sutta (A 4.34) comprises a prose section (the introduction) and four verses (the closing). Parallel versions of the Sutta’s teachings are found two other suttas, one in the Aṅguttara (A 5.32) and the other in the Iti,vuttaka (It 90).

The **Netti-p,pakarāṇa** quotes It 90, categorizing it as an eulogy or paean (*thava*).¹ The **Visuddhi-magga** partially quotes §(3) (on the conditioned and the unconditioned), which is common to all three texts, (given as (2) in the other two texts: see below), citing it as a reflection for “the recollection of peace” (*upasamānussati*), which is actually a recollection on nirvana as the stilling of all suffering.²

1.2 Here is the sutta collation table:

	<u>(Catukka) Agga-p,pasāda S</u> A 4.34 @ SD 45.13	<u>Cundī Rāja,kumāri Sutta</u> A 5.32 @ SD 66.4	<u>(Tika) Agga-p,pasāda Sutta</u> It 90/3.5.1 @ SD 45.17
Audience	The monks	Princess Cundī	The monks
Prose	(1) The Tathagata (2) The noble eightfold path (3) The Dharma: dispassion (4) The Sangha [none]	1. The Tathagata <i>omitted</i> 2. <i>identical</i> 3. <i>identical</i> 4. Morality of the aryas	1. The Tathagata <i>omitted</i> 2. <i>identical</i> 3. <i>identical</i> [none]
The verses	<i>identical</i>	<i>identical</i>	<i>identical</i>

1.3 Both A 4.34 and It 90 are addressed to the monks, while A 5.32 is addressed to princess Cundī. **The prose** of A 4.34 deals with 4 headings: the Tathagata, the noble eightfold path, the Dharma (dispassion) and the Sangha. Heading 2 (the noble eightfold path) is omitted in A 5.32 and It 90. The other **3 headings** are common to all three suttas—suggesting this is part of an urtext (common source teaching or text).

1.4 A 5.32, however, adds its own fourth heading (morality of the aryas), which shows that it is a special teaching for princess Cundī, a lay person. Hence, the inclusion of a section on morality is understandable. It 90 has only **3 heading** (the Tathagata, the Dharma and the Sangha) in its prose section. “Morality of the aryas,” is, however, omitted from both A 4.34 and It 90.

1.5 The closing verses, in *anuṣṭubh* sloka,³ are common to all three Suttas, suggesting that they are originally part of an urtext. Note that these verses mention neither the eightfold path nor the moral virtue of the aryas. This is another clue to their age.

1.6 From all this, it is likely that **It 90**, also the briefest of the three, is the oldest of them. Both A 4.34 and A 5.32 are probably around the same age. It is clear, however, that the oldest core has only the 3 jewels in the prose section and the 4 closing verses. The two Aṅguttara versions are based on this ancient core, and taught to a different audience in each case.

1.7 The popularity of A 4.34 is attested by the fact that it is quoted a number of times in **the Param’attha,jotikā 1**, the Commentary on the Khuddaka,pāṭha, as follows: on the 3 refuges (KhpA 1.34, 37) and on the Ratana Sutta (KhpA 6.43, 52, 58, 65).⁴

¹ Nett 188; cf Peṭk 56.

² Vism 8.245/293.

³ They are all quatrains with 8 syllables per line (like the verses of the Dhammapada, the Sutta Nipāta, the Thera-, gāthā, and the Therī,gāthā): see SD 45.7a (1.1.3.1).

⁴ These are all refs to paras in Khp:Ñ. The refs to our Sutta below are as follows: §§(1), (2), (3), 2.2.

2 The 4 foremost kinds of faith

2.1 FAITH IN THE BUDDHA

2.1.1 Wise faith (*avecca-p,pasāda*) in the Buddha is the vision of the possibility of full human awakening and liberation without any external agency. The benefits of such a faith are summarized for reflection in the 9 qualities in the recollection on the Buddha (*buddhānussati*) [2.1.2].

All or any of these 9 virtues can be attained by us if we aspire to them, just as the Buddha himself had aspired to them a very long time ago before his own awakening. Yet, with the Buddha's attaining of all these qualities, we only need to follow his instructions on the Dharma, so that we, too, can awaken just like he has. This is like some who has opened the door out of a burning house: we need only to walk out of that door, and we need to do this urgently.

2.1.2 The Buddha's virtues. Here, each of the 9 virtues of the Buddha is listed, in summary, for a brief reflection. For fuller explanations of the Buddha's 9 virtues, see *Buddhānussati*, SD 15.7 (3).⁵

2.1.2.1 ARHAT (*araha*). An arhat is one who has broken the spokes (*ara*) of the wheel of life and death.⁶ In other words, the Buddha has overcome the cycle of rebirth and redeath: he is neither reborn nor, as such, ever die. The unawakened must be reborn, and what is born must necessarily die.

2.1.2.2 FULLY SELF-AWAKENED (*sammā,sambuddha*). The Buddha is one who has fully awakened from the sleep of ignorance and is fresh with clear wisdom. He is no more troubled and driven by the dreams and nightmares of craving. His is the real world of life, love, light and liberation (signified by the 4 L's of the swastika turning clockwise).⁷

2.1.2.3 ACCOMPLISHED IN CONDUCT AND WISDOM (*vijjā,carāṇa,sampanna*). His awakened wisdom comprises of fully understanding the nature of rebirth (that is, life and death), of karma (how our body and mind can become tools of personal development and awakening), and he has overcome all defilements so that he is fully liberated from the cycle of lives and deaths.

Such wisdoms are reflected in his own actions and speech, so that "as he does, so he speaks; as he speaks, so he does" (*yathā,vādī tathā,kārī yathā,kārī tathā,vādī*).⁸ In other words, he is not a false teacher who is not worth his words, or some idolized guru with clay feet. His actions reflect his words, and his words reflection his actions, that is to say, his words and actions harmoniously reflect his wisdom and compassion.

2.1.2.4 WELL-FARER (*sugata*). He is a well-farer since he has traversed the noble eightfold path and reached nirvana. After awakening, he speaks rightly to the world for our benefit. Wherever he arises and goes, he fares well in the Dharma.

2.1.2.5 KNOWER OF WORLDS (*loka,vidū*). Not only does the Buddha know the nature of the 3 worlds (the sense-world, the form world and the formless world), and transcended them, but he also understands the nature of the real world within us, that is, the "all" (*sabba*), the nature of the 6 senses, how they are our only source of knowing, and the 6 sense-objects, the only things we can know. If we understand this, it is sufficient for us to gain awakening in this life itself.

2.1.2.6 PEERLESS GUIDE OF PERSONS TO BE GUIDED (*anuttara purisa,damma sarathī*). Although the Buddha primarily teaches humans and gods because of their ready minds, he is also capable of helping animals and other non-humans, whenever they have the capacity for spirituality. The Buddha is able to do

⁵ It Comy gives a number of such "foremost" (*agga*) qualities of the Buddha, such as: he is a unique being in terms of his aspiration and efforts to become buddha; as the Buddha he has supreme wisdom and compassion; even then, his appearance in the world is rare, and when he does appear, his teachings benefit all beings (esp humans and gods) without parallel (ItA 2:103).

⁶ *Samsāra,cakkassa* [PvA 7: *samsāra,vaṭṭassa*] *arāṇam hatattā*, "breaker of the spokes of the wheel of samsara" (VvA 106); see also Miln 38, 285; J 4:209, 6:261; DhA 2:142; VvA 277.

⁷ The turning of the swastika refers to the turning of the Dharma-wheel, the presence of the true Dharma in our midst.

⁸ **Mahā Govinda S** (D 19,11/2:224,3, 26/2:229,25), SD 63.4; **Pāsādika S** (D 29,29.3/3:135), SD 40a.6; (**Tathā-gata**) **Loka S** (A 4.23,2/2:24,7), SD 15.7(2.1.2); **Loka S** (It 112/4.13/122,2), SD 15.7; **Nigrodha,kappa S** (only first phrase, Sn 24/357a*/62), SD 80.6 = J 326/104*; Nc:Be 169.

this because he places the Dharma even above himself. This means that even after his passing, if we follow his example, then we too will be able to be moved by the same Dharma and help ourselves and others, too.

2.1.2.7 TEACHER OF GODS AND HUMANS (*sathā deva,manussanam*). The Buddha's teaching applies not only to the human world, but to the whole universe. The Buddha tells us that there are other universes, too, just like ours.⁹ However, as long as beings have minds and the freedom to learn, they are capable of knowing the Dharma.¹⁰

2.1.2.8 AWAKENED (*buddha*). The Buddha has himself awakened from the sleep of ignorance and craving. He awakens, fully rested and mentally refreshed, as it were. He has realized whatever that needs to be realized for understanding the true nature of existence, the conditions from which it arises, how to get out of such conditions, and he is himself liberated from such conditions.

2.1.2.9 BLESSED (*bhagavā*). "Blessed One" or "Lord" is our term of respect for the Buddha who has left us with the legacy of spiritual freedom without the need of beliefs or rituals, but with the disciplining of the body and taming of the mind. Keeping both body and mind healthy we become the true and blessed heirs of the Buddha's Dharma, so that we not only have a share (*bhāga*) of blessings, but is able to share (*bhāgī*) that Dharma blessings with others, too.

2.1.3 Diligence. Hence, it is said in **the (Dasaka) Appamāda Sutta** (A 10.15) echoes the qualities of the first foremost faith mentioned here in **the (Catukka) Agga-p,pasāda Sutta** [§(1)], thus:

1 Bhikshus, as far as there are beings, whether legless, or two-legged, or four-legged, or many-legged,¹¹ whether with form, or formless, or conscious [percipient], or non-percipient, or neither percipient-nor-non-percipient,¹²

the Tathagata is the foremost amongst them as the arhat [the worthy], fully self-awakened one.¹³

2 Even so, bhikshus, whatever wholesome states there are,¹⁴ all of them are rooted in diligence, converge on diligence, diligence is declared the foremost amongst them.¹⁵

(A 10.15,1-2), SD 42.23

The (Dasaka) Appamāda Sutta declares what such a faith entails, how wise faith in the Buddha empowers us to work towards self-awakening, that is, diligence (*appamāda*). In simple terms, diligence here refers to the necessity and efficacy of diligence, which is a shorthand for the 3 trainings.¹⁶ Hence, diligence is said to be the foremost of wholesome states.

2.2 FAITH IN THE EIGHTFOLD PATH. Of the three related suttas, only **the (Catukka) Agga-p,pasāda Sutta** has this teaching. The eightfold path is placed strategically here as a link between the Buddha, the

⁹ See **Kosala S 1** (A 10.29,2/5:59 f), SD 16.15; (**Ānanda**) **Abhibhū S** (A 3.80), SD 54.1; Kvu 13.1/476; see also SD 10.9 (8.2.3).

¹⁰ The Buddha declares that if sal trees were conscious (like us), they, too, could attain streamwinning: (**Licchavī**) **Bhaddiya S** (A 4.193,18), SD 45.8; **Sarakāni S 1** (S 55.24/5:377, if they could discern between right and wrong, they could attain streamwinning), SD 3.6; **Vāsetṭha S** (A 8.44/4:259, regarding the benefit of keeping the uposatha), SD 89.6.

¹¹ *Yāvatā bhikkhave sattā apadā vā dvi,padā vā catu-p,padā vā bahu-p,padā vā.*

¹² *Rūpino vā arūpino vā saññino vā asaññino vā n'eva,saññi,nāsaññino vā.*

¹³ *Tathāgato tesam aggam akkhāyati araham sammā,sambuddho.*

¹⁴ *Evam evam kho bhikkhave ye keci kusalā dhammā, sabbe te appamāda,mūlakā appamāda,samosaraṇā, appamādo tesam* aggam akkhāyati. *So Ee Se; Be Ce Ke tesam dhammānam*

¹⁵ Comy: How is it (diligence, *appamāda*) the foremost of them (wholesome states)? On account of benefitting the recipient. For, on account of diligence, they (the wholesome states) are obtained; hence, it is the foremost amongst them. (*Katham esa tesam aggo 'ti? Paṭilābhak'atthena. Appamādena hi te paṭilabbhanti, tasmā so tesam aggo, SA 3:133*).

¹⁶ On the 3 trainings, see *Sīla samādhi paññā*, SD 21.6.

teacher and the goal of the teaching, which follows as the second foremost faith [§(2)]. Foremost faith in the noble eightfold path is the joyful priority in the practice of the 3 trainings¹⁷ which the path embodies.

The foremost faith in the noble eightfold path is best summarized in this Dhammapada verse:

<p>The eightfold (path) is the best of paths; detachment from lust is the best of states—</p> <p>There is only this path, no other, As such, keep to this path—</p>	<p>the four statements¹⁸ are the best of truths; of the two-legged, the one with eyes (is best).</p> <p>for the purification of vision. this is the bewilderment of Māra. (Dh 273 f)</p>
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The eightfold path is, in fact, the only way to awakening. This is the path of practice: hence, it is said to be “conditioned”—because it is something that prepares us for awakening. This comprises the 3 trainings, as we have noted. The purpose of the training is to fully realize the 4 noble truths,¹⁹ which in turn leads to “detachment from lust,” which as third foremost faith (that is, in the Dharma) is dispassion (*virāga*) [§2]. This is how we defeat Māra, the personification of all that is bad within us.²⁰

2.3 FAITH IN THE DHARMA. To have faith in the Dharma means to see joy in it. A first kind of joy is that of blameless, that is, our body and speech are directed towards cutting down our unwholesome qualities and cultivating the wholesome qualities. A second kind of joy arises in our mental efforts in removing unwholesome thoughts and cultivating wholesome ones. All this leads to a peaceful joy and sustains our joyful interest in living our lives for a higher purpose of self-awakening and other-helping.

2.4 FAITH IN THE SANGHA. Sangha (*saṅgha*) here refers to the community of aryas, that is, those who have awakened to true reality by progressively ridding themselves of various defilements or “fetters” that bind us back in the rut of rebirth, redeath and suffering. “Arya” (*ariya*) means “noble,” on the sense of being increasingly wholesome in terms of body (including speech) and of mind, so that they are liberated beings worthy of emulation. This “noble community” (*ariya,saṅgha*), the foremost of groups, is our true refuge, that is, exemplars who inspire us to strive heedfully on the noble eightfold path.

The “conventional community” (*sammuti,saṅgha*) properly refers to properly ordained monks and nuns who are celibate, have no dealing with money and wealth and keep to monastic discipline (the Vinaya). The purpose of such a life is to keep it simple so that body and speech can be more effectively disciplined for the sake of mental cultivation leading to dhyana. Dhyanic joy helps us overcome attachment to bodily and worldly pleasures.

As such, monastics who do keep to the Vinaya, meditate properly and attain various levels of inner peace and liberating wisdom, can live simple lives free of sex (without family responsibilities) or money (without economic concerns). They live lives trying to emulate the aryas, especially the arhats, so that they are their visible exemplars to us, and in this life itself, they attain awakening.²¹

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¹⁷ On the 3 trainings, see *Sīla samādhi paññā*, SD 21.6.

¹⁸ Also called the “fourfold exposition” (*catu-p,paḍaṇi veyyakaraṇaṇi*); see *Kitāgiri S* (M 70.25), SD 12.1 (6a).

¹⁹ On the 3 phases and 12 aspects of the 4 noble truths, see SD 1.1 (6.2).

²⁰ Māra means “death,” or is bad personified: see *Māra*, SD 61.8; *Mahā Parinibbāna S* (D 16,3.4/2:103), SD 9.

²¹ Lay followers, too, can attain awakening in this life itself, ie, if we habitually practise the perception of impermanence (*anicca,saññā*): see eg (*Anicca*) *Cakkhu S* (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

The (Fours) Discourse on the Foremost Faith

A 4.34

1 There are, bhikshus, these **4 kinds of foremost faith**. What are the four?

(1) Bhikshus, as far as there are beings—

whether legless, four-legged, many-legged,
whether form or formless,

whether conscious, unconscious, or neither-conscious-nor-non-conscious—

that is to say, the Tathagata, worthy one, full self-awakened, is declared to be the foremost amongst them.²²

1.2 Bhikshus, those who have faith in the Buddha,

have faith in the foremost (of beings),²³

and those who have faith in the foremost, win the foremost fruit.

(2) Bhikshus, as far as there are conditioned truths,

the noble eightfold path is said to be the foremost of them.²⁴

1.3 Bhikshus, those who have faith in the noble eightfold path,

have faith in the foremost (of conditioned truths);

and those who have faith in the foremost, win the foremost fruit.

2 (3) Bhikshus, as far as there are truths, conditioned or unconditioned,²⁵

dispassion is said to be the foremost amongst them,²⁶

that is to say, the crushing of intoxication,

the removing of thirst,

the uprooting of attachment,

the cutting off of the cycles (of lives and deaths),

the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nirvana.²⁷

2.2 Bhikshus, those who have faith in the truth that is dispassion,²⁸

have faith in the foremost (truth),

and those who have faith in the foremost, win the foremost fruit.

(4) Bhikshus, as far as there are sanghas or groups,

the sangha of the Tathagata's disciples is said to be the foremost of them,

that is to say, the 4 pairs of persons, the 8 individuals:

this sangha of disciples of the Blessed One is

worthy of offerings,

²² The whole section: *Yāvatā bhikkhave sattā apadā vā dvi,padā²² vā catu-p,padā vā bahu-p,padā vā rūpino vā arūpino vā saññino vā asaññino vā n'eva,saññi,nāsaññino vā, tathāgato tesam aggam akkhāyati* [It adds *yad idam* here] *arahaṃ sammāsam,buddho*. Qu in opening of (**Dasaka**) **Appamāda S** (A 10.15,1), SD 42.23 [2.1.2]. Qu in Vism 293 where *yāvatā* (adv) is mistaken for pronoun (as *yo ayam*), as in Comys. Text omits *yad idam* (“that is to say”), which is found in **It 90**, SD 45.17. This passage is alluded to in comy on “the 3 refuges” (*saraṇa-t,taya* as “the foremost of all beings” (*sabba,sattānam aggo*, KhpA 20,22) and quoted in comy on Ratana S (KhpA 179,26).

²³ *Ye bhikkhave buddhe pasannā, agge te pasannā, agge kho pana pasannānam aggo vipāko hoti*.

²⁴ Qu in Comy on “the 3 refuges” (*saraṇa-t,taya*, KhpA 19,34) & comy on Ratana S (KhpA 181 f).

²⁵ In the suttas, only nirvana is said to be “unconditioned” (*asaṅkhata*). All others are states that are “conditioned” (*saṅkhata*). The noble eightfold path, since it leads to nirvana, the unconditioned, it is the next “foremost” or best thing. However, since it has a purpose, it is conditioned, but it is *the foremost* of conditioned states.

²⁶ *Virāgo tesam aggam akkhāyati*. Qu in comy on Ratana S (KhpA 180,19).

²⁷ *Yad idam mada,nimmadano pipāsa,vinayo ālaya,samugghāto vaṭṭ'upacchedo tanhā-k,khayo virāgo nirodho nibbānam*. Comy & Vism gloss **mada,nimmadana** as “the intoxication with conceit, with manhood and so on” (*māna,mada,purisa,mad'ādiko*, AA 2:106 = ItA 2:106 = Vism 8.247/293). BA glosses it as “all kinds of intoxications beginning with that of birth” (BA 63).

²⁸ §§2.1-2.3 qu in comy on Ratana S (KhpA 183 f).

worthy of hospitality,
 worthy of gifts,
 worthy of salutation with the lotus-palms,
 a supreme of merit for the world. [35]

- 2.3 Bhikshus, those who have faith in the sangha,
 have faith in foremost (group);²⁹
 and those who who have faith in the foremost, win the foremost fruit.³⁰
- 2.4 These, bhikshus, are the 4 kinds of foremost faith.

The verses of the foremost³¹

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|---|--|
| <p>3 <i>Aggato ve pasannānaṃ
 aggam dhammaṃ vijānataṃ
 agge buddhe pasannānaṃ
 dakkhiṇeyye anuttare</i></p> | <p>For those with faith in the foremost,
 knowing the foremost truth [Dharma],
 faithful in the Buddha, the foremost,
 peerless, worthy of gifts;</p> |
| <p>3.2 <i>agge dhamme pasannānaṃ
 virāgūpasame sukhe
 agge saṅghe pasannānaṃ
 puñña-k,khette anuttare</i></p> | <p>for those with faith in the Dharma,
 in the joy of the peace that is dispassion,
 for those with faith in the foremost sangha,
 the supreme field of merit;</p> |
| <p>3.3 <i>aggasmim dānaṃ dadataṃ
 aggam puññaṃ pavaḍḍhati
 Aggam āyu ca vaṇṇo ca
 yaso kitti sukham balam</i></p> | <p>for those giving gifts to the foremost,
 the foremost of merits grow,
 the foremost by way of life and beauty,
 fame, glory, happiness, strength.</p> |
| <p>3.4 <i>Aggassa dātā medhāvī
 agga,dhamma,samāhito
 deva,bhūto manusso vā
 agga-p,patto pamodatīti</i></p> | <p>Wise giver of the foremost to the foremost,³²
 mentally settled on the foremost state,
 having become a deva or a human,
 rejoices, having attained to the foremost.</p> |

— evaṃ —

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²⁹ *Ye bhikkhave saṅghe pasannā, agge te pasannā.*

³⁰ *Agge kho pana pasannānaṃ aggo vipāko hoti.*

³¹ The foll verses are identical in (Catukka) **Agga-p,pasāda S** (A 4.34), SD 45.13, **Cundī Rāja,kumārī S** (A 5.32), and (Ti) **Agga-p,pasāda S** (It 90), SD 45.17. See (1.2).

³² “Giver of the foremost to the foremost” is an amplified tr of *aggassa dātā*. Iti,vuttaka Comy explains that the *aggassa* (dative-genitive) can be taken to denote either the recipient of the gift or the gift itself. “**To the foremost**,” that is the foremost 3 jewels (ie not any other triad of gems) that he gives to, or “**giver of the foremost**” means he generates immense merit on account of the giving of the foremost of what should be given (ie appropriate giving to the sangha) (*aggassa ratana-t,tayassa dātā, atha vā aggassa deyya,dhammassa dānaṃ uḷāraṃ katvā tattha puññaṃ pavattetā*, ItA 2:111,5-7). On a grammatical n related to Sadd 390, see ItA:M 2:661 n1.