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Vepulla Pabbata Sutta

The Discourse on Mount Vepulla | S 15.20

Theme: Human life is very short

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2015

1 Introduction

1.1 The Vepulla Pabbata Sutta (S 15.20), the last sutta in **the Anamatagga Saṃyutta** (S 15),¹ is a graphic reflection on impermanence taught by the Buddha himself. It is a reflection on the impermanence of the world (represented by Mount Vepulla), the human race, and the fully-awakened buddhas and their chief disciples. The names of the hill, the people, their life-span, the time they take to climb up and down the hill, and the names of the buddha and their chief disciples of that time are here listed:

<u>Mountain</u>	<u>People</u>	<u>Life-span</u>	<u>Climb/descend</u>	<u>Buddha</u>	<u>Chief disciples</u>
Pācīnavamsa	Tivara	40,000 years	4 days	Kakusandha	Vidhura and Sañjīva
Vaṅkaka	Rohitassa	30,000 years	3 days	Koṇāgamana	Bhiyyosa and Uttara
Supassa	Suppiya	20,000 years	2 days	Kassapa	Tissa and Bhāradvāja
Vepulla	Māgadha	100+ years	a moment	Gotama	Sāriputta and Moggallāna

Figure 1 Names and times

1.2 The perception of impermanence here includes noting the following:

- (1) Places, such as an ancient hill, such as Vepulla, undergo name changes [§§3, 9, 15, 21].
- (2) People take progressively less time to climb up and down the hill as it subsides [§§4, 10, 16, 22].
- (3) The names of peoples change in different epochs [§§3, 9, 15, 21].
- (4) The life-spans of humans fluctuate during different epochs [§§4, 10, 16, 22].
- (5) Even the buddha of each epoch has a different name [§§5, 11, 17, 23].
- (6) Each of these buddhas has different chief disciples [§§5, 11, 17, 23].
- (7) In the end, even buddhas and chief disciples die, the hills and people disappear, and the world itself ends [§§7, 13, 19, 25].

1.3 The Commentaries speak of **3 kinds of worlds**: the world of space (*okāsa, loka*), of beings (*satta, loka*), and of formations (*saṅkhāra, loka*).² In the Vepulla Pabbata Sutta, we see all these three kinds of worlds as being impermanent, thus:

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|---|
| (1) the world of space | <i>okāsa loka</i> | Mount Vepulla at various times |
| (2) the world of beings | <i>satta loka</i> | the peoples, the 4 buddhas, and their chief disciples |
| (3) the world of formations | <i>saṅkhāra loka</i> | formations (<i>saṅkhārā</i>) ³ [§§7, 13, 19, 24, 27] |

The point here is that all existence, animate or inanimate, must come to an end. Knowing this true reality, we should distance ourselves from all worldly things, animate or inanimate. We would then lose all our interest in them, and would want to be free from them all. Only in this way, we will be able to really help them in due course. This is the key rationale for the Buddha's teaching the Dharma and for us to seek self-awakening—to be free from craving and ignorance.

1.4 The vital power of **the perception of impermanence** (*anicca, saññā*) should never be underestimated. In **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), the Buddha declares that practising it will bring us streamwinning in this life itself, that is, certainly at the very last moment of our lives. This is the first of 10 suttas in the Okkanta Vagga with the very same message.⁴ — — —

¹ S 15.1-20/2:178-193.

² Vism 7.37/204 f; DA 1:173; MA 1:397, 2:200; SD 29.6a (5.2); also SD 7.2 (1).

³ Ie, the world we project and live in, a self-constructed virtual reality.

⁴ S 25.1-10, esp S 25.1 @ SD 16.7.

The Discourse on Mount Vepulla

S 15.20

Without beginning, without end

1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying on Mount Vulture's peak, outside Rājagaha. There, the Blessed One addressed the monks, "Bhikshus!"

"Bhadante,"⁵ the monks replied to the Blessed One.

2 The Blessed One said this:

"This saṃsāra [cycle of lives and deaths] is without a knowable [discoverable] beginning.⁶ A first point is indiscernible of beings wandering and flowing on hindered by ignorance, fettered by craving.⁷

Mount Pācīna,vaṃsa

3 In the past, bhikshus, the Mount Vepulla was called **Pācīna,vaṃsa** [Eastern Bamboo]. [191] At that time, bhikshus, there was a people called **Tivara**.

4 The lifespan of the Tivara people, bhikshus, was 40,000 years.⁸

They, bhikshus, could climb Mount Pācīna,vaṃsa in four days and descend in four days.

5 At that time, bhikshus, the Blessed One, **Kakusandha**, an arhat, fully self-awakened, had arisen in the world.

His two chief disciples, the fortunate pair, were named **Vidhura** and **Sañjīva**.⁹

6 But see, bhikshus, the name of this mountain has disappeared, those people have died, and that Blessed One has attained final nirvana!¹⁰

7 So impermanent,	bhikshus, are formations!	<i>evaṃ aniccā bhikkhave saṅkhārā</i>
So unstable,	bhikshus, are formations!	<i>evaṃ addhuvā bhikkhave saṅkhārā</i>
So unreliable,	bhikshus, are formations!	<i>evaṃ anassāsikā bhikkhave saṅkhārā</i>

8 Just for this, bhikshus, it is enough to be revulsed towards all formations, enough to become dispassionate (towards them), enough to want to be free (from them)!¹¹

Mount Vaṅkaka

9 In the past, bhikshus, the Mount Vepulla was called **Vaṅkaka** [Crooked].¹² At that time, bhikshus, there were a people called **Rohitassa**.

10 The lifespan of the Rohitassa people, bhikshus, was 30,000 years.¹³

⁵ *Bhadante*, "sir, venerable," sg voc of *bhaddanta* or *bhadanta* (a secondary adj formation from *bhaddam* (or *bhadram*) *te*, lit "good fortune to you!", a friendly greeting. The better known form *bhante* is a Magadhism and a contracted form. See PED: *bhaddanta* & *bhante*.

⁶ *Anamataggo 'yaṃ bhikkhave saṃsāro*. Western philologists seem to resolve *anamatagga* as *anama-t-agga*, based on √NAM, "to bend." This is an adj of *saṃsāra*, which prob means "whereof the beginning is not bent off" = "what does not change." Pischel, *A Grammar of the Prākṛit Languages* (rev) 1981:§251 n1 (p207).

⁷ *Pubbā koṭi na paññāyati avijjā, nīvaraṇānaṃ sattānaṃ taṅhā, saṃyojanānaṃ sandhāvataṃ saṃsaratam*.

⁸ On the varying human life-spans during the times of the different buddhas, see **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14,1.7/2:3,-28-4,5 (SD 49.8)). **Cakka,vatti Siha,nāda S** (D 26) explains how the human life-span will decrease until it is only 10 years due to moral degradation, and then increase to reach 80,000 years in the time of the future Buddha Metteyya (D 26,14-25/3:68-76), SD 36.10.

⁹ These are the first of 4 pairs of chief disciples mentioned in *Buddhavaṃsa* (B 23.20, 24.22, 25.22, 39, 26.18; cf J 15, 86).

¹⁰ *Parinibbāna*, or "full nirvana," here meaning "the nirvana without remains" (*anupādi,sesa nibbāna*). The other nirvana is the one "with remains" (*sa,upādi,sesa nibbāna*). On these 2 kinds of nirvana, see SD 45.18 (2.5).

¹¹ *Yāvañ c'idaṃ bhikkhave alam eva sabba,saṅkhāresu nibbindituṃ, alam virajjituṃ, alam vimuccituṃ. Yāvañ,c'-idaṃ = yāvaṃ ca idaṃ = yad idaṃ*. See PED: *ya* (p544b)

¹² This is different from *Vaṅka,giri* where Vessantara dwells with his family in a hermitage (J 6:520); see DPPN.

They, bhikshus, could climb Mount Vaṅkaka in three days and descend in three days.

11 At that time, bhikshus, the Blessed One, **Koṇāgamana**, an arhat, fully self-awakened, had arisen in the world.

His two chief disciples, the fortunate pair, were named **Bhiyyosa** and **Uttara**.

12 *But see, bhikshus, the name of this mountain has disappeared, those people have died, and that Blessed One has attained final nirvana! [192]*

13 So impermanent, bhikshus, are formations!

So unstable, bhikshus, are formations!

So unreliable, bhikshus, are formations!

14 *Just for this, bhikshus, it is enough to be revulsed towards all formations, enough to become dispassionate (towards them), enough to want to be free (from them)!*

Mount Supassa

15 In the past, bhikshus, Mount Vepulla was called **Supassa** [Fairside].¹⁴ At that time, bhikshus, there were a people called **Suppiyā**.

16 The lifespan of the Suppiyā people, bhikshus, was 20,000 years.

They, bhikshus, could climb Mount Supassa in two days and descend in two days.

17 At that time, bhikshus, the Blessed One, **Kassapa**, an arhat, fully self-awakened, had arisen in the world.

His two chief disciples, the fortunate pair, were named **Tissa** and **Bhāra,dvāja**.

18 *But see, bhikshus, the name of this mountain has disappeared, those people have died, and that Blessed One has attained final nirvana!*

19 So impermanent, bhikshus, are formations!

So unstable, bhikshus, are formations!

So unreliable, bhikshus, are formations!

20 *Just for this, bhikshus, it is enough to be revulsed towards all formations, enough to become dispassionate (towards them), enough to want to be free (from them)!*

Mount Vepulla

21 Now, bhikshus, the Mount Vepulla is called **Vepulla** [Abundant]. Now, bhikshus, there are a people called **Māgadha**.

22 The lifespan of the Māgadha people, bhikshus, is short, brief, fleeting¹⁵—those who live long, live but a 100 years or a little more.¹⁶

They, bhikshus, can climb Mount Vepulla in a moment and descend in a moment.¹⁷

23 And now, I, bhikshus, an arhat, fully self-awakened, have arisen in the world.

My two chief disciples, the fortunate pair, are named **Sāri,putta** and **Moggallāna**.

24 *But see, bhikshus, the name of this mountain has disappeared, those people have died, and that Blessed One has attained final nirvana!*

¹³ Comy explains that it should not be construed that the human life-span kept progressively decreasing in the time of Koṇāgamana. In fact, after Kakusandha (the buddha before Koṇāgamana) passed away, the human life-span decreased until it reached the minimum of 10 years, then it increased progressively to reach an incalculable (*asaṅkheyya*), and then decreased again until it reached 30,000 years, when Koṇāgamana arose. The human life-span went through a similar cycle in the times of each of the subsequent buddhas (SA 2:160). **Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda S** (D 26) describes a similar cycle of life-spans leading up to the advent of the future buddha, Metteyya (D 26,14-23), SD 36.10. On these 4 historical buddhas, see SD SD 49.8 (2). On “incalculable” (*asaṅkheyya*), see SD 2.19 (App).

¹⁴ This tr is from F L Woodward, S:W 2:129.

¹⁵ *Māgadhakānaṃ bhikkhave manussānaṃ appakaṃ āyuppamāṇaṃ parittaṃ lahukaṃ.*

¹⁶ Comy says this means 10-20 years more (SA 2:160), ie, 110-120 years.

¹⁷ *Māgadhakā bhikkhave manussā vepullāṃ pabbataṃ muhuttēna ārohani, muhuttēna orohanti.*

25 So impermanent, bhikshus, are formations!
 So unstable, bhikshus, are formations!
 So unreliable, bhikshus, are formations!

26 *Just for this, bhikshus, it is enough to be revulsed towards all formations, enough to become dispassionate (towards them), enough to want to be free (from them)!*

Vepulla's destruction

27 There will come a time, bhikshus, when this very Vepulla will be destroyed, and these people will die. I, too, will attain final nirvana

28 So impermanent, bhikshus, are formations!
 So unstable, bhikshus, are formations!
 So unreliable, bhikshus, are formations!

29 *Just for this, bhikshus, it is enough to be revulsed towards all formations, enough to become dispassionate (towards them), enough to want to be free (from them)!*

Reflection on impermanence

30 The Blessed One said this. Having said this, the well-gone (*sugata*), the Teacher, further said:

31 *Pācīna,vaṃso tivarānaṃ
 rohitassāna vaṅkako.
 suppiyānaṃ supasso'ti
 māgadhānaṃ ca vepullo*

For the Tivaras, it was called Pācīnavamṣa,
 for the Rohitassa, Vaṅkaka,
 for the Suppiyas, Supassa,
 and for the Māgadhas, Vepulla.

32¹⁸ *Aniccā vata saṅkhārā
 uppāda,vaya,dhammino
 uppajjitvā nirujjhanti
 tesaṃ vūpasamo sukho'ti*

Impermanent, alas, are formations!
 It is their nature to rise and fall:
 having arisen, they cease to be—
 happy it is when they are stilled!

— evaṃ —

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¹⁸ **Sakra**, leader of the gods, utters this popular ancient verse at the Buddha's passing away (D 16 @ SD 9). It is said to be a remnant from the teaching of the previous Buddha, Kassapa, that only he remembers: **D 16**,6.10,2/2:157 = **D 17**,2.17/2:199 = **S v21**/1.11/1:6, 609, **S v609**/6.15/1:158, **S v776**/9.6/1:200 = **S 15.20**/2:193 (Buddha) = **J 95**/1:392 = **Tha 1159** = **DhA 1.6**/1:71; DA 3:748; MA 1:235. This famous stanza concludes **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 17,-2.17.4/2:199), SD 36.12.