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Papāṭa Sutta

The Discourse on the Precipice | S 56.42

Theme: Fully understanding the noble truths brings full awakening

Translated by Piya Tan ©2018

1 Sutta summary and highlights

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

1.1.1 Ignorance. The **Papāṭa Sutta** (S 56.42) states that our ignorance of the 4 noble truths is bigger and more fearsome (more dangerous) than the perilous Splendid Peak (*paṭibhāna, kūṭa*). This ignorance brings upon us the perils and pains of great suffering [§§1-5]. Without penetrating the 4 noble truths, we will not be fully liberated [§§6-11]. Only after penetrating the 4 truths can we fully awaken [§§12-17]. Hence, we should constantly reflect on the 4 noble truths [§18].

1.1.2 The “mirror pattern.” The **Papāṭa Sutta**—and the **Pariḷāha Sutta** (S 56.43), SD 53.16—are “mirrored suttas.” A **mirrored sutta** is structured on a “mirror pattern,” one that is divided into almost 2 halves of contiguous teachings on the same theme, with one half (usually the first half, giving the negative version), and the other half (usually the closing) the positive version. The negative presentation is an **apophasis**, something negatively stated or a disclaiming intention, while the positive presentation is a **kataphasis**, something positively stated or an affirming intention.

The Papāṭa Sutta’s first half describes how one who has not penetrated the 4 noble truths *cannot* fully awaken [§§6-11], while the latter half is on how one who, having penetrated the 4 noble truths, is **fully awakened** [§§12-17]. The Sutta closes with an exhortation by the Buddha to us to reflect on the 4 noble truths [§18].

1.2 SUTTA STRUCTURE

1.2.1 The Papāṭa Sutta (S 56.42) opens with the Buddha inviting the monks to spend the day-rest (*diva vihāra*) at Splendid Peak. A monk, upon seeing it, exclaims what an immense and fearsome peak it is and asks if there is anything bigger and more fearsome. [§5]

The Buddha replies that there is something bigger and more fearsome, that is, our ignorance of the 4 noble truths, which prevents us from being free from suffering, from fully awakening [§6]. In the rest of the Sutta, the Buddha instructs the monks present on the significance of his statement.

1.2.2 The Papāṭa Sutta (S 56.42) then states that it is our **ignorance of the 4 noble truths** that keep us in suffering [§§6-11]. This existential ignorance, this lack of full understanding, of the truths keeps us delighting in formations (*saṅkhārā*)—karmic activities through body, speech and mind—that conduces to “**birth, decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair**” [§7].

This “delighting” (craving) generates more formations that conduce to suffering [§§8-10], and so we “fall over **the precipice** (*papāṭa*) that is *birth ... decay ... death ... sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair*” [§11]. Thus, we are not fully freed from suffering, declares the Buddha [§11.2].

The Sutta closes on a positive note. When we have penetrated the 4 noble truths, we no more delight in the formations that generate suffering, and so we do not burn in suffering [§§12-17]. Hence, exhorts the Buddha, we should devote ourselves to reflecting on the noble truths [§18].

1.2.3 RELATED SUTTAS. The **Papāṭa Sutta** (S 56.42) is related to the following suttas and should be studied with them:

Papāṭa Sutta	S 56.42	ignorance of the 4 truths is more perilous than a great precipice	SD 53.15
Pariḷāha Sutta	S 56.43	ignorance of the 4 truths burns more painfully than hell-fire	SD 53.16
Kūṭāgāra Sutta	S 56.44	the primacy of the 4 noble truths	SD 53.17

2 Dependent arising and dependent ending

2.1 DEPENDENT ARISING

2.1.1 The first half of the Papāṭa Sutta teaching—on “those who are not fully freed” [§§6-11] is actually a condensed presentation of **dependent arising** (*paṭicca,samuppāda*), beginning with ignorance, through craving and ending in suffering. For the set of the 12 links of dependent arising, see this Table:

Table 2.1¹

PAST EXISTENCE	1. Ignorance 2. Volitional formations	Karma process (<i>kamma.bhava</i>) 5 causes: 1,2,8,9,10
PRESENT EXISTENCE	3. Consciousness 4. Name-and-form (mental and physical existence) 5. The 6 sense-bases 6. Contact 7. Feelings	Rebirth process (<i>upapatti.bhava</i>) 5 results: 3-7
	8. Craving 9. Clinging 10. Existence	Karma process (<i>kamma.bhava</i>) 5 causes: 1,2,8,9,10
FUTURE EXISTENCE	11. Birth 12. Decay-and-death, etc	Rebirth process (<i>upapatti.bhava</i>) 5 results: 3-7

Links 1-2, together with **8-10**, represent the Karma Process, containing *the 5 karmic causes of rebirth*.
Links 3-7, together with **11-12**, represent the Rebirth Process, containing *the 5 karmic results*.²

2.1.2 The Sutta starts its teaching section by describing “**the karma process**” (*kamma,bhava*). Our existence arises *from* the past rooted in [1]³ **ignorance** (*avijjā*)⁴ [3] and continues into the present through [8]

¹ For the context of this dependent arising table, see SD 5.16 (8.2).

² For details, see **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16, where see (4) for the full formula, and (1.4) for a def of each of the 12 links.

craving [2.1.3]. The phrase “they delight in (*abhiramanti*) **formations** that conduce to **birth**” [§7] has **4 implications** in our own dependent arising [Table 2.1]:

- (1) PAST KARMA PROCESS (*kamma, bhava*). This refers to our past conditioning rooted in ignorance, going back into past lives—this is our “past karmic conditioning.”
- (2) PRESENT REBIRTH PROCESS (*upapatti, bhava*). Conditioned by ignorance arises [2] **volitional formations** (*saṅkhārā*), from which arises [3] **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*)—the rudimentary “mind” behind our general awareness of things (beginning with post-natal consciousness). On account of consciousness, there arise [4] **name-and-form** (*nāma, rūpa*) (the differentiation between sense and object, the *mind* and the thing *minded*). Then, attention (*samannāhāra*)⁵ discerns sense and object—that is, [5] **the 6 sense-bases**—giving rise to [6] **contact** (*phassa*), from which arises [7] **feelings** (*vedanā*), basically hedonic evaluations of our experiences projected from our past and from our biases. This is our “present rebirth process” (*upapatti, bhava*), what we *are* now (our “being”).
- (3) PRESENT KARMIC PROCESS (*kamma, bhava*). When we act with [8] **craving** (*taṇhā*), we create *new* karma in the present, leading to [9] **clinging** (*upādāna*), leading to [10] **existence** (*bhava*), that is, what we now *become* (our karmic being) [1.1.3.3].
- (4) REBIRTH PROCESS (*upapatti, bhava*): future—here meaning “continued”—existence as [11] **birth** (*jāti*), that is, “birth” (that is, becoming), keeping this life going [2.1.4] and, at the end of life, rebirth. This is where we keep “repeating” ourself while undergoing [12] **decay-and-death** (*jarā, maraṇa*). These last two links of dependent arising are clearly implied in the list—“**birth ... decay ... death ... sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair**” [§7 passim]—highlighted in **the Papāṭa Sutta** [§7].

In **the Papāṭa Sutta**, **craving** is implied as the delight (*rati*) that arises when our craving is fulfilled. [2.1.3]

2.1.3 The Papāṭa Sutta makes a very significant point when the Buddha declares when we do *not* fully understand the 4 noble truths, “we delight in formations that conduce to birth ... decay ... death ... sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair” [§7]. This is **craving**—here called “delight” (*rati*, from the plural verb *abhiramanti*)—at work.

Such “delighting” [§8] gives rise to “**formations** that conduce to birth (*jāti, saṃvattanike saṅkhāre abhisāṅkharonti*)” [§9]. These are **volitional formations**—the karmic forces behind all our actions, body, speech and mind—which began at birth and continue to be generated until death, and then regenerated into a never-ending series of new lives that are but recycles of old ways and wiles.

2.1.4 The present-life dependent arising. We must deduce from the recurrence of the term “**volition**” (*saṅkhāra*) that the Buddha is here highlighting our psychological being in this life itself—that is, dependent arising as a **synchronic** (this-life) process.⁶ We, as it were, keep on giving birth to ourself, repeating and reinventing ourself, so that we believe there is an abiding “self.” The reality is that there is only a continuity (*santati*) and memory (*sati*) comprising our karmic activities and life-continuum.⁷ This self-view keeps us generating and reinforcing sensual desires, existence, views and ignorance.⁸

We must also understand that the volitional formations—our karmic acts of body, speech and mind—reinforcing our being will end with this life, the karmic potential—technically known as “**existential**

³ These bracketed [*italicized numbers*] refer to the 12 links: see **Table 1.1.3**. Links mentioned in the Sutta are **underlined bold**.

⁴ See (**Sacca**) **Avijjā S** (S 56.17), SD 53.25.

⁵ See **Madhu, piṇḍika S** (M 18,16) SD 6.14.

⁶ On a synchronic application of dependent arising, see SD 5.16 (13.4).

⁷ On how this “mental process” (*citta, vīthi*) occurs, see SD 19.14 (2-3); SD 47.19 (3.2.2.3).

⁸ These are the 4 influxes (*āsava*), totally destroyed only by the arhat.

consciousness” or the “subconscious” rebirth-consciousness—continues into the next and future lives. Hence, the teachings of this Sutta are *not* a denial or rejection of dependent arising over “3 lives”—which is the working of dependent arising in its **diachronic** (across-time) mode.⁹

2.1.5 The Papāṭa Sutta singularly states that *without* a full understanding or breakthrough into the 4 noble truths, we are “not fully freed from suffering” [§11.2]. The Buddha highlights the problem and danger of such an ignorance with **the parable of the precipice**, that is, of falling over “the precipice that is **birth, decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair.**”

When we fall over this precipice, a terrible and painful death is certain. This is certain because of the great height or depth of the precipice, with its steep slope of sheer rough and sharp rocks. However, when we are careful, we can avoid such a precipice. Keeping clear of it, we can move on safely to the path of awakening. This is what the second part of the Sutta is about.

2.2 Dependent ending in brief

2.2.1 The second half of the Sutta teaching—on “those who are fully freed” [§§12-17] is a condensed presentation of **dependent ending** (**paṭicca.anuppāda*) [2.1.1], showing how, with breakthrough into the 4 noble truths, we attain full freedom from suffering. This closing half of the Sutta inversely mirrors the first half, which, as already noted [2.1.2], shows how, without breaking through into the 4 truths, we do not gain full freedom from suffering. [1.2.2]

2.2.2 The closing half of the Papāṭa Sutta starts by stating how, with an understanding of the 4 truths, we do **not** delight in formations that conduce to “birth ... decay ... death ... sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair” [§§12-13]. Without such delighting, we do not give rise to any formations that conduce to birth, decay, death, etc [§§14-15].

Since we have created no formations that conduce to birth, etc, we do *not* fall over the precipice that is “birth, decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair”: we are then fully freed from suffering [§§16-17]. Hence, the Buddha advises to constantly reflect on the 4 noble truths [§18].

3 Ignorance

3.1 IGNORANCE (*avijjā*) AND THE INFLEXES (*āsava*)

3.1.1 Relationship

3.1.1.1 In simple terms, **ignorance** means “not knowing or not understanding.” There are 4 aspects or effects of this *not-knowing*, and they are related to **the 4 “influxes”** (*āsava*), thus:

	influxes (<i>āsava</i>)	
(1) We do <i>not</i> know <u>what</u> needs to be known for our happiness and wisdom:	views	<i>diṭṭhi</i>
(2) We do <i>not</i> know <u>why</u> we lack such knowledge:	sense-desires	<i>kāma</i>
(3) We do <i>not</i> know that it is <u>possible</u> for us to gain such knowledge:	existence	<i>bhava</i>
(4) We do <i>not</i> know <u>how</u> to properly proceed in life:	ignorance	<i>avijjā</i>

⁹ On a diachronic application of dependent arising, see SD 5.16 (8.2).

3.1.1.2 Traditionally, **the 4 influxes** (*asava*) are listed as follows: (1) sensual desires (*kāma'āsava*), (2) existence (*bhav'āsava*), (3) views (*diṭṭh'asava*) and (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*).¹⁰ Here, they have been collated with the 4 aspects of **ignorance**, which are the *theoretical* aspects of wisdom. “Ignorance,” as an influx, has a broader sense, encompassing both its *theoretical* and the practical aspects (that is, including not knowing *how* to end suffering).

3.1.2 The influxes or “mental influxes” (*āsava*) are so called because they are powerful karmic currents or “formations” (*saṅkhārā*) that flow from “outside” (that is, the sense-objects) through our 6 sense-bases—the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and *mind*—into our *mind*. Note that “mind” is mentioned twice.

The first mind refers to the activities of our **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*) or “conscious” mind, that is, *citta*. This can also be called, in modern lingo, the “cognitive mind,” since it deals with how we “know” or cognize the world, or rather “create” our own world.¹¹ The other 5 physical faculties are also *cognitive* senses, which together with the *cognitive* mind, fuel the second mind, the “existential mind,” that is, the **subconscious** or *bhav'aṅga*, the life-continuum.¹²

3.1.3 We can imagine **the subconscious** as some kind of “**karmic genes**” that lurk deep in our being, and continue even after our body or physical being dies. Just as our *biological* genes are inherited from our parents, we inherit our *karmic* genes from our past lives. Like the biological genes, our **existential mind** is dynamic, being constantly conditioned and shaped by our karmic activities (*saṅkhārā*) and, in turn, conditioning them and shaping our person (*kāya*) and personality or character (*carita*). Technically, all these together make up what we are, our “being” or “self-hood” *atta,bhava*. Nothing in this being is permanent: by the very nature of it being constructed and conditioned. It is, as such, impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-self.

3.2 THE TRUTHS AND THE 4 INFLUXES

How do the 4 influxes work through our spiritual ignorance of **the 4 noble truths**? Let us elaborate on the above list [3.1.1.1]

3.2.1 We do not know what needs to be known for our happiness and wisdom: views

Without any true idea of the real nature of life, we have to make our own guesses and estimations. All that we have for knowing ourself, others and the external world are our physical senses and the mind. Since we do not truly know how these faculties work, we have to resort to how we think things appear to us through our senses. We can only have **views** (*diṭṭhi*), that is, partial, blurred, distorted or vicarious¹³ visions of reality, or visions *heavily tinted and smirched by our desire, hate, delusion and fear*.

3.2.2 We do not know why we lack such knowledge: sense-desires

Without any proper means or skills of seeing or knowing, we have to resort to **reasoning**, that is, by observing what happens around us and coming to some kind of conclusion. Since we do not understand the

¹⁰ The older set of influxes is threefold, ie, those of: (1) sensual lust, (2) existence and (3) ignorance. See SD 30.3 (1.3.2); **D 33**,1.10(20)/3:216; **M 2**,99.3 (SD 30.3); **M 9**,70/1:55 (SD 11.14); **M 121**,12/3:108 (SD 11.3); **A 3.58**,5/1:165 (SD 94.5), **A 3.59**,4/1:167 (SD 80.16), **A 6.63**,9/3:414 (SD 6.11).

¹¹ SD 40a.10 (2.2.6.3; 8.2.4).

¹² See SD 17.8a (6.1); SD 32.1 (3.8); SD 48.1 (9.2.1.3).

¹³ “Vicarious” means from other sources, “2nd-hand knowledge.”

real nature of existence, we rely on or are driven by preconceptions by way of fear, need, superstition and religion fabricated by others who, too, are deluded by the virtual realities of their creation. Everything is worked on the bases of personal biases (*agati*) of *greed, hate, delusion and fear*. The pervasive emotion here is that of **sense-desires** (*kāma*), since we can only rely on our physical senses and personal reasoning and imagination.

3.2.3 We do *not* know that it is possible for us to gain such knowledge: existence

Our only means of knowledge are our physical sense-faculties, whose effectiveness is basically defined or limited by how we think and feel. Without understanding how **thinking and feeling**¹⁴ really function, and their vital differences, we have no proper ideas of their potential. We are not even clear about what can be known, the real sources of our knowledge. Without such understanding and wisdom, we are unable to see the possibility of human awakening to true reality—we do not fully appreciate the nature of life itself. We are left with our physical **existence** (*bhava*) on a day-to-day worldly basis, looking for and dependent on what we make of the world around and outside us.

3.2.4 We do *not* know how to properly proceed in life: ignorance

3.2.4.1 Despite the lack of a great deal of basic understanding of the nature and workings of true reality, we are capable of guessing and reasoning from how we interact with one another and with others (our human, social and cultural experiences) and how we interact with nature (magic, superstition, religion and science). Despite all such knowledges, we still lack the wisdom of **the Buddha**, that is, until he has arisen in the world.

The Buddha's special wisdom is his full understanding of **the 4 noble truths**. Surely, even before him, other humans must have known some aspects of these truths. But such knowing were at best only partial, provisional, even distorted, in the sense of being biased by greed, hate, delusion or fear (or all of these), or in the sense of being *incomplete and unauthentic*. Either way, such false knowing is neither liberating nor educating at all.

3.2.4.2 Clearly, the **ignorance** (*avijjā*) of the 4 noble truths is no ordinary ignorance. We may have heard many talks on the noble truths and read books on them. Scholars have discussed and debated about them in learned papers, books, theses, dissertations, monographs and seminars, but none of them were or are self-awakened and gained freedom from suffering.

This ignorance, then, is an existential ignorance, or better, **a spiritual ignorance**. It is the kind of ignorance that no academic education can correct, nor even religious conditioning inculcate. It can only be self-taught like learning music or writing a novel, or at least done by oneself, like running a race or trekking up a mountain. We need to learn and master the art or skills and experience its beauty and truth for oneself.

¹⁴ On thinking, see **Mūla,pariyāya S** (M 1,3) n, SD 11.8; **Ejā S 1** (S 35.90), SD 29.10 (3); SD 31.10 (2.6); SD 53.5 (2.1.3). On feeling, see SD 17.3 (1); as direct experience: SD 36.1 (1.6.0.2).

4 The 4 noble truths

4.1 THE 4 TRUTHS IN THE SUTTAS

4.1.1 The Dhammacakka Pavattana Sutta (S 56.11) fully and clearly explains the functions of each of the 4 noble truths, thus:¹⁵

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| (1) The first noble truth, | that is, suffering | is to be <i>understood</i> . ¹⁶ |
| (2) The second noble truth, | that is, the arising of suffering | is to be <i>abandoned</i> . ¹⁷ |
| (3) The third noble truth, | that is, the ending of suffering (nirvana) | is to be <i>realized</i> . ¹⁸ |
| (4) The fourth noble truth, | that is, the way to the ending of suffering | is to be <i>cultivated</i> . ¹⁹ |

4.1.2 The Sutta is also unique in presenting **the 3 phases** (*ti,parivaṭṭa*) of each of the truths, namely:

- | | |
|--|-------------------|
| (1) the knowledge (ie, understanding) of the truth, | <i>sacca,ñāṇa</i> |
| (2) the knowledge of the task to be done regarding each truth, and | <i>kicca,ñāṇa</i> |
| (3) the knowledge of the accomplishment of these tasks. | <i>kata,ñāṇa</i> |

4.1.3 The commentarial version of these phases is called “**the 3 good truths**” (*saddhamma*):

- | | | |
|---|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| (1) the true Dharma as <u>theory</u> , | <i>pariyatti.saddhamma</i> | textual aspect |
| (2) the true Dharma as <u>practice</u> and | <i>paṭipatti.saddhamma</i> | moral virtue and meditation |
| (3) the true Dharma as <u>realization</u> . | <i>paṭivedha.saddhamma</i> | sainthood and freedom ²⁰ |

When these 3 phases are applied to each of the 4 truths, they total as the 12 aspects or modes (*dvādas’-ākāra*).

4.2 THE 4 NOBLE TRUTHS AND BREAKTHROUGH

4.2.1 In the Papāṭa Sutta, **ignorance** refers to “not understanding” (*na pajānāti*) the 4 noble truths [3.1.1.1]. This phrase “not understanding” is also found in the same context in **the Parijāha Sutta** (S 56.43),²¹ but in **the Kūṭāgāra Sutta** (S 56.44) is replaced with “without having broken through” (*anabhisamecca*).²²

How do we begin to fully understand **the 4 noble truths** so that it brings about spiritual breakthrough, that is, at least the attaining of *streamwinning*²³? Basically—as taught in the 10 suttas of **the Okkanta**

¹⁵ See SD 1.1 (5.1.3-5.1.5).

¹⁶ See S 56.11,9 (SD 1.1).

¹⁷ See S 56.11,10 (SD 1.1).

¹⁸ See S 56.11,11 (SD 1.1).

¹⁹ See S 56.11,12 + SD 1.1 (6.2.2.1).

²⁰ Here, these 3 good truths are applied to the progress of the saints of the path. Worldlings (the unawakened) who apply these 3 good truths, still need to attain the path, ie, attain at least streamwinning. See VA 225; AA 5.33; cf Nm 143 for the first two. For a variant, where the last 2 functions are inverted, see **Mahā Saḷ’āyatanika S** (M 149,10.6/3:289) + SD 41.9 (2.4) & **Abhiññā S** A 4.251/2:246 f [A:B 5:254], SD 85.3.

²¹ The Pali words there is in the pl, *na-p,pajānanti* (S 56.43,4/5:451), SD 53.16.

²² S 56.44,1/4:452 passim (SD 53.17). **Anabhisamecca** (*na + abhisamecca*) is neg absol of *abhisameti*, “to go to, attain; to grasp, understand” (S 3:260; Pug 21; Dhs 390, 1061, 1162). Its n is *abhisamaya*, often used to refer to the “comprehension, penetration” of the truths (S 5:415, 440, 441; Tha 593), of the “breaking through into” streamwinning (S 2:134), and of awakening itself (S 4:205, 207, 399; A 3:246, 444; It 47).

Saṃyutta (S 25)—we need to constantly reflect on the impermanence of all things in this world. Such a habitual karma guarantees us with streamwinning in this life itself, if not, certainly at the moment of passing away.²⁴

4.2.2 The 4 noble truths can be reflected in the light of **impermanence** in the following manner:

(1) The noble truth that is suffering, together with the 2nd noble truth constitutes the meaning of life, that life is *change*. This 1st truth, reflected in the light of impermanence, is the suffering due to change (*vipariṇāma, dukkhatā*) which is more profound than reflecting merely on physical suffering, and which is easier than reflecting on the suffering that are the formations.²⁵

(2) The noble truth that is the arising of suffering. This is the 2nd reflection on the meaning of life in terms of how suffering arises from craving (*taṇhā*). We crave for what we *think* we lack. We conceive or imagine a *lack* by comparing and measuring ourself against others. The most common bases for such measuring are form (the body and physical things) and feelings (the quality of sensations and emotions).²⁶

From **the Yamaka Sutta** (S 22.85), we have this pair of reflections:

Form is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ended and gone away.²⁷

Feeling is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ended and gone away.²⁸
(S 22.85.37/3:112), SD 21.12

For a more engaging reflection, the word “form” may be detailed as “my body ... this person ... this person’s health ... his wealth ... his reputation ... this building ... this object ... ,” etc); and “feeling” may be more specific (such as “my happiness ... his suffering ... success ... ,” etc).

(3) The noble truth that is the ending of suffering and the 4th truth constitute the reflection on the purpose of life, especially the spiritual life. Textually, the 4th noble truth is that of **nirvana**, the death-free unconditioned state. This is the final end of all suffering. Reflecting on nirvana, we can see it temporarily enacted—as a metaphor—in the passing away of our mental states (such as anger), of people we know, of beings (such as our pets) we love; the loss of treasured or precious things; changes in our own body and mind and those of others. Whenever we blow out a candle or see one blown out, or when we turn off the light or the oven fire, reflect on the nature of nirvana as not being located anywhere, as unconditioned. Thus, we get a hint of nirvana when we look deep into impermanence.

(4) The noble truth that is the path leading to the ending of suffering. The path here is actually the living journey, our spiritual life. It refers to our diligent progress in the 3 trainings—those of moral virtue, mental concentration and wisdom. The path of awakening is itself our spiritual growth; hence, the path *is* the goal. Nirvana is not the “end-point” but the **unconditioned state** that we attain when this journey is completed.

²³ On streamwinning, see **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3.

²⁴ See eg **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

²⁵ This is the 3rd of the 3 kinds of suffering (*dukkhatā*): (1) bodily suffering (the suffering of suffering) (*dukkha, dukkhatā*); (2) the suffering that is the formations (*saṅkhāra, dukkhatā*); and (3) suffering due to change (*vipariṇāma, dukkhatā*): see **(Sāriputta) Dukkha S** (S 38.14), SD 1.1(4.1).

²⁶ On a deeper level, we may be able to compare the remaining 3 aggregates, namely, perception, formations and consciousness; but these are likely to be too subtle for this level of reflection, and are best omitted.

²⁷ *Rūpaṃ aniccaṃ yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ, yaṃ dukkhaṃ taṃ niruddhaṃ tad atthagataṃ’ti.*

²⁸ *Vedanāṃ aniccaṃ yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ, yaṃ dukkhaṃ taṃ niruddhaṃ tad atthagataṃ’ti.*

As a **reflection on impermanence**, let us reflect on the steps we take as we head for the path of awakening. To rightly head for the path, we should aspire for streamwinning in this life itself. As an **aspirant** or a “streamer,” our task is to habitually reflect on impermanence. When we do this as our second nature, the Buddha guarantees that we will reach the path of awakening, that is, attain streamwinning, in this life itself, if not certainly at the moment of our passing away. [4.2.1]

5 Papāṭa

5.1 The word **papāṭa** (from the Sutta title) (Skt *prapāta*), comes from the prefix *pa-* (down) + √PAT, “to fall.” It has the following senses:

- (1) (abstract n) falling down, a fall (V 2:284; S 5:47);
- (2) a cliff, precipice, steep rock (M 1:11; S 3:109; A 3:380);
- (3) (adj) falling off steeply, having an abrupt end (V 2:237 = A 4:198, 200).

5.2 In the Sutta teaching, we see the monks being amazed at some steep and plunging precipice (sense 2). When they ask the Buddha whether there is anything steeper and more formidable than that [§5], the Buddha speaks to them of the “precipice” of not penetrating the 4 noble truths [§11], which prevents us from being awakened and liberated from samsara (senses 1 and 3). It should also be noted that this latter sense is taken figuratively, as used by the Buddha.

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Papāṭa Sutta

The Discourse on the Precipice

S 56.42²⁹

- 1** At one time, the Blessed One was staying on Mount Vulture Peak outside Rājagaha.
- 2** Then, the Blessed One addressed the monks:
“Come, bhikshus, let us retire to **Splendid Peak** [*paṭibhāna, kūṭa*]³⁰ for the day-rest.”
“Yes, bhante,” the monks replied in assent. [449]
- 3** Then, the Blessed One, along with some monks went to Splendid Peak. Now, a certain monk, saw the great precipice that is the Splendid Peak.
- 4** Seeing it, he said to the Blessed One:
“This, bhante, is **a great precipice** indeed! This, bhante, is indeed **a truly great precipice!**”
- 5** Is there, bhante, anywhere else a precipice that is greater and more fearsome than this precipice?³¹
“There is, bhikshu, *a precipice that is greater and more fearsome than this precipice.*”
“But what, bhante,³² is that *precipice that is greater and more fearsome than this precipice?*”

²⁹ The paragraph numbering here does not follow that of the PTS ed.

³⁰ *Paṭibhāna* usu means “wit,” esp the analytic skill of ready wit (*paṭibhāna, paṭisambhidā*), the 4th of the 4 analytic skills: SD 28.4 (4); SD 41.6 (2.2). This name only appears here, and is obscure. The word *paṭibhāna* is likely related to Skt *prati-bhā*, lit “to shine upon,” but also with the sense of “splendour, light; intelligence; boldness; fancy” (SED 668). There is a possibility the word is derived from *prati-bhaṣ*, “to speak in return, reply,” which suggests that the rocks might have echoed. Then, it may be called “Echo Peak.”

³¹ *Atthi nu kho bhante, imamhā papātā añño papāto mahantataro ca bhayānaka, taro* cāti.*

THOSE WHO ARE *NOT* FULLY FREED

6 “Those recluses or brahmins, bhikshus, who do not understand, as it really is:

- (1) this is **suffering**;
- (2) this is **the arising of suffering**;
- (3) this is **the ending of suffering**;
- (4) this is **the path leading to the ending of suffering**—

7 they delight in formations that conduce to **birth**;
they delight in formations that conduce to **decay**;
they delight in formations that conduce to **death**;
they delight in formations that conduce to **sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair.**

8 They,
delighting in formations that conduce to **birth**,
delighting in formations that conduce to **decay**,
delighting in formations that conduce to **death**,
delighting in formations that conduce to **sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair,**

9 thus
 give rise to formations that conduce to **birth**,
give rise to formations that conduce to **decay**,
give rise to formations that conduce to **death**,
give rise to formations that conduce to **sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair.**

10 They,
having created formations that conduce to **birth**,
having created formations that conduce to **decay**,
having created formations that conduce to **death**,
having created formations that conduce to **sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair;**

11 Thus,
 they fall over **the precipice** that is **birth**;
they fall over the precipice that is **decay**;
they fall over the precipice that is **death**;
they fall over the precipice that is **sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair.** [450]

11.2 They are not fully freed from birth, from decay, from death, from sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair. They are **not fully freed from suffering**, I say!³³ [§7.2]

THOSE WHO ARE FULLY FREED

12 Those recluses or brahmins, bhikshus, who **do understand**, as it really is:

- (1) this is suffering;
- (2) this is the arising of suffering;
- (3) this is the ending of suffering;

³² At least one Sinhala version reads *bhikkhave* (“monks”) here, thus construing this sentence as the Buddha addressing the monks present.

³³ *Te na parimuccanti jātiyā jarāya maraṇena sokehi paridevehi dukkhehi domanassehi upāyāsehi, na parimuccanti dukkhasmāti vadāmi.* See (1.1.1).

(4) this is the path leading to the ending of suffering—

13 they **do not delight** in formations that conduce to **birth;**
they do not delight in formations that conduce to **decay;**
they do not delight in formations that conduce to **death;**
they do not delight in formations that conduce to **sorrow, lamentation, physical pain,**
mental pain, despair.

14 They, **delighting not** in formations that conduce to birth,
delighting not in formations that conduce to decay,
delighting not in formations that conduce to death,
delighting not in formations that conduce to sorrow, lamentation, physical pain,
mental pain, despair.

15 They give rise to **no** formations that conduce to birth,
give rise to no formations that conduce to decay,
give rise to no formations that conduce to death,
give rise to no formations that conduce to sorrow, lamentation, physical pain,
mental pain, despair.

16 They,
 having created **no** formations that conduce to birth,
having created no formations that conduce to decay,
having created no formations that conduce to death,
having created no formations that conduce to sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental
pain, despair;

17 they fall not over **the precipice** that is birth;
they fall not over the precipice that is decay;
 they fall not over **the precipice** that is death;
they fall not over the precipice that is sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain,
despair.

17.2 They are fully freed from birth, from decay, from death, from sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, despair. They are fully freed from suffering, I say! [§11.2]

EXHORTATION

18 Therefore, bhikshus,
 you should devote yourself (to reflecting): **‘This is suffering.’**
You should devote yourself (to reflecting): **‘This is the arising of suffering.’**
You should devote yourself (to reflecting): **‘This is the ending of suffering.’**
You should devote yourself (to reflecting): **‘This is the path leading to the ending of suffering.’**

— evaṃ —

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