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Khaṇa Sutta

The Discourse on the Opportunity | S 35.135

Theme: Now is the right time to practise the Buddha Dharma

Translated by Piya Tan ©2018

1 Sutta summary and highlights

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

1.1.1 The Khaṇa Sutta (S 35.135) is a short “mirrored” sutta where the Buddha declares that **the human state** is the best opportunity (*khāṇa*) [1.2] for practising the holy life (specifically, renunciation; broadly, Dharma, faring) to gain the path of awakening in this life itself.¹ [§1]

1.1.2 When we are suffering the pains of **hell**, it is impossible to practise the holy life to gain the path of awakening because we are preoccupied with pain and avoiding it so that we will never have a mind that is calm and clear enough for mental cultivation. [2.1]

1.1.3 When we are enjoying the pleasures of **heaven**, too, it is almost possible to practise the holy life to gain the path of awakening because we are too preoccupied with pleasures to think about something that seems to end them. Our mind is too caught up with the body to be able to see itself. [2.2]

1.2 KHAṆA

1.2.1 Definition. The word *khāṇa* in the Sutta title is defined by Cone’s *Dictionary of Pali* (DP) as follows:

khāṇa, a fit or suitable moment; an opportunity; esp the right moment to be born as a man, birth in favourable circumstances (when one can take advantage of a Buddha being in the world): A 4:227,8; Dh 315 ≈ Sn 333; Tha 231; Thī 459.

1.2.2 “The right time”

1.2.2.0 According to **the commentarial tradition**, the Bodhisattva (the Buddha-to-be), while enjoying his long heavenly life in Tusita heaven,² before deciding to be reborn amongst the humans, makes these 5 investigations to find the ideal conditions for his coming, that is: (1) the human lifespan, (2) the continent, (3) the country, (4) the family and (5) the mother.³

1.2.2.1 THE HUMAN LIFESPAN. The human life-span figures for effective understanding of the Buddha Dhamma. When the lifespan is too long, people are unlikely to see the reality of impermanence and the significance of teachings on impermanence, suffering and non-self. When the lifespan is too short, people will not have the time to imbibe these truths to inspire spiritual growth and change. This epoch when the

¹ See SD 52.1 (2.2.3).

² See SD 52.1 (2.1.2).

³ J 2:48 f :: J:J 64-66; DA 2:428-430; MA 4:171-173; AA 1:114, 122; BA 273; ApA 53 f. **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14) not only mentions the 7 buddhas of recent times but also gives their details under 11 heads (*paricchedā*) (D 14/2:1-54), SD 49.8a; see also SD 36.2 (3.2.2). Only a summary is given here: for details, see SD 52.1 (2.2).

Buddha arose in India, the human life is generally under 100 years, which is sufficient time for us to appreciate the Buddha's teaching of impermanence by way of the 4 noble truths.⁴

1.2.2.2 THE CONTINENT. The Bodhisattva's 2nd investigation is that of the ideal continent—what today may be broadened to represent our world, planet earth itself. Although the Bodhisattva (the Buddha-to-be) descends from Tusita, he never declares himself to be any kind of divine prophet, nor do the upholders of early Buddhism see him as anyone more than a human seeker who takes the deepest and most involved look into our worldly life, fully and powerfully sees its frailties and failures, effectively sought to remedy them, and successfully finds the way to full awakening, and liberates the human mind from the limits of the physical body and world to reach into the heights of the mind and beyond.

Essentially, the historical Buddha opens up for us a world that is more than our biological house but the world as our human home, by accepting everyone else as what we are: humans. Based on this open vision, **humanity** is defined as the love and respect for life, that all beings interconnect through birth and rebirth. Though we inhabit this same good earth, we also arise in other worlds and planes of existence, even beyond this world. We are made aware of an unimaginably extensive multiverse of beings and possibilities of the on-going evolution of lives and goodness.

1.2.2.3 THE COUNTRY. The Buddha did not arise in any country in the West, the South, the North, or outside India 2600 years ago because those areas had not been well civilized enough to produce seekers and teachers who were able to freely experiment with spirituality, that is, as a personal experience. **Religion**, as a collective and cohesive belief-system, was, in those areas, used either to “negotiate” with the powers of Nature for human exploitation, or as a means of crowd-control for those in power, or to muster the numbers to dominate, even conquer, other tribes and nations. Religion then was nothing more than sophisticated magic and practised priestcraft, as it is still mostly today.

Also in those times, in most cases, too, the **language** was not rich or versatile enough to work with the subtleties of understanding how the mind works, much less to lay out a method or path for mental cultivation and liberation. Language was a device to master materiality and muster the masses for empires and social hierarchy—it was more for crowd control and class conduct, to dilute individuality and hold the tribe together.

On the other hand, the Indian languages of north India, even in those times, had evolved to such a level of versatility and depth that it was capable of explaining personal, spiritual and profound experiences and visions that challenged the status quo in a peaceful but profound manner. They had grammar and language far advanced than any others of their times, and are even today the foundation of our living languages for effective global communication and growth. This is the kind of language that early Buddhism uses to this day: not only the language of tongues but of the mind and, above all, of the heart—of spacious silence and open peace.

During the 6th century BCE, the middle Ganges plain was undergoing “the 2nd urbanization”⁵ and the Iron Age. Iron contributed to better and stronger structures, weapons, tools and vehicles. Kings were able to have larger and better armies, and to conquer large areas. The ensuing peace was conducive to commerce and travel. Money economy (gold, silver, copper, etc) facilitated trade and labour specialization, which, in turn, gave greater wealth and leisure to the populace.⁶ With surplus wealth and time, more people had time for religion or began to question the realities of life, especially with the rise of the

⁴ Further see SD 52.1 (2.2 (1)).

⁵ The 1st urbanization occurred with the Indus Valley civilization (3300-1300 BCE), a Bronze Age culture—esp with Harappa (Punjab, Pakistan, about 24 km (15 mi) west of Sahiwal) and Mohenjo-daro (Sindh, Pakistan).

⁶ On the “2nd urbanization: the Ganges plain,” see Thapar, *Early India*, 2002:139-146.

urban crowd. This is the area traditionally called the “Middle Country,” the historical “Buddha land,” the space where the Buddha lived, walked and taught the Dharma.

Human progress in India reached such a height that is surpassed only in our own times. These spiritual heights, however, have never been surpassed since the Buddha. His teachings are still available to us for our scrutiny and practice leading to the liberation that he himself has attained.⁷

1.2.2.4 THE FAMILY. The Bodhisattva’s 4th investigation is that of the ideal family for him to be born into. Of the 4 social classes of northern India at that time—the brahmins, the kshatriyas, the vaishyas and the shudras⁸—he chooses to arise in human society from the kshatriya or noble class, parented by Suddhodana, a Sakya rajah or chieftain, and his queen, Mahā Māyā. Tradition tells us that the Bodhisattva *chooses* such a family to be born into.

Conversely, if we see it as a natural event (*dhamma,niyāma*),⁹ then, we see the appearance of the Bodhisattva, then, the Buddha, amongst humans, as by way of “natural selection” (also termed *dhamma,niyāma*). From the flow of the right conditions of civilization and culture—our evolution from animal to human, from tribe to individual, from individual to self-transcendence—the one who arrives from such a long and learning journey of human, social and spiritual evolution is called **the Buddha**.

1.2.2.5 THE MOTHER. Mothers are the living doors through which we first arrive at our human state. The Buddha chose to arise amongst humans because we dwell midway between the self-demeaning sufferings of the non-human state, especially the hells, and the self-forgetting pleasures of the divine heavens. Both pain and pleasure keep us body-bound, limited by our senses. But the human life, although sense-based, is able to distinguish the two, and hence learn from them to rise above them.

We obtain our human body from our parents, who then hold and love us in our early years nurturing us with humanity. Not only are we *born* human but also *become* human. Then, as we mature—not merely to grow old but to grow up—we have to be ever more on our own. We have to grow out of the biological family, into the global family, into the spiritual family, and finally find our true self as an individual which makes all this comprehensible, worthwhile and liberating. This is, in fact, the message of **the Khaṇa Sutta** (S 35.135), SD 53.24.

We first see hints of the Bodhisattva’s individuation process as the 7-year-old Siddhattha sitting alone in meditation under the jambul tree; then, his leaving the palace to renounce the world. As his life picks up spiritual momentum, we see him leaving his biological family on a lone quest for spiritual liberation. When he gained it, he sat all alone radiant and triumphant under the Bodhi tree. Man has found himself, thus freeing the self, which empowers him to rise even beyond the divine, to attain full and true awakening, total liberation, **nirvana**.

⁷ Further see SD 52.1 (2.2 (2)).

⁸ The 4 social classes (*vaṇṇa*, “colour,” or *jāti*, “birth”) are respectively *brāhmaṇa*, *khattiya*, *vessa* and *sudda*, ie, the priest, the noble, the merchant and the working classes respectively: see SD 10.8 (6).

⁹ This is the 5th and last of the 5 natural laws or orders (*pañca,niyāma*), ie, those of: (1) heat or energy (*utu,niyāma*), (2) seeds or heredity (*bīja,niyāma*), (3) karma (*kamma,niyāma*), (4) mental processes (*citta,niyāma*) and (5) the nature of things (*dhamma,niyāma*). The last governs or explains all states and events not covered by the other 4: see SD 5.6 (2).

2 Hell and heaven

2.1 HELL

2.1.1 The Saṃyutta Commentary to this Sutta gives a traditional explanation of “hell”: That there is no separate hell so named but it is a name for all the 31 great hells. Specifically, however, it is said in reference to Avīci, the lowest of the hells (SA 2:400,8).

2.1.2 The Pariḷāha Sutta (S 56.43) describes the “hell of great burning” (*mahā,pariḷāho nāma nirayo*) as a state when all our senses and sensing bring us only pain and suffering.¹⁰ Both the Pariḷāha Sutta and the Khaṇa Sutta give no hint at all that it is a place or some spatial dimension. In fact, from the tone of both the Suttas, it is clear that it refers to our own mental state—a karmic state where what we fear and what pains us most overwhelms us as a private reality. In this sense, all the hells are our own creation, tailor-made, private and very real.¹¹

2.2 HEAVEN

2.2.1 The Saṃyutta Commentary explains the significance of Tāvātimsa heaven, that it represents any of the heavens of the sense-world. What is the import of the teaching? “It is impossible to live the holy life of the path either in hell, where there is extreme suffering, or in heaven, where there is extreme pleasure, so that negligence arises through continuous enjoyment and delights. The human world, on the other hand, is a combination of pleasure and pain. Right here both hell and heaven are seen. Hence, this is the karmic ground for the holy life of the path. The human state you have gained is the opportunity, the right occasion, for living the holy life.” (SA 2:400,12-22)

2.2.2 The Khaṇa Sutta should remind us of the 3 most important questions we must constantly ask ourselves:

- (1) When is the best time to practise the Dharma? It is *now*, and the moment we say it, it is gone. This is our first lesson to remember.
- (2) Who is the most important person? It is the one with you right now. Just be kind and patient with him or her, and you have learned to restrain the self in a wholesome way. If there is no one with us, then we are that most important person. Be kind and patient to yourself, too, in keeping the precepts.
- (3) What is the most important practice? To know what we are thinking right now. To ask why we are thinking that thought so that we understand ourselves better.

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¹⁰ S 56.43,2 (SD 53.16).

¹¹ See SD 53.16 (2).

Khaṇa Sutta

The Discourse on the Opportunity

S 35.135

A hell called “the 6 contact-bases”

1 It is a gain, bhikshus; a good gain for you, bhikshus, that you have found the opportunity¹² for living the holy life.¹³ [§§3+4]

2 I have seen, bhikshus, the **hells** called “the 6 contact-bases.”¹⁴ Therein,
(1) whatever **form** one *sees* with the eye is only undesirable, not desirable [not wished for].¹⁵

One *sees* only unpleasant *forms*, not pleasant ones.¹⁶

One *sees* only disagreeable *forms*, not agreeable ones.¹⁷

(2) Whatever **sound** one *hears* with the ear is only undesirable, not desirable.

One *hears* only unpleasant *sounds*, not pleasant ones.

One *hears* only disagreeable *sounds*, not agreeable ones.

(3) Whatever **smell** one *smells* with the nose is only undesirable, not desirable.

One *smells* only unpleasant *smells*, not pleasant ones.

One *smells* only disagreeable *smells*, not agreeable ones.

(4) Whatever **taste** one *tastes* with the tongue is only undesirable, not desirable.

One *tastes* only unpleasant *tastes*, not pleasant ones.

One *tastes* only disagreeable *tastes*, not agreeable ones.

(5) Whatever **touch** one *touches* [*feels*] with the body is only undesirable, not desirable.¹⁸

One *feels* only unpleasant *touches*, not pleasant ones.

One *feels* only disagreeable *touches*, not agreeable ones.

(6) Whatever **thought** [mind-object] one *knows* with the mind is only undesirable, not desirable.

One *knows* only unpleasant *thoughts*, not pleasant ones.

One *knows* only disagreeable *thoughts*, not agreeable ones.¹⁹

A heaven called “the 6 contact-bases”

3 It is a gain, bhikshus; a good gain for you, bhikshus, that you have found the opportunity²⁰ for living the holy life. [§§1+4]

4 I have seen, bhikshus, the **heavens** called “the 6 contact-bases.”²¹ Therein,

¹² *Khaṇa*, see (1.2).

¹³ *Lābhā vo bhikkhave, suladdhaṃ vo bhikkhave, khaṇo vo paṭiladdho brahma.cariya,vāsāya.*

¹⁴ *Cha phass’āyatanikā nāma nirayā.* See (2.1).

¹⁵ *Tattha yaṃ kiñci cakkhunā rūpaṃ passati, aniṭṭha,rūpaṃ yeva passati, no iṭṭha,rūpaṃ.*

¹⁶ *Akanta,rūpaṃyeva passati, no kanta,rūpaṃ.*

¹⁷ *Amanāpa,rūpaṃ yeva passati, no manāpa,rūpaṃ.*

¹⁸ *Yaṃ kiñci kāyena phoṭṭhabbaṃ phusati, aniṭṭha,phoṭṭhabbaṃ yeva phusati, no iṭṭha,phoṭṭhabbaṃ.*

¹⁹ *Yaṃ kiñci manasā dhammaṃ vijānāti, aniṭṭha,rūpaṃ yeva vijānāti, no iṭṭha,rūpaṃ, akanta,rūpaṃ yeva vijānāti, no kanta,rūpaṃ, amanāpa,rūpaṃ yeva vijānāti, no manāpa,rūpaṃ.*

²⁰ *Khaṇa*, “a fit or suitable moment; an opportunity; esp the right moment to be born as a man, birth in favourable circumstances (when one can take advantage of a Buddha being in the world)” (DP): A 4:227,8; Dh 315 ≈ Sn 333; Tha 231; Thī 459.

²¹ *Cha phass’āyatanikā nāma saggā.* See (2.2).

- (1) whatever **form** one *sees* with the eye is only desirable, not undesirable [not unwished for].
One *sees* only pleasant *forms*, not unpleasant ones.
One *sees* only agreeable *forms*, not disagreeable ones.
 - (2) Whatever **sound** one *hears* with the ear is only desirable, not undesirable.
One *hears* only pleasant *sounds*, not unpleasant ones.
One *hears* only agreeable *sounds*, not disagreeable ones.
 - (3) Whatever **smell** one *smells* with the nose is only desirable, not undesirable.
One *smells* only pleasant *smells*, not unpleasant ones.
One *smells* only agreeable *smells*, not disagreeable ones.
 - (4) Whatever **taste** one *tastes* with the tongue is only desirable, not undesirable.
One *tastes* only pleasant *tastes*, not unpleasant ones.
One *tastes* only agreeable *tastes*, not disagreeable ones.
 - (5) Whatever **touch** one *touches* [*feels*] with the body is only desirable, not undesirable.
One *feels* only pleasant *touches*, not unpleasant ones.
One *feels* only agreeable *touches*, not disagreeable ones.
 - (6) Whatever **thought** [mind-object] one *knows* with the mind is only desirable, not undesirable.
One *knows* only pleasant *thoughts*, not unpleasant ones.
One *knows* only agreeable *thoughts*, not disagreeable ones.
- 5 It is a gain, bhikshus; a good gain for you, bhikshus, that you have found the opportunity²² for living the holy life. [§§1+3]

— evaṃ —

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²² See n at §3.