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(Koṭi,gāma) Mittā Sutta

The (Koṭi,gāma) Discourse on Friends | S 56.26

Theme: The 4 truths should be taught to our near and dear ones

Translated by Piya Tan ©2018

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY. The **(Koṭi,gāma) Mittā Sutta**, the Koṭi,gāma Discourse on Friends (S 56.26), is a short discourse that records the Buddha’s admonition that we “grasp, gird, ground” our family, relatives, friends, colleagues and acquaintances “for breakthrough into the 4 noble truths” [§1]. It is an exhortation to propagate the Dharma so that others understand the 4 noble truths and attain the path of awakening.

1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

1.2.1 When there were 60 monks arhats in the world, the Buddha sent them out in 60 different directions to show their peaceful presence to the world. This is known as **the great commission** (*mahā,carika*), famously recorded in the Vinaya as follows:

- 1 Then the Blessed One addressed the monks:¹
- 2 “Freed am I, bhikshus, from all snares, divine and human! You too, bhikshus, [21] are freed from all snares, divine and human.
- 3 Go forth, bhikshus, on a mission² for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good and happiness of the gods and humans.
- 4 Let not two of you go the same way.
- 5 Teach the Dharma, bhikshus, good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, both in the spirit and in the letter.
- 6 Declare the holy life in its whole³ and complete purity.
- 7 There are beings with little dust in their eyes who, not listening, would be ruined.
- 8 They will grow if they understand the Dharma.⁴ (Mahā,vagga 1.11.1 @ V 1:20 f⁵)

1.2.2 The (Koṭi,gāma) Mittā Sutta (S 56.26) is the laity’s version of the great commission [1.2.1]. Like his exhortation to the 1st 60 arhats, the Buddha exhorts his lay followers, too, to spread the true teaching for the benefit of others, that is, so that they, too, will be able to attain the path of awakening. The Buddha’s specific instruction here is that we “grasp, gird, ground” them in the 4 noble truths. [2]

1.2.3 Related sutta. There is a similar discourse on “friends” in **the Satipaṭṭhāna Saṃyutta** (S 47), entitled **the (Satipaṭṭhāna) Mittā Sutta** (S 47.48), SD 12.20. The theme, however, there is not the 4 noble truths but the 4 focuses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*).

¹ This whole passage appears verbatim in **Pāsa S 2** (S 4.5/1:105 f). For the Skt parallel, see Mvst 3:415 f = Mvst:J 3:416 f. See S:B 413 n273.

² “Mission,” *cārikam*, usu tr as “moving or walking about, wandering, roaming; pilgrimage; journey” (DPL).

³ “Whole,” *kevala*, ie unadulterated, entire, not mixed with anything else.

⁴ “If they understand the Dharma,” *dharmassa aññātāro*, lit “if they are knowers of the Dharma.”

⁵ The Pali texts call this section *Māra Kathā*, “the Māra episode.” Here only the section on the great commission, the first half, is given.

2 How to inspire the truths in others

2.1 “TO BE GEARED UP, GIRDED, GROUNDED (FOR)”

2.1.1 Inspiring others to see the truths

2.1.1.1 The (Koṭigāma) Mittā Sutta (S 56.26) exhorts us that our family, relatives, friends, colleagues and acquaintances who look up to us (especially the monastics) are “to be geared up, girded, grounded” (*samādapetabbā nivesatabbā patiṭṭhāpetabbā*) “for breakthrough into the 4 noble truths” [§1]. “**Breakthrough**” (abhisamaya) refers to the full comprehension of the 4 truths, which refers to the attaining of the path, that is, at least the attaining of streamwinning in this life itself.

2.1.1.2 This means that, ideally, we should have ourselves at least attained **streamwinning**, if not then at least we should have aspired to attain it in this life itself. To do this we must constantly reflect on impermanence, as taught in **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1).⁶ Further, as part of our own training, we should constantly reflect on the 4 noble truths, as stated at the close of the (Koṭigāma) Mittā Sutta [§4].

2.1.1.3 The 3 key verbs of the (Koṭigāma) Mittā Sutta (S 56.26) are *samādapetabbā nivesetabbā patiṭṭhāpetabbā*, which are in the future passive participle (also called “gerundive”), referring to action that is going to happen soon or must happen, and to be urgently done by the party addressed. The dictionaries generally define the 3 verbs as follows: *samādapetabbā*, “to be undertaken”; *nivesetabbā*, “to be entered into”; *patiṭṭhāpetabbā*, “to be established.”

These translations, although technically (lexically) accurate, are rather awkward, lacking literary grace. A more aesthetically sounding rendition that is also accurate is, respectively, “to be geared up, to be girded, to be grounded (for)” breakthrough into the 4 truths. How are we “to be geared up, girded, grounded” for breakthrough in the 4 truths? This is what we will now examine.

2.2 REFLECTING ON THE 4 NOBLE TRUTHS [§4]

2.2.1 The truths are “to be grasped” (*samādapetabbā*) by them

2.2.1.1 We all see some kind of **unsatisfactoriness** (*dukkha*) in daily lives, but we don’t really think much about it mainly because we are not sure what to do about it. We feel pain and failure in our bodies and we turn to medicine and technology to heal and help us; or we simply go into denial as if nothing has happened.

In other words, we do not really grasp the significance or implications of suffering, failure, decay, disease or death; we learn nothing from them. When the challenge is too difficult, we turn our minds away from the real issues and distract ourselves with sensual pleasures.⁷

2.2.1.2 There are sutta teachings that help us to deal with suffering. **The (Pañcaka) Ṭhāna Sutta** (A 5.48), SD 42.1, for example, records the Buddha as encouraging us never to give up in the face of failure:

If he should know, “Not to be attained is this goal by me nor through anyone else,”
then, ungrieving, he would bear it thus: “What firm action shall I take now?”

(A 5.48,72), SD 42.1

⁶ See SD 16,7; or any of the 10 suttas of **Okkanta Saṃyutta** (S 25).

⁷ See **Sall’atthena S** (S 36.6,8.3), SD 5.5.

Now, this is useful when dealing with daily difficulties or more common failures, changes in fortune, even physical suffering, but these are only 2 out of the 3 kinds of suffering that characterize our lives. **The Dhamma, cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11), SD 1.1, states that there are 3 kinds of suffering: the physical, the temporal (due to change), and the existential (suffering of the formation, that is, the 5 aggregates). This last and 3rd kind of suffering is the most difficult to overcome. Here we need to cultivate all the wisdom we can and direct it properly to attain the path—only with this, we can end existential suffering.⁸

2.2.1.2 The Saṃyutta Commentary glosses *samādapetabba*⁹ as “to be grasped [learned]” (*gaṇhāpetabba*, SA 3:200,2). It connotes the idea of motivating and inspiring, including teaching and reminding, others to study and reflect on the 4 truths. Before we can fully comprehend the 4 noble truths and break through into true reality, we need to “be geared up” (*samādapeti*) or roused for breakthrough into what the 1st noble truth—suffering—is really about. The short answer is that this is the full comprehension of the 5 aggregates: form, feeling, perceptions, formations and consciousness.¹⁰

2.2.1.3 The teachings of **the (Pañcaka) Ṭhāna Sutta** (A 5.48) for the wise noble disciple are very instructive. Here is the Buddha’s instructions on how to deal with the 1st of 5 common problems that plague us, that of **decay**:

33 And, bhikshus, for a noble disciple, too, what is subject to decay decays [grows old].

When what is subject to *decay* does decay, he reflects thus:

“I’m not the only one who, subject to *decay*, decays.

34 For as long as there are the coming and going, dying and arising of beings, for all these beings what is subject to *decay* decays.

35 **And when what is subject to *decay* decays,**

if I were to sorrow, *be stressed, mourn, beat my breast, or lament,*
I would only fall into confusion.

I would have no appetite for food, too.

My body would discolour [turn ugly], too.

I would not be able to get any work done, too.

36 My enemies would rejoice.

My friends would be saddened.”

37 **So, when what is subject to *decay* decays,**

he sorrows not, feels stressed not, mourns not, beats not his breast, laments not, falls not into confusion.

38 This, bhikshus, is called a noble disciple, not pierced by the venomous dart of sorrow, like the untutored worldling who only torments himself.

39 The noble disciple is sorrowless, the dart drawn out,¹¹ attains nirvana himself.

(A 5/48.33-39), SD 42.1

The same passage, with the proper adjustments (*mutatis mutandis*), applies to **disease, death, destruction and failure**.¹²

⁸ For details on existential suffering, see SD 53.26 (3).

⁹ *Samādapetabbā* is fut pass part of *samādapeti* (*sam + ādapeti*), “to cause to take, to incite, rouse.”

¹⁰ For details on the 5 aggregates, see SD 53.33a (2.3.2).

¹¹ *Visalla*: cf M 105,18/2:256; Tha 404; Sn 939. See A 5.48,10 (SD 42.1) n.

¹² A 5.48,33-68 (SD 42.1).

2.2.2 We should gird (*nivesetabbā*) ourselves in the truths

2.2.2.1 The word *nivesetabbā*¹³ means “to be made to enter or directed towards; to be made to settle, to be established or to be founded (on).” From the contexts¹⁴ of this verb which always appears as a stock phrase—*samādapetabbā nivesetabbā paṭiṭṭhāpetabbā*—we can safely surmise that, as a phrase, it means, “should be studied, practiced, realized.” I have poetically translated the phrase as “(one) should grasp, gird, ground oneself” for breakthrough into the 4 noble truths. “Gird” has the sense of “to prepare (for a difficulty); to equip (oneself).”

2.2.2.2 In simple terms, “to be girded,” that is, the noble truths are to be “to be practiced” or “to be reflected on,” as exhorted by the Buddha [§4]. This means that we should recognize suffering and unsatisfactoriness and see them for what they really are. Then, we examine how they have arisen, that is, the conditions (always a number of them) that brought them about. Having known this, we work out how correct and prevent their recurrence. And finally go about effecting these strategies.¹⁵

2.2.3 We should ground (*paṭiṭṭhāpetabbā*) ourselves in the truths

2.2.3.1 The verb *paṭiṭṭhāpetabbā*¹⁶ means “to be established,” or as we have noted [2.2.2.1], “to be grounded (in),” that is, to have penetrated or fully comprehended the 4 noble truths--this means mastering all the 12 aspects (*dvādas’ākāra*) of the 4 truths, that is, in terms of **theory, practice and realization**.¹⁷ **The Dhamma, cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11) lays out the technical fulfilment of breakthrough into the 4 truths in terms of **the 3 phases** (*ti, parivaṭṭa*) of each of the 4 truths, as follows:

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

2.2.3.2 The Commentarial version of these 3 phases are called the 3 “good truths” (*saddhamma*),¹⁸ namely,

<i>sacca, ñāṇa</i> :	the true teaching as <u>theory</u>	(textual learning)	<i>pariyatti saddhamma</i>
<i>kicca, ñāṇa</i> :	the true teaching as <u>practice</u>	(moral virtue and concentration)	<i>paṭipatti saddhamma</i>
<i>kata, ñāṇa</i> :	the true teaching as <u>realization</u>	(wisdom)	<i>paṭivedha saddhamma</i>

(VA 225; AA 5.33; cf Nm 143 where only the first two are listed)

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¹³ Fut pass participle of *niveseti*, caus of *nivesati*, “makes enter; directs towards; causes to settle (on); establishes, founds.”

¹⁴ The phrase *samādapetabbā nivesetabbā paṭiṭṭhāpetabbā* is stock. found in the foll contexts: cultivating sati-patthana (S 5:144, 145, 189), factors of streamwinning (S 5:365×7, 366), breaking through into the 4 truths (S 5:435×2); the truth (A 1:206), wise faith (A 1:222×4, 223), 5 qualities (A 3:138×6, 139).

¹⁵ The 4 truths are here arranged as 1-2-4-3, the “practice sequence” as found in **Mahā Saḷ-āyatanika S** (M 149,-11 etc) + SD 41.9 (2.4); SD 53.26 (2.2.1).

¹⁶ *Paṭiṭṭhāpetabbā* (fut pass part) is caus of *paṭiṭṭhahati*, “to establish, set up, fix, put into, install.”

¹⁷ See SD 1.1 (5.1.5).

¹⁸ See SD 1.1 (5.1.5).

(Koṭi,gāma) Mittā Sutta

The (Koṭi,gāma) Discourse on Friends

S 56.26

1 Bhikshus, those to whom you show compassion, and who think you should be heard [heeded]¹⁹—friends, colleagues or relatives by blood and ties— [435]

bhikshus, they are to be **geared up, girded, grounded**²⁰ (by you) for breaking through into the 4 noble truths

according to true reality.²¹

The 4 noble truths

2 For what four?

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|--|---|
| (1) For the noble truth that is | suffering. |
| (2) <i>For the noble truth that is</i> | <i>the arising</i> of suffering. |
| (3) <i>For the noble truth that is</i> | <i>the ending</i> of suffering. |
| (4) <i>For the noble truth that is</i> | <i>the path</i> to the ending of suffering. |

3 Bhikshus, those to whom you show compassion, and who think you should be heard [heeded]—friends, colleagues or relatives by blood and ties—

bhikshus, they are to be **geared up, girded, grounded** (by you) for breakthrough into the 4 noble truths according to true reality.

Reflection on the truths

4 Therefore, bhikshus,

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| You should devote yourself (to the reflection): ²² | “This is suffering.” |
| <i>You should devote yourself (to the reflection):</i> | “This is the arising of suffering.” |
| <i>You should devote yourself (to the reflection):</i> | “This is the ending of suffering.” |
| <i>You should devote yourself (to the reflection):</i> | “This is the path leading to the ending of suffering.” ²³ |

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¹⁹ Meaning here, “those who show respect to you.”

²⁰ Lit, “you are to be roused, equipped, established for breakthrough” On these 3 key words, see (2.2).

²¹ *Ye hi keci bhikkhave anukampeyyātha ye ca sotabbam maññeyyurū mittā vā amaccā vā ñātī vā sālohitā vā, te kho bhikkhave, catunnaṃ ariya,saccānaṃ yathā,bhūtaṃ abhisamayāya samādapetabbā nivesatabbā patiṭṭhāpetabbā.*

²² *Idaṃ dukkhaṃ’ti yogo karaṇīyo.*

²³ For further details, see SD 53.40 (***) .