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Visākhā (Nattā) Sutta

The Discourse on Visākhā('s Granddaughter) | U 8.8

Theme: Endearment brings sorrow

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2014

1 Sutta summary and highlights

This is a short instructive story on **the reflection of impermanence** (*anicca saññā*) or **mindfulness of death** (*maraṇa,sati*). Once, the lady Visākhā comes to see the Buddha in bright daylight with her hair and clothes all drenched [§§1-3]. When the Buddha asks after her [§4], she replies that her beloved granddaughter has died [§5].

The Buddha then asks her if she wants to have as many children as there are people in Sāvattihī, and she says she would be delighted with that [§6]. The Buddha then tells her that she would not have dry clothes or dry hair for even a single day, as everyday many die in Sāvattihī! [§§7-10]. Understanding the significance of the Buddha's instruction [§§12-14], she gives up the idea of having so many children as being a joyful thing [§11], reflecting this would only add to her sorrows daily[§12].

If we hold no one dear, sorrow not [§13], she reflects, and would not despair [§14]. The Sutta closes with the Buddha uttering two verses [§§15-17] reflecting on the occasion. The first verse is on how sorrow arises [§16], and the second, on how happiness arises [§17]. These verses echo the sentiment of a number of verses from the Dhammapada [5.2].

2 Who died?

The Udāna Commentary says that she was a young girl (*kumārikā*), daughter of a son of the great lay follower, Visākhā. She had been one who was diligent in all her duties,¹ especially towards monks and nuns, that is, in preparation for the alms-offering at their home, during the offering, and after that. She was also beautiful and charming, so that was a favourite with Visākhā. She, however, died of some illness. (UA 427). We are not given her name.

3 Sutta teaching

3.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TEACHING

3.1.1 The Sutta neither says that love is futile nor that we (as lay practitioners) should avoid loving others. Essentially, it is saying that where there is an emotional attachment to another, there is a reciprocal sense of sorrow. The thorn hidden in the rose of love is attachment to that beloved. Here, "attachment" means some kind of fixed idea about a person, or projecting some kind of expectation onto that person.

3.1.2 Visākhā's pain arises from death, that is, the ultimate deprivation that separates us from those whom we love. The Lebanese poet, although a Maronite Christian, expresses the spiritual dimensions of love in his poem on "**Marriage**" (*The Prophet*, 1923), in words and spirit that an informed Buddhist can easily relate to.

¹ Cf **Sammoha,vinodanī** which mentions 14 main duties, 82 minor duties, and a few others (concerning the shrine terrace, the Bodhi-tree terrace, etc) without elaborating (VbhA 297).

But let there be spaces in your togetherness.
 And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.
 Love one another, but make not a bond of love:
 Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.
 Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup.
 Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf.
 Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone,
 Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music.
 Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping.
 For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.
 And stand together yet not too near together:
 For the pillars of the temple stand apart,
 And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow. (Gibran, "The Prophet")

3.1.3 A Buddhist reader may have some problem only with the word "soul" here. However, it is well known amongst contemporary westerners that "soul" does not refer to a fixed or eternal entity, or we need not accept any such sense. We can take "soul" here as expressing what we often mean when we refer to the "heart" of our thoughts, feelings, or actions. It also has the sense of creativity, expressing truth and beauty in a joyful way.

3.2 LOVING AND LEARNING

3.2.1 According to the Commentary, the Buddha is here pointing out to Visākhā (and us) the broader significance of the situation. Being aware of Visākhā's **delight in the worldly cycle** (*vaṭṭābhiraṭi*), that is, the ups and downs of our daily lives, the Buddha is asking Visākhā (and us) to consider if we really want to be caught up in unnecessary sorrow and suffering. (UA 427)

Indeed, the Buddha is implying that all sorrow and suffering are "unnecessary." They can be avoided. In other words, we can still love, but be free from sorrow and pain. This is called lovingkindness. To truly love someone entails two vital points: the first is, of course, lovingkindness, that is, accepting that person just as he is.

3.2.2 The second vital point begins there, that is, **to love is to learn**. Although we might think that when we love someone, everything is likely to work out well, there are always surprises where we are caught off guard. As such, there is always room to learn more about those whom we love. People are not static entities. They change, or they sometimes turn out to be other than what we thought they were.

Loving one another, therefore, also involves a maturing, growing wiser, together, although this may not occur at the same time, or at the same rate. Such being the case, we don't always have control over our growth rate as individuals. We need to give space to one another, especially those whom we love. In short, love means allowing others to grow, and allowing ourselves to grow, too. In either case, it is a learning process.²

4 Sources of suffering

4.1 The Udāna Commentary, commenting on "whatever grievings" (*ye keci sokā*) [§16a] notes that the fool is troubled by various levels of mental torment, and is internally consumed when touched by the 5

² See Reflection, "To love is to learn," R282, 2013.

kinds of losses (*vyasana*), that is, those of relatives, of possessions, through diseases, on account of immorality, and through views. (UA 428)³

4.2 The 5 kinds of losses (*pañca vyasana*) are also listed in **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33) and **the Vibhaṅga** (Vbh 99 etc). The Saṅgīti Sutta defines the 5 kinds of losses and instructs us on their significance, as follows:

The 5 kinds of losses (*pañca vyasanaṇi*):

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|---|-----------------------|
| (1) The loss of relatives. | <i>ñāti vyasana</i> |
| (2) The loss of wealth. | <i>bhoga vyasana</i> |
| (3) The loss through illness. | <i>roga vyasana</i> |
| (4) The loss through moral conduct ⁴ [moral loss]. | <i>sīla vyasana</i> |
| (5) The loss through (wrong) views. | <i>diṭṭhi vyasana</i> |

Avuso, *no* beings, after death, when the body has broken up, are reborn in a plane of misery, a bad destination, a lower realm, in hell, on account of the loss of relatives, the loss of wealth, or the loss of health.

But, beings, after death, when the body has broken up, *are* reborn in a plane of misery, a bad destination, a lower realm, in hell, on account of the loss through moral conduct and the loss through views. (D 33,2.1(11)/3:235)

4.3 The 5 kinds of losses are also mentioned in **the Vibhaṅga** in its definitions of sorrow (*soka*), lamentation (*parideva*) and despair (*upāyāsa*) (Vbh 99 f), three of the 8 kinds of sufferings that constitute the first noble truth that is suffering.⁵

5 Related teachings

5.1 The lady Visākhā appears in another sutta in the Udāna, that is, **the (Pasenadi) Visākhā Sutta** (U 2.9), where she comes to see the Buddha in the middle of the day, complaining that the Kosala rajah, Pasenadi, has not fulfilled a promise that he made. The Buddha comforts her with this udana:

<i>Sabbaṃ para,vasaṃ dukkhaṃ</i> <i>sabbaṃ issariyaṃ sukhaṃ</i> <i>sādhāraṇe vihaññanti</i> <i>yogā hi duratikkamāti</i>	All suffer under the power of another, all who are mighty feel comforted, but they are afflicted all the same, for bondages are hard to transcend.	U 2.9
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5.2 The Udāna Commentary on the Sutta notes that the Buddha's closing verses echo the sentiments of a cycle of **Dhammapada** verses related to emotional attachment (UA 429), as follows:

<i>Piyato jāyati soko</i> <i>piyato jāyati bhayaṃ</i> <i>piyato vipparamuttassa</i> <i>n'atthi soko kuto bhayaṃ</i>	From endearment comes grief, from endearment comes fear. For one freed from endearment, there is no grief, much less fear.	Dh 212
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<i>Pemato jāyati soko</i> <i>pemato jāyati bhayaṃ</i>	From love comes grief, from love comes fear.
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³ Also alluded to at UA 209.

⁴ ie loss through immoral conduct, such as being punished for a crime.

⁵ For details, see **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,5) + SD 1.1 (4.1).

<i>pemato vippamuttassa n’atthi soko kuto bhayaṃ</i>	For one freed from love, there is no grief, much less fear.	Dh 213
<i>Kāmato jāyati soko kāmato jāyati bhayaṃ kāmato vippamuttassa n’atthi soko kuto bhayaṃ</i>	From sensual pleasure comes grief, from sensual pleasure comes fear. For one freed from sensual pleasure, there is no grief, much less fear.	Dh 214
<i>Taṇhāto jāyati soko taṇhāto jāyati bhayaṃ taṇhāto vippamuttassa n’atthi soko kuto bhayaṃ</i>	From lust comes grief, from lust comes fear. For one freed from lust, there is no grief, much less fear.	Dh 215

5.3 The Udāna Commentary on the Sutta (UA 429) also notes that the Sutta theme on the danger of endearment in the world is similarly found in a stanza from **the Kalaha Vivāda Sutta** (Sn 4.11) in **the Sutta Nipāta**, thus:

<i>Piyā pahūtā kalahā vivādā parideva,sokā saha,maccharā ca mānātimānā saha,pesunā ca macchariya,yuttā kalahā vivādā vivāda,jātesu ca pesuṇāni</i>	From endearment comes quarrels, disputes, lamentations, grief, along with avarice, and conceit and arrogance, along with slander. Quarrels and disputes are linked to avarice, and slanders, too, arise from disputes.	Sn 863
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5.4 The Sutta commentary closes with a famous quote from the parable of the raft in **the Alaggadūpama Sutta** (M 22), and reminding us that any state (*dhamma*), such as a visual object, or even any state connected with calm or insight (*samatha,vipassanā*), should not be held dear, what more worldly things that bring us sorrow. For in the Sutta, the Buddha declares: “You should abandon even the dharmas [including the good], how much more that which are not-dharmas [the not-good]!”⁶

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Visākhā (Nattā) Sutta

The Discourse on Visākhā(’s Granddaughter)

U 8.8

Visākhā in mourning

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time, the Blessed One was staying in Migāra’s Mother’s Mansion in Eastern Park outside Sāvattihī.

2 At that time, the beloved and charming granddaughter of Visākhā, Migāra’s mother,⁷ passed away.⁸

⁶ M 22,13-14/1:135 @ SD 3.13.

⁷ Cf U 2.9: see (4.1).

⁸ *Tena kho pana samayena visākhāya migāra,mātuyā nattā kālaṃ,katā hoti piyā manāpā. Nattā* (f) (Skt *naptṛ*) is granddaughter; *nattar* (m) is “grandson, grandchild.” Cf *putte ca nattāro ca* [§6]. See DP: *natta(r)*. See (3.1).

3 Then, Visākhā, Migāra’s mother, with wet dress and wet hair,⁹ in the middle of the day,¹⁰ approached the Blessed One. Having gone up to him, saluted him, and sat down at one side.

Sitting thus at one side, the Blessed One said this to Visākhā, Migāra’s mother,

4 “Where, Visākhā, have you come from, in the middle of the day, coming here with wet clothes and wet hair?”¹¹

5 “My beloved and charming granddaughter, bhante, has passed away.¹² That’s why I’m here with wet clothes and wet hair in the middle of the day.”

Regularity of death

6 “Would you, Visākhā, want as many children and grandchildren as there are people in Sāvattthī?”¹³

“Yes, blessed bhante, I would want as many children and grandchildren as there are people in Sāvattthī!”

7 “But, Visākhā, how many people in Sāvattthī pass away each day?”¹⁴

8 “Ten people, bhante, pass away each day in Sāvattthī.

Nine people, bhante, pass away each day in Sāvattthī.

Eight people, bhante, pass away each day in Sāvattthī.

Seven people, bhante, pass away each day in Sāvattthī.

Six people, bhante, pass away each day in Sāvattthī.

Five people, bhante, pass away each day in Sāvattthī.

Four people, bhante, pass away each day in Sāvattthī.

Three people, bhante, pass away each day in Sāvattthī.

Two people, bhante, pass away each day in Sāvattthī.

One person, bhante, passes away each day in Sāvattthī.

9 Sāvattthī, bhante, is never without humans who pass away!”

Unending sorrows

10 “What do you think, Visākhā? Would there be any time when you would be without wet clothes or without wet hair?”

11 “Surely not, [92] bhante! Enough, bhante, of my having to do with so many children and grandchildren!”¹⁵

12 “Those, Visākhā, who have a hundred who are dear, have a hundred sorrows.¹⁶
Those who have ninety who are dear, have ninety sorrows.

⁹ Cf U 2.7.

¹⁰ *Atha kho visākhā migāra,mātā alla,vatthā alla,kesā divā divassa.*

¹¹ *Handa kuto nu tvam visākhā āgaccasi alla,vatthā alla,kesā idh’upasaṅkantā divādivassāti.*

¹² *Nattā me bhante piyā manāpā kālaṅkatā.*

¹³ *Iccheyyāsi tvam visākhā yāvaticā sāvattthiyā manussā, tāvatike putte ca nattāro cāti.* Comy says that at that time there were 700 million (*satta jana,koṭiyo*) people in Sāvattthī (UA 427). A *koṭi* is a crore or 10 million. We have to consider this is a time before mathematics as we know it, and Arab-Indian mathematics historically evolved only from the 1st millennium CE, at least a few centuries after the Buddha. As a rule of thumb, we could here perhaps read 700 thousand (*sahassa*) rather than million, for which there is no specific Pali term, at least in the suttas.

¹⁴ *Kīva,bahukā pana visākhā sāvattthiyā manussā devasikam kalam karontīti.*

¹⁵ *No h’etaṃ bhante, alam me bhante tāva bahukehi puttehi ca nattārehi cāti.*

¹⁶ *Yesam kho visākhā satam piyani satam tesam dukkhani.* Here *piyani* is acc neut pl (throughout); hence, cannot mean “dear ones,” but has a broad sense, encompassing to both the animate and the inanimate. On *satam piyani* (neut) vs *satam piyam* (masc), “a hundred beloved (persons),” see UA 428

<i>Those who have eighty who are dear,</i>	<i>have eighty sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have seventy who are dear,</i>	<i>have seventy sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have sixty who are dear,</i>	<i>have sixty sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have fifty who are dear,</i>	<i>have fifty sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have forty who are dear,</i>	<i>have forty sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have thirty who are dear,</i>	<i>have thirty sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have twenty who are dear,</i>	<i>have twenty sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have ten who are dear,</i>	<i>have ten sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have nine who are dear,</i>	<i>have nine sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have eight who are dear,</i>	<i>have eight sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have seven who are dear,</i>	<i>have seven sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have six who are dear,</i>	<i>have six sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have five who are dear,</i>	<i>have five sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have four who are dear,</i>	<i>have four sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have three who are dear,</i>	<i>have three sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have two who are dear,</i>	<i>have two sorrows.</i>
<i>Those who have one who is dear,</i>	<i>have one sorrow.</i>

13 Those who have none who are dear, have no sorrow!

14 Sorrowless are they, dust-free, without any despair are they, I declare!¹⁷

The closing verses

15 Then, the Blessed One, understanding the significance of this, on that occasion, uttered this udana [inspired utterance]:¹⁸

16 *Ye keci sokā paridevitā vā
dukkhā ca²⁰ lokasmim aneka,rūpā
piyaṃ paṭicca-p,pabhavanti ete
piye asante na bhavanti ete*

Whatever grievings¹⁹ or lamentings
or sorrows in countless ways in the world,
they arise dependent on what is dear—
when there is nothing dear, they exist not.

17 *Tasmā hi te sukhino vīta,sokā
yesaṃ piyaṃ n’atthi kuhiñci loke
tasmā asokaṃ virajaṃ patthayāno
piyaṃ na kayirātha kuhiñci loke’ti*

Therefore, happy, sorrow-free, are they,
those who have nothing dear in the world.²¹
Therefore, wishing for the sorrowless, the dust-free,
one should not hold anything dear in the world.

— evaṃ —

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¹⁷ *Asokā te virajā anupāyāsāti vadāmīti.*

¹⁸ *Atha kho bhagavā etam atthaṃ viditvā tāyaṃ velāyaṃ imaraṃ udānaṃ udānesi.* The foll verses are quoted in **Nett 67**, and the first verse at Peṭṭ 14.

¹⁹ Comy notes that the fool is troubled by mental torment, and is internally consumed when touched by the losses of relatives, of possessions, through diseases, on account of immorality, and through views. (UA 428). See (4).

²⁰ Be *va*.

²¹ Comy alludes to the parable of the raft in **Alaggadūpama S** (M 22), that “You should abandon even the dhar-
mas, how much more that which are not dharmas!” (M 22,13-14/1:135), SD 3.13. See (4.4).