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(Tika) Deva Sutta

The (Threes) Discourse on Devas | A 3.18

or **Deva,loka Sutta**, the Discourse on Heavenly Worlds

Theme: The purpose of the holy life is not heavenly rebirth

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2016

1 Sutta significance

1.1 SUMMARY. This is an instructive note by the Buddha reminding us, especially the renunciants, of the purpose of practicing the Buddha's teaching. It is *not* for purpose of attaining heavenly rebirth, despite its long life, beauty, happiness, glory and supremacy. The reason is simple: heavenly life is still part of the cycle of samsara, rigged with *impermanence, suffering and non-self*.¹

1.2 SIGNIFICANCE

1.2.1 No matter how long-lived heavenly life may be, it still must end, along with its beauty, happiness, glory and supremacy. Moreover, a deva or divine being will know of his impending death, for which he is not prepared, lacking a proper understanding of reality and wisdom of impermanence.

The profound fear and negative emotion that characterize the impending loss of heavenly life and its blessings, arouse negative thoughts in the dying moments. When that heavenly being has not done much good karma in heaven, it all adds up so that he “falls” (*cavati*) from the heavenly state into a lower realm, often one of the subhuman planes—as an animal, a preta or a hell-being.

1.2.2 Only a saint of the path, such as a **streamwinner** (*sotāpanna*), is never reborn lower than the human state. Wherever such a saint is reborn, it will be a place or environment of happiness that is conducive to spiritual development. Even when the streamwinner or the once-returner enjoys a life of sensual pleasure, such as having great wealth or a family, he will not consciously or willingly break the precepts.

2 “Pained, ashamed, disgusted”

2.1 THE NIBBIDĀ PHRASE

2.1.1 Nibbidā

2.1.1.1 The only true purpose of following the Buddha's teachings is to awaken to true reality or at least to reach the path of awakening in this life itself. As **renunciants** (monks and nuns), and those aspiring for renunciation, we should live in accordance to the Vinaya (the monastic discipline) to cultivate moral virtue as the basis for practising the Dharma (the true teaching). Both of these practices form the bases for mental cultivation to prepare our minds for letting go of worldliness and awakening to true reality of the unconditioned, called nirvana.²

2.1.1.2 As **lay practitioners**, we enjoy sensual pleasures (such as earning a living, building up wealth, having relationships and a family, being creative in the arts and technology, pursuing learning). All this is

¹ On the 3 characteristics, see SD 1.2 (2); SD 18.2 (2.2).

² On nirvana, see **Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta S 1** (U 8.1) SD 50.1.

done with the joy and spirit of the 5 precepts rooted in the values of life, labour, love, truth and lucidity.³ Our **moral life** is inspired by lovingkindness, the unconditional acceptance of oneself and others. This truthful, joyful, friendly and helpful expressions of body and speech strengthen us with the joy for effective **mental cultivation** and mindfulness, rooted in an understanding and acceptance of the impermanence of all things. This is the practice that guarantees our reaching the path in this life itself.⁴

2.1.1.3 The *nibbidā* phrase, “pained, ashamed, disgusted” (*aṭṭiyati harāyati jigucchati*, 3rd person singular present)⁵—given in the 2nd person potential plural⁶—in its various grammatical forms is very common in the suttas. Notice how it is used: the Buddha first asks us, through the monks, a rhetorical question: Wouldn’t we be “pained, ashamed, disgusted” when outsiders thought that we practice the Dharma for the sake of heavenly rebirth? [§1]

Clearly, the assembled monks have understood and accepted the true purpose of Dharma-based life, whether as renunciants and lay followers, as that of reaching the path of awakening in this life itself. Hence, we should also be “pained, ashamed, disgusted” even by the idea of desiring *heavenly life, beauty, happiness, glory or supremacy* [§3].

In that case, concludes the Buddha, we should begin at least with being “pained, ashamed, disgusted” with any misconduct of the body, speech and mind, that is, creating any bad karma. The opposite of creating bad karma is cultivating the good karma of moral virtue, mental concentration and insight wisdom—the practice of the way to the path of awakening.

2.1.2 Commentary.

2.1.2.1 The Commentary on the (Tika) Deva Sutta defines the triad of terms thus:

- “**to be pained**” means “to feel afflicted, oppressed” (*aṭṭiyeyāthāti aṭṭā pīliṭā bhaveyyātha*);
- “**to be ashamed**” means “to feel shame (from modesty)” (*harāyeyyāthāti lajjeyyātha*);
- “**to be disgusted**” means “in this case, it means feel disgusted as if towards dung” (*juguccheyyāthāti gūṭhe viya tasmim vacane sañjāta, jigucchā bhaveyyātha*). (AA 2:186,22-24)⁷

The feeling here is that of distancing oneself from the source of the “disgust.” When we are “**pained**,” we would wonder, “When will I be rid of this pain?” When we are “**ashamed**,” we wonder, “What would the teacher or other good people think of me here?” When we are “**disgusted**,” it is as if we are seeing something really repulsive and we just want to move away from it.⁸

2.2 SPIRITUAL DISGUST (*nibbidā*)

2.2.1 Understanding suffering

2.2.1.1 This triad of terms—“pained, ashamed, disgusted”—refers to the experience of “**spiritual disgust**” (*nibbidā*). When this experience is well and fully experienced and understood, it is, at least

³ Love is the 3rd value in the sense that sexuality must be an expression or fruit of love. It also has the twin value of liberty: we should respect the *freedom* of others when they say no to our advances. On the 5 values, see SD 1.5 (2.7+2.8); SD 51.11 (2.2.3.4); SD 54.2e (2.3.2.5).

⁴ See (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

⁵ See **Nibbidā**, SD 20.1 (2.3); also **Amba, laṭṭhika Rāhul’ovada S** (M 61,17), SD 3.10.

⁶ As 1 sg pres, *aṭṭiyāmi harayāmi jigucchāmi*, see **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11,5+7), SD 1.7(3.1.1).

⁷ See also MA 3:129.

⁸ For a more detailed analysis, see **Nibbidā**, SD 20.1 (2.3); also SD 54.14 (2); SD 1.17 (3).

momentarily, free from the burdens of lust, hate and delusion. It is an experience rooted in some level of insight wisdom that sees the unwholesome state as being impermanent; hence, it is suffering.

In simple terms, it is like when fire burns our fingers (or any part of our body) we would not stick them into it again. Hence, we would not, under normal circumstances, put our hand into the fire. We neither hate nor love the fire, but understand it for what it is. On the other hand, it is also possible that we stop patronizing a certain store after we learn that the goods we bought from it were not only inferior, but the prices were higher than a reputable store where we get authentic goods at a cheaper price.

In spiritual terms, **disgust** is accompanied by some level of “dhamma restlessness” (*dhamm’uddhacca*), “a Dharma-rooted mental or moral restlessness.” It is natural that we would be “pained” to see people suffering from their own lust, hatred and delusion. We might feel “ashamed” (such as feeling that we have failed as a teacher) in not being able to effectively warn others of impending dangers of a certain decision, our inability to extricate someone from some serious insidious problem. We would feel clearly “disgusted” at the shamelessness and hubris of monastics who openly or secretly break the Vinaya rules.

2.2.1.2 This experience of spiritual disgust (*nibbidā*) [2.2.1.1] has a positive counterpart or synonym, that of *distancing* and *having nothing to do* with the object or source of the disgust. This is called “**non-identification**” (*a,tam,maya,tā*, literally, “not-that-ness”). If we see *nibbidā* as a kind of *initial* vision of the true reality of things, *atammayatā* is a pervasive and positive mindset that keep us free from the influence or effects of that disgust—in either case, we simply have nothing to do with it.⁹

The Majjhima Commentary on the Alaggadūpama Sutta (M 22), in glossing *nibbidā* (“revulsion, disenchantment”) as “the insight leading to the emerging (of the path)” (*vuṭṭhāna,gaminī,vipassanā*), says that amongst its synonym is “the exhaustion of *tammayatā*” (*tam,mayatā,pariyādānan’ti*) (MA 2:114). Hence, understandably, *nibbidā* and *atam,mayatā* mean the same thing. Indeed, we can easily see that the explanation of *atam,mayatā* perfectly describes *nibbidā*, too.¹⁰

3 Related suttas

The (Tika) Deva Sutta (A 3.18) should be studied with the following suttas which have similar teaching or elaborate on the teaching here.

3.1 THE MŪLA,PARIYĀYA SUTTA (M 1)

3.1.1 The Mūla,pariyāya Sutta (M 1) is, in the light of the (Tika) Deva Sutta, a full analysis of the process of the arising (*upapatti*) of “formations” (*saṅkhārā*)—here, meaning views of existence—that are the “roots” of birth and being. None of these roots really exist in themselves as the “essence” or “Soul” behind our lives. They are simply conditioned states that arise and fall, conditioned by craving and ignorance. The Sutta lays out 24 such “bases” (*vatthu*) of existence in 8 cycles covering subjects ranging from the ordinary person, through learners on the path, the arhats and the fully self-awakened buddhas.

⁹ See SD 20.1 (2.4).

¹⁰ See *Atammayatā*, SD 19.3.

3.2 THE SAṆKHĀR'UPAPATTI SUTTA (M 120)

3.2.1 The Saṅkhār'upapatti Sutta (M 120) states that when we properly cultivate the fivefold noble growth (*ariya, vuḍḍhi*)—in faith, moral virtue, spiritual learning, charity and wisdom¹¹—we will be able to aspire to any wholesome rebirth we want. These 5 qualities are the bases for rebirth in any of the sense-world heavens. For rebirths in the higher heavens, dhyana is needed (which is implicit in the 5th and last growth).¹²

3.2.2 The imperfections of the heavens. As we have noted [1.2], the heavens are still part of samsara. Hence, heavenly life—as in all existence—must, in due course, come to an end. The rebirth of such divine beings, on account of their unwholesome dying thought will bring them down to an unhappy rebirth. Only the streamwinners and other saints do not fall into the subhuman states, but are bound for awakening, and the arhat is already awakened, just like the Buddha.

3.3 THE SUMEDHĀ THERĪ, GĀTHĀ (Thī 454 f)

3.3.1 The noble saints of the path (*ariya*) or **the learners** (*sekha*), are those bound for awakening, who understand and accept the universal nature of impermanence. Hence, they fear no death, understanding it to be only a transition to a new life, depending on our karma and dying happily. Dying in this manner, they are reborn in a happy rebirth that conduces to their further Dharma-practice.

3.3.2 The nun **Sumedhā** puts this understanding more succinctly:

Most,¹³ not understanding the truths taught by the noble Buddha,
rejoice in existence and desire to be born amongst the devas.
Birth even amongst the devas is not forever, but an impermanent state of being.
But the foolish fear not being born again and again. (Thī 454 f)

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¹¹ On the fivefold growth, see (**Sāvaka**) **Vaḍḍhi S** (A 5.63), see SD 47.8 (2.3.5.1); also **Saṅkhār'upapatti S** (M 120,-3), SD 3.4.

¹² See **Saṅkhār'upapatti S** (M 120), SD 3.4.

¹³ "Most," *bahutarā*, lit "more," "majority" (Tha:N 454).

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A 3.18

1 “Bhikshus, if wanderers of other sects were to ask you:
‘Avuso, do you live **the holy life** under the recluse Gotama *for the sake of being reborn in the deva-*
*world,*¹⁴

wouldn’t you then, bhikshus, be pained, ashamed, disgusted?¹⁵”

2 “Yes, bhante, we would!”

3 “In that case, surely, bhikshus, you are pained, ashamed, disgusted
with heavenly life,
with heavenly beauty,
with heavenly happiness,
with heavenly glory,
with heavenly supremacy.

dibbena āyunā
dibbena vaṇṇena
dibbena sukkena
dibbena yasena
dibben’ādhipateyya

4 Then, even more so, bhikshus,
you should be **pained, ashamed, disgusted**
you should be pained, ashamed, disgusted
you should be pained, ashamed, disgusted

with bodily misconduct,
with verbal misconduct,
with mental misconduct.

kaya,duccarita
vacī,duccarita
mano,duccarita

— evaṃ —

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¹⁴ *Deva, lokūpapattiyā āvuso samaṇe gotame brahma, cariyāṃ vussathāti.*

¹⁵ *Nanu tumhe bhikkhave evaṃ puṭṭhā aṭṭiyeyyātha harāyeyyātha jiguccheyyāthāti.* On “pained ... ashamed ... disgusted,” see (2).