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Kaliṅgāra Sutta

The Discourse on the Woodblock | S 20.8

Theme: Simplicity and diligence are the bases of inner progress

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2012

1 Sutta summary and highlight

1.1 SUMMARY

1.1.1 The Kaliṅgāra Sutta (S 20.8) is a short prophetic sutta wherein the Buddha warns that so long as the Vajjīs live a spartan life, such as using a wooden pillow to sleep on and keeping up regular training and exercise, their enemy, king Ajāta, sattu, will not be able to conquer them. When they become luxurious and indolent, they will be subjugated by outside powers.

Similarly, when the monastics live a simple life of wholesome diligence, they will grow spiritually. When they are heedless and lack striving, their life will be drowned in unwholesomeness. They will be stuck in the world and taste its bitter fruits here and hereafter.

1.1.2 These spartan conditions of early Buddhist monasticism is often found in the traditional meditation retreats of our own time. During such a retreat, we are expected to keep to the 8 precepts, which are the 5 precepts, with the 3rd precept upgraded to the observance of celibacy, and the addition of the precepts against taking food outside forenoon (dawn to noon), against any kind of self-adornment and against any kind of luxurious bedding.¹

In the monasteries of Myanmar and Thailand, monks, nuns and meditators, as a rule, sleep on simple plank beds with nothing more than a straw mat. Such simplicity helps us to reflect on the true spirit of renunciation. It begins with letting go of material luxury, in preparation for the mental or meditative levels of renouncing of thoughts and views for inner calm and clarity.

1.2 A PROPHETIC SUTTA

The Kaliṅgāra Sutta (S 20.8) records the Buddha reminding monastics that they are renunciants and thus should live a simple life of diligence in spiritual practice. Otherwise, like the Vajjīs, when they gave up their simple life and diligence, were easily conquered by their enemy, the monastics, too, will fall in worldliness and lose their way.

Hence, this Sutta belongs to the genre of the “prophetic,” that is, like the “future fears” theme of **the Anāgata Bhaya Suttas 1-4** (A 5.77+80/3.105-110), where the Buddha warns monastics, especially the forest monks, against worldliness. There are at least 4 suttas with this theme, thus:

A 5.77/3:100-102	Anāgata, bhaya Sutta 1	The urgency of spiritual attainment	SD 77.15
A 5.78/3:103-105	Anāgata, bhaya Sutta 2	The urgency of spiritual practice	SD 77.16
A 5.79/3:105-108	Anāgata, bhaya Sutta 3	The decline of the monastic order	SD 77.17
A 5.80/3:108-110	Anāgata, bhaya Sutta 4	The growing materialism of the monastic order	SD 77.18

¹ These are also called “observance precepts” (*uposatha, sīla*): **(Tad-ah’) Uposatha S** (A 3.70,9-16), SD 4.18; **Vitthat’uposatha S** (A 8.42), SD 89.11; **Nav’aṅg’uposatha S** (A 9.18), SD 59.4.

2 Early monastic practice

2.1 THE “WOODBLOCK”

On the phrase, “wood-block” (*kaliṅgara*), the Commentary says that in **the 1st period from the Buddha’s awakening** (*paṭhama, bodhi*, literally, “the 1st awakening”) [2.2], the monks would practise meditation from the time they finished their meal (before noon) until sunset (*suriyo attham gacchati*), when they washed.

Then, they continued meditating throughout the 1st watch of the night (up to about 10 pm). They would sleep in the middle watch (from 10 pm to 2 am), resting their heads on pieces of wood (*kaṭṭha, -khaṇḍa*, a gloss on *kaliṅgara*). Then, during the last watch (2 to 6 am), they would resume their walking meditation until sunrise. (SA 2:230,9-16).

This is clearly the practice of those monastics who are determined to attain arhathood, who have to exert determined effort. In the case of the arhats (including the Buddha), this is a natural routine they would keep to, unless they are sick or very tired.

2.2 PAṬHAMA, BODHI

2.2.1 The Commentary to **the Kaliṅgara Sutta** (S 20.8), as we have noted [2.1], mentions the “1st period from the Buddha’s awakening” (*paṭhama, bodhi*) (SA 2:230,9), or simply, “the 1st period.” We can safely conjecture that this refers to the 1st 10-20 years, when there were more arhats and unawakened monastics. The arhats would naturally keep to the monastic training [2.1]. The Kaliṅgara Sutta does not merely refer to how the arhats and diligent monastics lived during the Buddha’s time: it is an exhortation to us today, to live simple lives and diligently work to reach the path of awakening.²

2.2.2 The 2 or 3 period of the ministry

2.2.2.1 It is helpful to distinguish 2 or 3 periods of the Buddha’s ministry (*paṭhama, bodhi*) of the 45-year ministry of the Buddha. **The 1st period**, as we have noted, spans from the 1st 10 years up to the end of the 20th rains (or 5 years beyond). **The 2nd period** refers to the last half of the Buddha’s ministry, that is, the last 25 years, when there were more unawakened monastics than the arhats. Hence, the Vinaya played a vital role in maintaining order in the sangha.

2.2.2.2 It is also meaningful to speak of a “**middle period**” of the Buddha’s ministry, that is, roughly from the 10th to the 30 years of the ministry. This is a kind of interim period when “arhat” Buddhism was less widespread, and we see a rise in the population of the Buddhist laity. It is likely during this period, we also see a rise in the number of **streamwinners**, and more laity have access to the Buddha Dhamma.

In practical terms, the middle period would be more or less similar to the 2nd period. The only difference, perhaps, was that the middle period was a kind of transitional period in terms of the growth of Buddhist disciples (*sāvaka*), that is, disciples who have attained the path, especially streamwinning and once-returning. In other words, more lay practitioners reached the path.³

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² Cf *paṭhamābhisambuddha*, (the Buddha) “just after the great awakening”: SD 55.8 (1.1.2).

³ On **the 2 periods** of the Buddha’s ministry, see SD 1.1 (2.2), SD 40a.1 (1.3), SD 44.18 (1.1); on **the middle period**, see SD 40a.1 (1.3.2.3), SD 54.8 (1.1.3.3).

Kaliṅgāra Sutta

The Discourse on the Wood-block

S 20.8

1 Thus have I heard.

2 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in in the Pinnacled Hall⁴ in the great wood outside Vesālī. There the Blessed One addressed the monks, thus:

“Bhikshus!”⁵

“Bhante!”⁶ the monks replied in assent to the Blessed One.

3 The Blessed One said this:

Vajjī routine

3.2 “Bhikshus, the Licchavis now dwell using wood-blocks as headrests;⁷ [268] they are diligent, ardent in their training [exercising].⁸

King Ajata,sattu Vedehi,putta of Magadha, does not gain access to them. He does not get a hold on them.

4 But in the future, the Licchavis will become delicate, with soft and tender hands and feet; they will sleep with cotton pillows on soft bed, until sunrise.⁹

Then, king Ajata,sattu Vedehi,putta of Magadha will gain access to them. He will get a hold on them.

Monastic routine

5 Bhikshus, now the monks dwell using wood-blocks as headrests. They are diligent, ardent in striving. Mara the bad does not gain access to them. He does not get a hold on them.

6 But in the future, the monks will become delicate, with soft and tender hands and feet; they will sleep with cotton pillows on soft beds until sunrise.

Then Mara the bad will gain access to them. He will get a hold on them.

7 Therefore, bhikshus, you should train yourselves thus:

‘Using wood-blocks as headrests, we will dwell diligent, ardent in striving!’¹⁰ Thus, should you train yourselves.”¹¹

— evaṃ —

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⁴ “Pinnacled hall,” *kūṭṭhāra,sālā*: SD 45.2 (2); M 35,1 n, SD 26.5.

⁵ *Bhikkhavo*.

⁶ *Bhadante*.

⁷ *Kaliṅgarūpadhānā bhikkhave etarahi licchavī viharanti*.

⁸ *Appamattā ātāpino upāsanasmiṃ*. “Training,” *upāsana*, broadly, “training, exercise, workout, practising (a skill)”; specifically, “shooting (arrows), practice (of archery).” May be done outdoors, or indoors, in a hall (*upāsana-ṭ,ṭhāna*, VbhA at Abh 251,4; *santhāgāra*, SA 3SA 5:453,10, or *upāsana,sālā*, Miln 352,24).

⁹ *Bhavissanti bhikkhave anāgataṃ addhānaṃ licchavī sukhumāla mudu,taluṇa.hattha,pādā**. *Te mudukā suseyyā sutula,bimbohanāsu** yāva sūriy’uggamanā seyyaṃ kappessanti*. *[Ee so; Be *mudu,taluṇa,hattja,pādā*; Ke Se *mudutalā,hattha,pādā*], **[Ee so; Ee Ke Se *tūla,bimbohanāsu*; Ce *tūla,bimbohan’ādīsu*; Be Ka *tūla,bimbohan’ādīsu*].

¹⁰ *Kaliṅgarūpadhānā viharissāma appamattā ātāpino padhānsmin’ti*.

¹¹ For the Buddha’s exhortation to meditate, see eg (**Nava Purāṇa**) **Kamma S** (S 35.146,9), SD 4.12.