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Lok'āyatika Sutta

The Discourse on the Cosmologist | S 12.48
Theme: The middle way between extreme views
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

Introduction

1.1 The Kaccāna,gotta Sutta (S 12.15/2:17), **the Acela Kassapa Sutta** (S 12.17/2:20), **the Aññatara Brāhmaṇa Sutta** (S 12.46/2:75 f), **the (Sabba) Jāṇussoṇī Sutta** (S 12.47/ 2:76 f) and **the Lok'āyatika Sutta** (S 12.48/2:77) all share the well known statement of the Buddha regarding the extremes of “all exists” (*sabbam atthi*) and “nothing exists” (*sabbam n'atthi*), and of eternalism (*sassata*) and annihilationism (*uccheda*), and of “not following either of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dharma by the middle” (*ete te ubho ante anupagamma majjhena tathāgato dhammaṃ deseti*).

The “middle” here refers to dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*).¹

1.2 The Sutta Commentary says that the brahmin is well versed in **lok'āyata**, the art of debate (*vitaṇḍa,- satthe lokāyate kata,paricayo*) (SA 2:76). The Ṭikā explains the word's etymology thus,

It is called *lok'āyata* because by means of this the world goes not for, advances not for, future welfare” (*āyatim hitam tena loko na yatati na itatī ti lok'āyatam*). For, on account of this view, beings do not rouse even the thought of doing meritorious deeds, much less do they make the effort. (SAṬ:VRI 276)

1.3 Bodhi notes that the Ṭikā's explanation

seems to reflect the understanding of *lok'āyata* held at the time of the commentaries, as seen in [Monier William's SED] definition of the word as ‘materialism, the system of atheistical philosophy (taught by Cārvāka).’ There is cogent evidence that the word acquired these connotations in a later period. (S:B 763 n128)

1.4 T W Rhys Davids, in the introduction to his translation of the Kūṭadanta Sutta (D 5), discusses the term *lok'āyata* at some length. He notes that *lok'āyata* is used in the Nikāyas in a complimentary sense in reference to a branch of brahminical learning, such as in **the Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3)² and **the Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta** (D 4).³ He proposes that the word originally meant “nature-lore” and only gradually acquired the negative meaning of sophistry and materialism.⁴

1.5 K N Jayatilleke, on the other hand, argues that since the word is always used with reference to the world (*loka*), or the all (*sabba*), it originally signifies, not nature-lore in general, but cosmology, and that the arrangement of *lok'āyata* theses in opposing pairs indicates that the brahmins used the rival cosmological theories as topics of debate (1963:48-57).

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¹ See **Dependent arising**, SD 5.12.

² D 3.3/1:88.

³ D 4.5/1:114.

⁴ D:RD 1:166-172.

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S 12.48

1 At Sāvattḥī.

2 Then a brahmin who was a cosmologist (*lok'āyatika*)⁵ approached the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and friendly exchange was concluded, he sat down at one side. Sitting thus at one side, he said this to the Blessed One:

3 (1) “What now, master Gotama, do all [do everything] exist (*sabbam atthi*)?”

“‘All exist,’ this, brahmin, is the oldest world-view [cosmology].”⁶

4 (2) “What now, then, master Gotama, do all not exist (*sabbam n'atthi*)?”⁷

“‘All do not exist,’ this, brahmin, is the second world-view.”

5 (3) “What now, then, master Gotama, is all one [is everything a unity] (*sabbam ekattan*)?”⁸

“‘All is one,’ this, brahmin, is the third world-view.”

6 (4) “What now, then, master Gotama, is all many [is everything a plurality] (*sabbam puthuttan*)?”⁹

“‘All is many,’ this, brahmin, is the fourth world-view.”

6.2 Without tending towards any of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dharma by the middle:

*avijjā, paccayā saṅkhārā
saṅkhāra, paccayā viññāṇaṃ
viññāṇa, paccayā nāma, rūpaṃ
nāma, rūpa, paccayā sa'āyatanaṃ
sa'āyatana, paccayā phassa
phassa, paccayā vedanā*

7 with ignorance as condition, there are volitional formations;
with volitional formations as condition, there is consciousness;
with consciousness as condition, there is name-and-form;
with name-and-form as condition, there are the six sense-bases;
with the six sense-bases as condition, there is contact;
with contact as condition, there is feeling;

⁵ See Intro.

⁶ Comy says both this first view and the third view, “all is one” (monism) [5] are forms of the **eternalist view**: *sabbam atthi sabbam ekattan'ti imā dve sassata, ditṭhiyo* (SA 2:76). This view is often contrasted in the Nikāyas with its opposite, “nothing exists” or more literally “all does not exist,” closely related to *uccheda, ditṭhi* (nihilism), as mentioned in the next para. The Buddha declares both to be extremes to be avoided, so that one follows the middle way (M 1:65; S 2:76). The fact that this is “the oldest world-view” is understandable, as this is what, in modern philosophy, is termed “**naïve realism**,” ie “the simplest form of the view that sense perception is direct awareness of external things: that we actually perceive objects in the ‘external world,’ and are not forever cut off from them all by a veil of appearance.” (Anthony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed 1984:240). Naïve realism is generally challenged by “arguments from illusion,” that point out, for instance, that a round object may appear as elliptical from a certain angle, and that its colour seems to change according to the lighting. The Buddhist view, in terms of modern philosophy, is close to what modern western philosophy calls “**critical realism**” (a term first used by R W Sellars, *Critical Realism*, 1916), which “retains the belief of common-sense realism in independent physical things, but admits that these are not directly and homogeneously presented to us in perceptual situations” (Flew, id).

⁷ The Comy says that both this second view and the fourth view, “all is many” (pluralism) [6], are two forms of the **annihilationist view**: *sabbam n'atthi sabbam puthuttan'ti imā dve uccheda, ditṭhiyo ti veditabbā* (SA 2:76).

⁸ Comy explains that he asks whether it has a permanent nature (*nicca, sabhāva*). This is monism, the doctrine that there is only one substance, essence or permanent entity (eg the universal soul): see §4n here.

⁹ Comy explains that this means a nature different from the previous nature (SA 2:76). However, in modern philosophy, this is one of two forms of pluralism, ie, “attributive pluralism,” the doctrine that there are many kinds of attribute. The other form is “substantive pluralism,” the doctrine that there are many substances or essential entities (such as “souls”), a common non-Buddhist view in ancient India. See also §3n here.

*vedanā, paccayā taṇhā
taṇhā, paccayā upādānaṃ
upādāna, paccayā bhava
bhava, paccayā jāti
jāti, paccayā jarā, maraṇaṃ
soka, parideva, dukkha,-
domanass'upāyasā sambhavanti
evam-etassa kevalassa dukkha-k,-
khandhassa samudayo hoti*

with feeling as condition, there is craving;
with craving as condition, there is clinging;
with clinging as condition, there is existence;
with existence as condition, there is birth;
with birth as condition there arise decay-and-death,
sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair.

—Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

*avijjāya tveva asesā, virāga, nirodhā
saṅkhāra, nirodho
saṅkhāra, nirodhā viññāṇa, nirodho
viññāṇa, nirodhā nāma, rūpa, nirodho
nāma, rūpa, nirodhā saḷāyatana, nirodho
saḷāyatana, nirodhā phassa, nirodho
phassa, nirodhā vedanā, nirodho
vedanā, nirodhā taṇhā, nirodho
taṇhā, nirodhā upādāna, nirodho
upādāna, nirodhā bhava, nirodho
bhava, nirodhā jāti, nirodho
jāti, nirodhā jarā, maraṇaṃ
soka parideva, dukkha,-
domanass'upāyasā nirujjhanti
evam-etassa kevalassa dukkha-k,-
khandhassa nirodho hoti*

7.2 But with the utter fading away and ending of ignorance,
volitional formations ends;
with the ending of volitional formations, consciousness ends;
with the ending of consciousness, name-and-form ends;
with the ending of name-and-form, the six sense-bases end;
with the ending of the six sense-bases, contact ends;
with the ending of contact, feeling ends;
with the ending of feeling, craving ends;
with the ending of craving, clinging ends;
with the ending of clinging, existence ends;
with the ending of existence, birth ends;
with the ending of birth, there end decay-and-death;
sorrow, lamentation, physical pain,
mental pain and despair.
—Such is the ending of this whole mass of suffering.”¹⁰

8 When this was said, the brahmin said this to the Blessed One:

“Excellent, master Gotama! Excellent, Master Gotama!

Just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned,

or were to reveal what was hidden,

or were to show the way to one who was lost,

or were to hold up a lamp in the dark

so that those with eyes could see forms,

in the same way the Blessed One has, in numerous ways, made the Dharma clear.

8.2 I go to the Blessed One for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks.

May the Blessed One remember me as a layman who has gone to him for refuge from this day forth for life.”

— evaṃ —

Bibliography

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¹⁰ Also at S 12.1/2:1 f, 12.15/2:16 f.