

5

Bhaginī Sutta

The Discourse on Sisters | S 15.17

Theme: Rebirth—We have been sisters to others before

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2020

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 The Bhaginī Sutta (S 15.16), the discourse on sisters, is a short reflection on the endlessness and cyclic repetitiveness of sentient life, samsara. We have existed for so long that we have been, at some point in our past lives, a sister to all those beings we know today: members of our family, our relatives and friends, people we know and meet, even other non-human sentient beings.

1.2 THE REBIRTH SUTTAS

1.2.1 Humanity is one family

1.2.1.1 The 6 related suttas on *the mother, the father, the brother, the sister, the son and the daughter* —S 15.14-19 (SD 57.2-7 respectively)—can be summarized as follows:

“A beginning point of beings roaming and wandering on, fettered by ignorance, obscured by craving, cannot be discerned. It is not easy, bhikkhus, to find a being who has been not **a mother ... a father ... a brother ... a sister ... a son ... a daughter** (to one another) before during this long journeying.”

1.2.1.2 These 6 persons or relationships represent the essence of a *biological family relationship*, that is, being parents, siblings and children within the same human family. To highlight the significance of each of these human relationships, it is laid out in a full sutta template of its own, giving a total of **6 suttas**, as follows:

SD 57.2	S 15.14/2:189	Mātā Sutta	we have been <u>a mother</u> to others	in past lives
SD 57.3	S 15.15/2:189	Pitā Sutta	we have been <u>a father</u> to others	in past lives
SD 57.4	S 15.16/2:189	Bhātā Sutta	we have been <u>a brother</u> to others	in past lives
SD 57.5	S 15.17/2:189	Bhaginī Sutta	we have been <u>a sister</u> to others	in past lives
SD 57.6	S 15.18/2:190	Putta Sutta	we have been <u>a son</u> to others	in past lives
SD 57.7	S 15.19/2:190	Dhītā Sutta	we have been <u>a daughter</u> to others	in past lives

However, these relationships, in the spirit of these Suttas, go beyond the biological family [2].

2 Sutta introductory notes

For the introductory notes to **the Pitā Sutta** (S 15.15), see **SD 57.2** in its following sections:

- 2.1 The Anamatagga Saṃyutta:** sutta summary and significance; chapter summary; chapter contents.
- 2.2 The rebirth suttas:** humanity is one family [1.2.1.2-1.2.1.3]; related suttas and reflections [1.2.2].

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Bhaginī Sutta

The Discourse on Sisters

S 15.17

1 Staying at Sāvattthī.¹

There the Blessed One addressed the monks ... :

Samsara is without beginning

2 **“Without a knowable beginning,**² [With neither beginning nor ending,]³ bhikshus, is this samsara [cycle of rebirths and redeaths].

2.2 ⁴A beginning point⁵ of beings roaming and wandering on, shrouded in ignorance, fettered by craving,⁶ cannot be discerned.⁷

REBIRTH AS SISTERS

3 It is not easy, bhikshus, to find a being who has not been a **sister** (to one another) before during this long journeying.

Why is the reason for this?

3.2 *Without a knowable beginning, bhikshus, is this samsara.*

3.3 *A beginning point of beings roaming and wandering on, shrouded in ignorance, fettered by craving, cannot be discerned.*

The 3 perils

4 For such a long time, bhikshus, have you thus suffered painfully, suffered severely, suffered disastrously, and filled up the cemetery grounds.⁸

¹ For the full preamble, see S 15.14,1 (SD 57.2).

² *Anamataggāyaṃ bhikkhave saṃsāro.* On *anamatagga*: *an* (negation) + *amata* [or, *ana*, double neg + *mata*, past part of *maññati*, to think, understand, consider; thus, “not to be known”] + *agga*, “foremost (point)” (CPD): DhA 1:11,3. See SD 28.7a (2); SD 48.3 (1.2.3).

³ On the etym of this sense, see SD 48.3 (1.2.3.4).

⁴ *Pubba,koṭi na paññāyati, avijjā,nīvaraṇānaṃ sattānaṃ taṇhā,samyojanānaṃ sandhavataṃ saṃsaratāṃ.*

⁵ From this statement—and the lack of a similar one on an “ending point”—it is likely that *anamat’agga*, as used here, means “without a knowable beginning.” See prec n & SD 48.3 (1.2.3).

⁶ According to **Vijjā,bhāgiya S** (A 2.3.10), while craving “feters” [prevents] liberation, ignorance “shrouds” [hinders] wisdom (*rāg’upakkiliṭṭhaṃ vā ... cittaṃ na vimuccati, āvijj’upakkiliṭṭhā vā paññā na bhāviyati*, A 2.3.10/1:61), SD 3.2(4.2).

⁷ “Cannot be discerned” *na paññāyati. Paññāyati* (the passive of *pajānāti*, “to know, understand”) means “to be known, to be clear or evident, to be perceived, seen or taken for, to appear” (It 89; DhA 1:14, 95, 2:75). The implication here is that a “beginning” or an “ending” of the time-space continuum does not exist as a fixed reality. Time has neither beginning nor ending. The physical universe may end but it will re-arise ad infinitum.

⁸ *Evaṃ dīgha,rattaṃ vo bhikkhave dukkhaṃ paccanubhūtaṃ tibbaṃ paccanubhūtaṃ vyasanaṃ paccanubhūtaṃ kaṭasi,vaḍḍhitā. Kaṭasi,vaḍḍhitā = kaṭasī,” cemetery” + vaḍḍhita, “heaping up, swelling.”* See Sadd 396 n10. Comy explains *kaṭasī* as “cemetery ground; the earth of the charnel ground” (*susānaṃ paṭhavī*, SA 2:156,23 = Nc 273,34). See also U 72,1; UA 351,28; cf *kaṭasi,vaḍḍhanā* (UA 351,30; ItA 1:85,3).

4.2 Surely, bhikshus, it is enough to feel revulsed towards all formations [conditioned things]; it is enough to discard them; enough to want to be liberated from them!”⁹

— evaṃ —

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⁹ *Yavaṃ c’idaṃ bhikkhave alaṃ eva sabba,saṅkhāresu nibbinduṃ alaṃ virajjituṃ alaṃ vimuccitun’ti.*