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(Opamma) Nakha,sikha Sutta

The (Opamma) Discourse on the Fingernail | S 20.2

Theme: Rare is human birth

Translated by Piya Tan ©2013, 2020

1 Summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

The **(Opamma) Nakha,sikha Sutta** (S 20.1) is a short teaching by the Buddha on the rarity of human birth (like the bit of dirt in his finger-nail) compared to being reborn in other (subhuman) realms (the size of the whole earth herself). Since we have this rare opportunity of human birth, we should put it to the best use by diligently striving for the path of awakening.

1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

1.2.1 The rarity of human birth

The (Opamma) Nakha,sikha Sutta records the Buddha as referring to the rarity of human birth, as echoed in this famous Dhammapada verse:

<i>Kiccho manussa,paṭilābho</i>	Difficult it is to gain a human state;
<i>kicchaṃ maccāna jīvitam</i>	difficult is the life of mortals;
<i>kicchaṃ saddhamma,savanam</i>	difficult it is to hear the Dharma;
<i>kiccho buddhānam uppādo</i>	difficult is the arising of buddhas.

(Dh 182)¹

1.2.2 The rarity of rebirth as humans and as devas

The Sutta commentary informs us that a cycle of 30 suttas in **the Pañca,gati Peyyāla Vagga** (S 56.12.-11), where this becomes variations on the theme of the rarity of rebirth as humans and as devas. The Commentary notes that this sutta statement also includes the devas along with humans to highlight the fact that few are reborn amongst humans , just as it is rare to be reborn as devas (SA 2:223,14-16). [2.2]

2 Related suttas

2.1 (ABHISAMAYA) NAKHA,SIKHA SUTTA (S 13.1)²

The 1st sutta of the Abhisamaya Vagga, which is the 1st subchapter of the Abhisamaya Saṃyutta is also called **the Nakha,sikha Sutta** (S 13.1); hence, it is disambiguated as the (Abhisamaya) Nakha,sikha Sutta. Both S 13.1 and S 20.2 are located in the very same **Nidāna Vagga**, the 2nd chapter of the Saṃyutta. The Sutta states that one who is “accomplished in vision” (*ditṭhi,sampanna*), that is, a streamwinner, has destroyed such a significant level of suffering that what remains is just a trifling, like the bit of dirt in the Buddha’s fingernail, while the suffering that has been destroyed is like the whole earth itself!

¹ For an explanation of this verse, see SD 57.13 (1.2.3.2).

² S 13.1/2:133 f (SD 70.1).

2.2 PAÑCA,GATI PEYYĀLA VAGGA (S 56.12.11)³

The theme of **the (Opamma) Nakha,sikha Sutta** (S 20.2) is more fully developed into a cycle of 30 suttas in **the Pañca,gati Peyyāla Vagga** (S 56.12.11), where this becomes variations on the theme of the rarity of rebirth as humans and as devas. The Commentary says that the devas are included here along with humans to highlight the fact that few are reborn amongst humans and devas (SA 2:223,14-16).

2.3 Appa,mattaka Vagga (A 1.19)⁴

The Appa,mattaka Vagga (A 1.19) is a set of 45 suttas divided into 2 cycles. The 1st, **the Dharma Cycle**, has 15 suttas, arranged in ascending order, from the most conducive place and kind of birth for learning and cultivating wisdom, to meeting the Buddha, and hearing, learning and practising his teaching, to living the holy life and gaining spiritual freedom. The 2nd, **the Rebirth Cycle**, has 30 suttas, reflecting on the rarity of being born as humans and as devas, and that more beings are likely to fall into the 3 subhuman states, that is, *hell, the animal womb and the preta realm*.

2.4 (ANAMATAGGA) PUGGALA SUTTA (S 15.10)⁵

This is a reflection on samsara being so immeasurably long and suffering that we should feel revulsion towards it. We should be moved to seek the way out into the path of awakening, beginning as a streamwinner.

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(Opamma) Nakha,sikha Sutta

The (Opamma) Discourse on the Fingernail

S 20.2

1 The Buddha was dwelling at Sāvattihī.

Then, the Blessed One took up a bit of soil in his fingernail, and addressed the monks, thus:⁶

“Bhikkhus, what do you think? Which is more: this bit of soil that I have taken up in my fingernail, or the great earth?”⁷

2 “Bhante, the great earth is more.

The bit of earth that the Blessed One has taken up in his fingernail is trifling.

Compared to the great earth, it comes not into any consideration at all, not even by a fraction; there is no contrast at all.”⁸

3 “Even so, bhikkhus, those beings who are reborn amongst humans are few. But those beings are more numerous who are reborn elsewhere than among human beings.”⁹

³ S 56.12.11 (S 56/102-131), SD 57.28.

⁴ A 1.19/1:35-38 (SD 57.8).

⁵ S 15.10/2:185 f (SD 5.19a).

⁶ *Atha kho bhagavā parittaṃ nakha,sikhāyaṃ paṃsuṃ āropetvā bhikkhu āmantesi.*

⁷ *Taṃ kiṃ maññatha bhikkhave, katamaṃ nu kho bahutaraṃ yo cāyaṃ mayā paritto nakha,sikhāyaṃ paṃsuṃ āropito, yā cāyaṃ mahā,paṭhavīti.*

⁸ *Saṅkhyam pi [Ce saṅkham pi] nōpeti, kala,bhāgam pi nōpeti, upanidhim pi nōpeti.* This phrase is stock: **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129,9.2;3:166), SD 2.22; **Nakha,sika S** (S 20.2/2:263), SD 67.5; **Nanda S** (U 3.2,13), SD 43.7.

⁹ For comy, see (1.2) & SD 57.8 (2.2.3).

Therefore, bhikshus, you should train yourself thus:
'We will dwell diligently.'¹⁰
Thus you should train yourselves."

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¹⁰ *Appamattā viharissāmāti.*