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(Catukka) Koṭṭhita Sutta

The (Fours) Discourse on Koṭṭhita | A 4.174a (A:Be 4.173)

Ce Mahā,koṭṭhita Sutta The Discourse on Maha Koṭṭhita

The same teaching recurs in A 4.174b/2:162,4-163 (SD 4:174b) with Ānanda as questioner

Theme: The ending of the bases for contact cannot be predicated

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2021

1 Summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

1.1.1 The (Catukka) Koṭṭhita Sutta (A 4.174a) records a brief dialogue between the arhat Sāriputta and the elder Mahā Koṭṭhita.¹ Mahā Koṭṭhita questions Sāriputta regarding the 6 bases for contact (*cha phas-s'āyatana*)²: whether with their “remainderless fading away and ending” (*asesa, virāga, nirodha*) there is:

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| (1) anything else, | <i>att'aññāṃ kiñci</i> |
| (2) nothing else, | <i>n'atth'aññāṃ kiñci</i> |
| (3) both anything else and nothing else, | <i>atthi ca n'att'aññāṃ kiñci</i> |
| (4) neither anything else nor nothing else. | <i>n'ev'atthi no atth'aññāṃ kiñci</i> |

1.1.2 Sāriputta rejects all these 4 questions as being “wrongly put”: “Do not say so, avuso” (*mā h'evam āvuso*).³ The reason is that so long as there is any sense-base (the meeting of sense-faculty, sense-object and sense-consciousness), there is sense-contact, that is, the experience of sensing. Where there is **sensing**, there is thinking, which brings on **mental proliferation** (*papañca*). This is samsaric existence.

1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

1.2.1 This dialogue concerns the ontological state of an arhat who has attained “final nirvana” (who has passed away), that is, attained the “**nirvana-element without residue**” (*anupādi, sesa nibbana, dhātu*). Such a “person” cannot be said to exist, or not exist, or both exist and not exist, or neither exist nor not exist. Since there is neither consciousness nor any footing for consciousness, there is neither karma nor rebirth to speak of.

1.2.2 Mahā Koṭṭhita questions Sāriputta from the viewpoint of the arising of **consciousness** from the “triangle of experience,” that is, the meeting of sense-faculty, sense-object and sense-consciousness, when there arises sense-contact (*phassa*).⁴ However, when all such sensing has ended, so does thinking, and with that there is no more mental proliferating.⁵

This is **nirvana**, which cannot be categorized in any way: whether it exists, or does not, or both exists and exists not, or neither exists nor exists not. Nirvana is unconditioned; hence, unpredicable. We may only speak something *about* it (comparisons, metaphors, stories, etc), but nothing of it.

¹ On Mahā Koṭṭhita, see SD 28.4 (2); SD 30.2 (1).

² On the 6 bases of contact, see SD 57.34 (2.3.4).

³ This is the 4th and last of the proper ways of answering a question, ie, (1) by a categorical answer, (2) by an analytical answer, (3) by a counter-question, or (4) putting aside the question (as being wrongly put): **Kathā, vatthu S** (A 3.67,2.3) + SD 46.11 (2.2).

⁴ On the triangle of experience (how the bases of contact work), see SD 57.34 (Table 2.3.4).

⁵ On how the 5 aggregates arise from “contact” (*phassa*), see **Dvaya S 2** (S 35.93,3.4 etc), SD 57.39.

1.2.3 The Kevaḍḍha Sutta records an interesting and humorous story the Buddha tells of a monk who, using his psychic power, traversed the sense-world heavens up to the 1st-dhyana brahma realm, asking the gods, “**Where do these 4 great elements—earth, water, fire, wind—cease without a trace?**” A similar question is asked in **the (Catukka) Koṭṭhita Sutta** (A 4.174a), but it is about what remains with the ending of sensing and that which *is sensed*. In the Kevaḍḍha Sutta, question is not about how sensing and what is sensed end, or what remains with their ending, but about where these elements end without remains.

Understandably, the Buddha responds by stating that the question is “wrongly put” [1.1.2], and that the question should be rephrased as follows:

Where do earth, water, fire, wind find no footing;
where, long and short, small and great, fair and foul,
where name and form totally cease without a trace?

The answer to this question is:

It is here that earth, water, fire and wind **find no footing**;
here, long and short, small and great, fair and foul;
here, name and form cease without a trace:
with consciousness’ cessation this stops here.”⁶ (D 11,85/1:223), SD 1.7

2 Related suttas

The (Catukka) Koṭṭhita Sutta (A 4.174a) mentions **the 6 bases of contact** (*cha phass’āyatana*). These are the suttas related to them:

Pañca-t, taya Sutta	M 102,25.1	the 6 bases of contact defined	SD 40a.12 (3.12.2)
Dhātu Vibhaṅga Sutta	M 140,7	the 6 kinds of sense-contacts	SD 4.17
Titth’āyatana Sutta	A 3.61,7/1:176	<i>phass’āyatana</i> in context and in detail	SD 6.8
(Catukka) Yoga Sutta	A 4.10/2:11 f	ignorance of the 6 bases is a “bond” (<i>yoga</i>)	SD 105.1
(Catukka) Koṭṭhita Sutta	A 4.17a/2:161 f	Koṭṭhita asks Sāriputta about the 6 bases	SD 57.36
(Catukka) Ānanda Sutta	A 4.17b/2:162 f	Ānanda asks Koṭṭhita about the 6 bases	SD 57.37
(Pañcaka) Nāgita Sutta	A 5.30,15/3:32	they should be reflected as being “impermanent”	SD 55.12a (3.4.4)
Kosala Sutta 1	A 10.29/5:64	the ending of the 6 bases is nirvana here and now	SD 16.15
(Catukka) Cara Sutta	A 4.11/2:13 f	(see introductory notes)	SD 57.34 (2.3.4)

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⁶ The Buddha makes a similar statement by way of an inspired utterance (*udāna*) on the parinirvana of **Bāhiya Dāru, cīriya** (U 1.10): “Where water, earth, fire and wind find no footing, | There neither brightness burns nor sun shines | There neither moon gleams nor darkness reigns. | When a sage, a brahmin, through wisdom has known this by himself. | Then, he is freed from form and formless, from joy and pain.” (U 1.10/9,4-8), SD 33.7. A similar verse is found at **S 1.27** (1:15,18*), SD 50.13(2), and a similar teaching is given by Mahā Cunda to Channa (S 35.87/-4:59), SD 11.12. The brahma Ghāṭikāra says something similar (S 1.50/1:35,19* = 2.24/2:60,17*). On this verse [§85], see D:W 557 n242 & **Mahā Parinibbāna S**, SD 9 (9.8.6). For further modern comy, see also SD 54.2b (2.2.2).

(Catukka) Koṭṭhita Sutta

The (Fours) Discourse on Koṭṭhita

A 4.174a

1 Then, the venerable **Mahā Koṭṭhita** approached the venerable Sāriputta, and exchanged greetings with him. When they had concluded their greetings and cordial talk, he sat down to one side and asked the venerable Sāriputta:

(1) “Avuso [Friend], with the remainderless fading away and ending of **the 6 bases for contact**, is there **anything** else?”⁷

“Do not speak so, avuso.”

(2) “Avuso, with the remainderless fading away and ending of the 6 bases for contact, is there then **nothing** else?”⁸

“Do not speak so, avuso.”

(3) “Avuso, with the remainderless fading away and ending of the 6 bases for contact, is there then **both** something else and nothing else?”⁹

“Do not speak so, avuso.”

(4) “Avuso, with the remainderless fading away and ending of the 6 bases for contact, is there **neither** something else nor nothing else?”¹⁰

“Do not speak so, avuso.”¹¹

2 “Avuso, when you are asked:

(1) ‘With the remainderless fading away and ending of the 6 bases for contact, is there anything else?’ you say: ‘Do not speak so, avuso.’

And, avuso, when you are asked:

(2) ‘With the remainderless fading away and ending of the 6 bases for contact, is there then nothing else?’ you say: ‘Do not speak so, avuso.’

And, avuso, when you are asked:

(3) ‘With the remainderless fading away and ending of the 6 bases for contact, is there then both something and nothing else?’ you say: ‘Do not speak so, avuso.’

And, avuso, when you are asked:

(4) ‘With the remainderless fading away and ending of the 6 bases for contact, is there then neither something nor nothing else?’ you say: ‘Do not speak so, avuso.’

In what way, avuso, should the meaning of this statement be understood?”

3 (1) If one says, “Avuso, with the remainderless fading away and ending of the 6 bases for contact, there is something else,’ one proliferates that which is not to be proliferated.¹²

⁷ Channaṃ āvuso phass’āyatanānaṃ asesā, virāga, nirodhā **atth**’aññaṃ kiñcīti.

⁸ Channaṃ āvuso phass’āyatanānaṃ asesā, virāga, nirodhā **n’atth**’aññaṃ kiñcīti.

⁹ Channaṃ āvuso phass’āyatanānaṃ asesā, virāga, nirodhā **atthi ca n’atth**’aññaṃ kiñcīti.

¹⁰ Channaṃ āvuso phass’āyatanānaṃ asesā, virāga, nirodhā **n’ev’atthi no atth**’aññaṃ kiñcīti.

¹¹ Comy glosses **ma h’evaṃ** with *evaṃ mā bhaṇi*, “Do not speak thus” (AA 3:150,16-18); and explains that the 4 questions are asked by way of eternalism, annihilationism, partial eternalism, and “eel-wriggling” (*sassat’uccheda, -ekacca.sassata, amarā, vikkhepa*, AS 3:150,15 f). Thus, Sāriputta rejects each question as being “wrongly put.” “Eel-wriggling” is a pejorative for agnosticism, skepticism, hedging or evasiveness.

(2) If one says: ‘Avuso, with the remainderless fading away and ending of the 6 bases for contact, there is nothing else,’ *one proliferates that which is not to be proliferated*.

(3) If one says: ‘Avuso, with the remainderless fading away and ending of the 6 bases for contact, there is both something else and nothing else,’ *one proliferates that which is not to be proliferated*.

(4) If one says: ‘Avuso, with the remainderless fading away and ending of the 6 bases for contact, there is neither something else nor nothing else,’ *one proliferates that which is not to be proliferated*.

Avuso, so far as the range of the 6 bases for contact extends, that far extends the range of proliferation.¹³

So far as the range of proliferation extends, [162] that far extends the range of the 6 bases for contact.

With the remainderless fading away and **ending** of the 6 bases for contact there is the ending of proliferation, the stilling of proliferation.”

— *catuttham* —

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¹² *Ap,papañcaṃ papañceti*. Comy: “He creates proliferation [speculations] in relation to something that should not be proliferated [speculated about]. He travels along a path that one should not travel on.” The Pali word *papañca* suggests mental fabrication, obsessive mental construction, and deluded conceptualization, which Comys say arise from craving, conceit and views (*taṇhā, māna, diṭṭhi*). Comy, says Bodhi, seems to take *appapañca* as a contraction of *appapañciya*, without any explanation. The word prob means “that which is to be proliferated,” based on Comy gloss: “proliferating where one has no basis for proliferating” (*na-p,papañcetaḥṭṭhāne papañcaṃ karoti*); “taking a path that should not be taken” (*anācaritabbaṃ maggaṃ ācarati*) (AA 3:151,1 f). A Chinese parallel, SĀ 249, says: “These (statements on the 6 bases for contact) are just empty words” (此則虛言 *cǐ zé xū yán*). “Abandoning all these falsehoods (that is, the 6 bases for contact) (離諸虛偽 *lí zhū xū wěi*),” one attains nirvana. (T2.60a16-20)

¹³ *Tavatā papañcassa gati*. Comy: “So far as the range of the 6 bases extends, that far extends the range of proliferation, distinguished by way of craving, views, and conceit” (AA 3:151,3-5).