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Sotānugata Sutta

The “Followed by Ear” Discourse | A 4.191

Theme: Benefits of listening to the Dharma

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2010, 2019, 2021

1 Introduction

1.1 THE TITLE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

1.1.1 The Sotānugata Sutta (A 4.191) is a short discourse on the benefits of listening to and learning the Dharma. In our Sutta title, *sotānugata* means “followed by ear,” has both literal and figurative senses. Literally, it means “one who has listened to” the Dharma, that is, learned it by listening; or, we can take it broadly to mean, “having learned the Dharma.” Notice that in §2 the Sutta says that “a monk masters (*pariyāpuṇati*) the Dharma ... ,” where it means that he has mastered the teaching by heart, and also understood it. [1.2.1]

1.1.2 The 2 senses of sotānugata

1.1.2.1 Figuratively, *sotānugata* refers to one whose good karma through the ear (listening to the Dharma) follows one, and thus benefits one. Our past acts of listening or learning the Dharma are the good karma that allow us to recognize the Dharma once we hear it again [1.2.2]. Yet, the past is now: we start listening and learning the suttas *now*. The moment we start, it is gone into the past. We have planted

Every moment we spend studying a sutta, even when we only understand it in parts, is like adding a new piece of jigsaw puzzle. As we study the suttas, a but at a time, everyday or habitually, our heart lights up, even when we do not seem to know it. The jigsaw picture grows and become more complete. Reaching the path is like when we have completed the puzzle, and can see the whole picture. This is clearly better than doing bad, which brings bitter painful fruits that stays on with us life after life.

1.1.2.2 This is, in fact, what the Sutta is about: it gives 4 occasions when we are able to recognize the Dharma by listening and benefit from it, that is:

- (1) when the devas recite the Dharma [§2];
- (2) when a monk recites the Dharma to the devas [§3];
- (3) when a young deva instructs an assembly of devas [§6];
- (4) when a newly arisen deva reminds another [§9].

1.1.2.3 Significantly, the Sutta also tells us that in all these cases, the monk has mastered the Dharma (by listening to the sutta teachings) “**dying with a confused mind**” (*muṭṭha-s, sati kālam kurumāno*). This is possible because of the person’s habitual karma of hearing, learning, reciting and mastering the Dharma. We may even assume that the person is not a good meditator, and so dies confused, meaning with a thought of greed, hate, delusion or fear.

The Sotānugata Sutta (A 4.191) is a highly significant text that shows the 6ing priority of **habitual karma** deciding the kind of rebirth we will have. This is understandable since what we habitually conditioned ourself with is the karma that would have a profound effect on our last thought. In the absence of such a habitual karma, or that such a karma is negative, and the last thought is negative, too, then, clearly, the rebirth will be a negative one.¹

¹ Cf **Mahā Kamma Vibhaṅga S** (M 136,17.1/3:214 + n), SD 4.16. On the last thought-moment, see SD 48.1 (6.3.1).

1.2 MEANING OF SOTĀNUGATA

1.2.1 Sotānugata (*sotā* + *anugata*) literally translates as “followed by ear.” **Anugata** (*anu*, “after” + *gata*, past participle of *gacchati*, to go) is the past participle of *anugacchati* (to go after, follow). Hence, *anugata* means “gone after, accompanied by, come to; following.” *Sotānugata*, thus, means “followed by ear,” that is to say, *listened well*, or, more broadly, “learned well.” The usage here is a positive one.

1.2.2 Figuratively, *anugata* means “fallen or gone into, affected with (with suffix *-anugata*).” Here, it has a negative sense of “being a victim of, suffering (from),” as in the following usages:

Lakkhaṇa Sutta (D 30)

parisā'ssa hoti anugatā acalā'ti, “(if he is a recluse, dustless and stainless,) his assembly, too, follows unshakably.” (D 30,21(4d)/3:173,10), SD 36.9

Meghiya Sutta (U 4.1)

khuddā vitakkā sukhumā vitakkā, anugatā manaso ubbilāpā², “petty thoughts, subtle thoughts, when followed, are the mind’s elation [distraction].” (U 4.1/37,23*), SD 34.2

Paṭisambhidā,magga (Pm 1:128,4)

jātiyā anugato loka,sannivāso'ti, “those associating with the world are trailed by birth.”

1.2.3 The Commentary explains: “Having applied the sense-faculty that is the ear, one designates (the meaning) with the ear that is knowledge” (*sotānugatānan'ti pasāda,sotaṃ odahitvā ñāṇa,sotena vavat-thāpitānaṃ*, AA 3,17 f). Though this seems to favour *sotānudhatānaṃ*, AA:Be glosses *sotānugatā honti* with *sotaṃ anuppattā anupaviṭṭhā honti*, “not arising, not entering the ear” (18:364,20), which supports the reading *sotānugatānaṃ*.³ AA:Ce has *sotānugatānaṃ* in the lemma at first, but then here reads *sotānudhatā honti*. In short, the readings are uncertain in the Commentaries here.

2 Difficult passages

2.1 Who recites the Dharma to the devas

2.1.1 The sentence, “... **the happy ones recite Dharma passages ...**” (*sukhino dhamma,padā plavanti*) [§2.2; 2.1] is problematic both in reading and meaning. However, from the Sutta context, the word can only refer to the devas there who know Dharma (apparently, having learnt it as devas) and recite it. This is confirmed by the statement that they, *sukhino*, “do not recite the Dharma,” but it is recited by a monk with psychic powers who visits them [§§3.3, 5.2].

2.1.2 In the rest of the Sutta, the Dharma-reciter is a single deva each time. In **§8.3** “a young deva” (*deva,putta*) recites the Dharma to an assembly of devas. Finally, in **§9.3**, the deva who recites the Dharma is referred to as being “one who is spontaneously born” (*opapātika*).

Opapātika has the following 2 usages in the suttas:

- (1) one who is a spontaneously born being, that is, reborn naturally, especially as a deva: see **Mahā Cattā-rīsaka S** (M 117,5 n) SD 6.10;

² Vī *anuggate manaso uppilāve*. Comy glosses *anugatā* here as “not arisen on account of being hard to attain” (*dullabha,vasena anuppanne*, UA 237:20).

³ This reading seems to reflect *anugata* (cl *anuggata*) as used in **Meghiya S** (U 37,23), SD 34.2.

- (2) a non-returner (*anāgāmī*), that is, one reborn in the pure abodes, never to return to the sense-world; that is, he will attain awakening in the pure abodes: see SD 40a.1 (5.1.2.3(5)).

The Commentary refers to the 1st usage, saying that the deva first arises as a young deva, and then recalls the Dharma (*paṭhamam uppanno deva,putto pacchā uppannam sāreti*, AA 3:171,9 f).

2.2 “The happy ones recite Dharma passages to him” (§2.2)

2.2.1 The Burmese (Be) reading is *tassa tattha sukhino dhammapadā plavanti* [§2.2].

Dhamma, padā here simply means “Dharma passages,” that is, sutta teaching. However, *plavanti* (pl), from √PLU (to float), means “they float,” which, as Norman (in his study on the *apilapati*, “to recite” and *apilāpeti*, “to remember by recitation” (1988:49-61)⁴) has pointed out, may work with “mindfulness” (*sati*), but does not fit the context here.

2.2.2 The PTS reading (Ee), *dhammapadāni pi lapanti*, with *pi* (an emphatic particle) + *lapanti* (to talk, accost, beg, declare) as separate words, although slightly better than the Be reading, is still awkward. We can imagine someone “talking” the Dharma, but it does not properly fit the context here.

2.2.3 Both the Sinhala (Ce) and the Siamese (Se) read *tassa tattha sukhino dhammapadāpilapanti*, “there, the happy ones recite the Dharma to him,” which clearly fits our Sutta context well. The compound *dhamma, padāpilapanti* is resolved as *dhammapadā*, “Dharma passages,” + *apilapanti*, “to recite (pl).” Its singular form is *apilapati* (to recite) or *apilavati* (to float); this latter is used in connection with memories that “floats before (one’s mind)”⁵ (CPD). However, in our present context, the former sense applies [DP sv *apilapati*]. Norman agrees that the verb here is *api-lapanti* = *abhi + lapanti* (1988:6).⁶

2.3 The meaning of the passage

2.3.1 The meaning of the phrase *tassa tattha sukhino* is problematic, too. *Sukhino* here can be either the subject (nominative plural) or the object (dative-genitive singular): hence, it can mean either “to him, the happy ones there” (with *tassa* referring to a newly reborn deva, and *sukhino* a nominative plural, referring to the devas already there); or “to him who is happy there” (with *tassa* and *sukhino* as dative singulars referring to the same subject).

2.3.2 The Burmese Commentary (AA:Be) gives the first alternative, taking *dhammapadā* as the nominative subject, *plavanti* as the verb, and *tassa sukhino* as the dative indirect object: “Passages of the Dharma ‘float before’ him who is happy there.” The Burmese Commentary explains: “To the one who is mentally confused during his intermediate state, the Dharma that is the Buddha-word that he had recited, the root of his having recited them before, all float before him clearly seen like images in a clear mirror.”⁷

⁴ K R Norman, “Pāli lexicographical studies V,” JPTS 1988:49-61. Repr in *Collected Papers* 3, Oxford, 1992:257-259.

⁵ This latter meaning applies to the word as used in **Meghiya S** (U 37,23), SD 34.2.

⁶ Norman op cit.

⁷ Be: “*dhamma, padā plavanti* means that they have arisen muddle-minded in the intermediate state, that is, before the basic [simple] recitation of the collected words of the Dharma spoken by the Buddha, which then appear clear to them; they understand everything clearly like (seeing) an image in a mirror” (*dhammapadā plavantīti antarā, bhava nibbatta, muṭṭha-s, satino, yepi pubbe sajjhāya, mūlikā vācā, paricita, buddha, vacana, dhammā, te sabbe pasanne ādāse chāyā viya plavanti, pākaṭā hutvā paññāyanti*, AA:Be 2:365)

2.3.3 Both the Sinhala Commentary (AA:Ce) and Siamese Commentary (AA:Se) give the lemma as *dhammapadāpilapanti* (*dhammapada*, “Dharma passages” + *apilapanti*, “they recite”), and explains: *te sabbe pasanne ādāse chāyā viya apilapanti upaṭṭhahanti*, “they recite, understand, everything clearly like an image in a mirror” (as above).⁸ The verb *upaṭṭhahanti*, “they care for, understand,” clearly glossing on *apilapanti/plavanti*.

Comparing the various versions of the Commentaries, Se is interesting as it says *antarā, bhavē nibbattassa sukhino*, “in the intermediate states, they arise as happy beings” (departing from Be *nibbatta, muṭṭha, s-satino*), which means that they have arisen muddle-minded in the intermediate state, but *after* that, recalling the Dharma brings them joy which frees them from that state to be reborn as devas.

2.3.4 In keeping with the context, it is perhaps best to take *tassa* and *sukhino* as referring to different persons: *tassa* the indirect dative object, and *sukhino* the nominative plural subject; the transitive verb *apilapanti* (= *abhilapanti*), and *dhamma, padā(ni)* as direct object—as Norman does.⁹ He adds that because AA does not recognize the verb *apilapanti*, it has to take (*a*)*pilapanti* as intransitive, with *dhammapadā* as subject, and *sukhino* as genitive/dative in agreement with *tassa*. (1992:259). Hence, “the happy ones” (*sukhina*) are the devas in that heaven, who “recite Dharma passages to him (*tassa*),” the monk who is reborn there—which explains the sentence: “**the happy ones recite Dharma passages to him.**” [§2.2; 2.0]

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Sotānugata Sutta

The “Followed by Ear” Discourse

A 4.191

1 “Bhikshus, when one has followed [learned] the teachings by ear,¹⁰ recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, penetrated them well by view, **4 benefits** are to be expected.

What are the four?

(1) The devas recite the Dharma

2 Here, bhikshus, a monk masters the Dharma: **sutta, geyya, veyyākaraṇa, gāthā, udāna, iti, vuttaka, jātaka, abbhuta, dhamma and vedalla.**¹¹

⁸ Comy vll. Ce(BJT): *dhammapadā plavantīti antarā, bhavē nibbattassa muṭṭha-s.satino yepi pubbe sajjhāya, mūlikā vācā, paricīta, buddha, vacana, dhammā, te sabbe pasanne ādāse chāyā viya plavanti pākaṭā hutvā paññāyanti* (AA(BJT) 18:272, digital) is essentially the same as Be (prec n). Ce(SHB), too, is almost identical, except for stating that the arose “happy” (*sukhino*) even before the recitation of the Buddha Dharma (*dhammapadā pilapantīti satte bhavē nibbattassa sukhino yepi pubbe sajjhāya, mūlikā vācā, paricīta, buddha, vacana, dhammā, te sabbe pasanne ādāse chāyā viya apilapanti upaṭṭhahanti pākaṭā hutvā paññāyanti*, AA(SHB) 17:557).

⁹ Norman op cit.

¹⁰ *Sotānugata* = *sota*, “the ear” + *anugata*, “followed,” meaning “following on hearing, acquired through hearing.” Be Ee *sotānugatānaṃ bhikkhave dhammānaṃ*; Ce has *sotānudhatānaṃ* (“of the ear elements”) here, and *sotānudhātā honti* just below while Be Ee *sotānugata honti*; however, Ce has *sotānugataṃ* in the *uddāna* verse. AA:Ce reads *sotānugatānaṃ*. See (1.2).

He has *learned these teachings by ear, recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, penetrated them well by view.*

2.2 Dying with a confused mind,¹² he is reborn into a certain host of devas.¹³ There, **the happy ones** recite Dharma passages to him.¹⁴

His mindfulness [memory], bhikshus, is slow in arising, but, even then, this being quickly reaches distinction.¹⁵

2.3 This, bhikshus, is **the 1st benefit** to be expected when one *has learned the teachings by ear, recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, penetrated them well by view.*

(2) A monk recites the Dharma to the devas

3 [2] Furthermore, bhikshus, a monk masters the Dharma: *sutta geyya, veyyākaraṇa, gāthā, udāna, iti, vuttaka, jātaka, abbhuta, dhamma and vedalla.*

He has learned those teachings by ear, recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, penetrated them well by view.

3.2 Dying with a confused mind, he is reborn into a certain host of devas. There, however, the happy ones do not recite Dharma passages to him,

3.3 but **a monk with psychic powers through the attainment of mastery of mind** teaches the Dharma to an assembly of devas.¹⁶

It occurs to him: ‘This is the Dharma-Vinaya in which I formerly lived the holy life.’

His mindfulness [memory], bhikshus, is slow in arising, but, even then, this being quickly reaches distinction.

4 Suppose, bhikshus, a man were skilled in the sound of **a kettledrum**.¹⁷

While traveling along a highway, he might hear the sound of a kettledrum.¹⁸ He would not be at all perplexed or uncertain about the sound.¹⁹

Rather, he would conclude: ‘That is the sound of *a kettledrum!*’²⁰

¹¹ *Suttam̐ geyyam̐ veyyākaraṇam̐ gātham̐ udānam̐ itivuttakam̐ jātakam̐ abbhutam̐ dhammam̐ vedallam̐*, respectively: the discourses (*sutta*), “the poems” (mixed prose with verse (*geyya*)), the expositions (*veyyākaraṇa*), the verses (*gāthā*), the inspired utterances (*udāna*), the sayings (*iti, vuttaka*), the birth-stories (*jātaka*), the marvels (*abbhuta, dhamma*), and the catechisms (*vedalla*). As a set, they are called “the 9 limbs of the Teacher’s teaching” (*nav’āṅga satthu, sāsana*), an early list of teaching-types before the canon was closed. They are spelt here with the lower case because they are not exactly the texts we have today, although these are rooted in them. See SD 51.16 (2) defs; SD 58.2 (5.4.2); SD 3.2 (1.4); SD 26.11 (3.2.1.3); SD 30.2 (2.1); SD 30.10 (4).

¹² “Dying with a confused mind” (*muṭṭha-s, sati kālam̐ kurumāno*): see (1.1.2.3).

¹³ This statement suggests that rebirth is *not* always dictated by our dying or last thought (as often held by Abhidhamma). AA:Se actually says that “they are reborn happy in the intermediate state” (*antarā, bhavē nibbattassa sukhino*) departing from Be *nibbatta, muṭṭha, s. satino*. This in fact explains the happiness of those devas who, before being reborn there, had died muddle-minded.

¹⁴ *Tassa tattha na heva kho sukhino dhamma, padāpilapanti**. *Be *plavanti*; Ce Ke Se *pilapanti*; Ee *pi lapanti*. On “the happy ones” (*sukhino*), see (2.0).

¹⁵ *Dandho bhikkhave sat’uppādo; atha so satto khippam̐ yeva visesa, gāmī hoti*. “Distinction” (*visesa*) refers to attaining the path at least as a streamwinner.

¹⁶ *Api ca kho bhikkhu iddhimā ceto, vasi-p, patto deva, parisāyam̐ dhammam̐ deseti*.

¹⁷ *Seyyathāpi bhikkhave puriso kusalo bheri, saddassa*.

¹⁸ *So addhāna, magga-p, paṭipanno bheri, saddam̐ suṇeyya*.

¹⁹ *Tassa na h’eva kho assa kaṅkhā vā vimati vā ‘bheri, saddo nu kho, na nu kho bheri, saddo’ti*.

²⁰ *Atha kho bheri, saddo’tv-eva niṭṭham̐ gaccheyya*.

5 Even so, too, bhikshus, a monk masters the Dharma: **[186]**
sutta geyya, veyyākaraṇa, gāthā, udāna, iti, vuttaka, jātaka, abbhuta, dhamma and vedalla.

He has learned those teachings by ear, recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, penetrated them well by view.

5.2 Dying with a confused mind, he is reborn into a certain host of devas.
There, however, the happy ones do not recite Dharma passages to him,

but **a monk with psychic powers through the attainment of mastery of mind** teaches the Dharma to an assembly of devas.

It occurs to him: 'This is the Dharma-Vinaya in which I formerly lived the holy life.'

His mindfulness [memory], bhikshus, is slow in arising, but, even then, this being quickly reaches distinction.

5.3 This, bhikshus, is **the 2nd benefit** to be expected when one *has learned the teachings by ear, recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, penetrated them well by view.*

(3) A young deva recites the Dharma to the devas

6 [3] Furthermore, bhikshus, a monk masters the Dharma:
sutta geyya, veyyākaraṇa, gāthā, udāna, iti, vuttaka, jātaka, abbhuta, dhamma and vedalla.

He has learned those teachings by ear, recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, penetrated them well by view.

6.2 Dying with a confused mind, he is reborn into a certain host of devas.
There, however, the happy ones do not recite passages of the Dharma to him,

nor does a monk with psychic powers through the attainment of mastery of mind teaches the Dharma to an assembly of devas,

6.3 but, **a young deva**²¹ teaches the Dharma to an assembly of devas.

It occurs to him: 'This is the Dharma and discipline in which I formerly lived the spiritual life.'

His mindfulness [memory], bhikshus, is slow in arising, but, even then, this being quickly reaches distinction.

7 Suppose, bhikshus, a man were skilled in the sound of **a conch**.²²

While traveling along a highway he might hear the sound of a conch. He would not be at all perplexed or uncertain about the sound.

Rather, he would conclude: 'That is the sound of *a conch*!'

8 Even so, too, bhikshus, a monk masters the Dharma:
sutta geyya, veyyākaraṇa, gāthā, udāna, iti, vuttaka, jātaka, abbhuta, dhamma and vedalla.

He has learned those teachings by ear, recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, penetrated them well by view.

8.2 Dying with a confused mind, he is reborn into a certain host of devas.
There, however, the happy ones do not recite passages of the Dharma to him,

nor does a monk with psychic powers through the attainment of mastery of mind teaches the Dharma to an assembly of devas,

8.3 but, **a young deva** teaches the Dharma to an assembly of devas.

²¹ "A young deva," *deva,putta*, a deva who has not long arisen in that heaven. As examples of *deva,putta*, Comy mentions like (*viya*) Pañcāla, caṇḍa [S 2.7/1:48], Hatthaka Mahā, brahmā [A 3.127/1:278 f] and Sanañ, kumāra Brahmā [SD 54.3d (2.2).] (AA 3:171, 7 f).

²² "A conch," *saṅkha*, the shell of an Indian Ocean mollusc, *Turbinella pyrum*, which is a large spiral with flared lip used as a ceremonial horn.

It occurs to him: ‘This is the Dharma and discipline in which I formerly lived the spiritual life.’

His mindfulness [memory], bhikshus, is slow in arising, but, even then, this being quickly reaches distinction.

8.4 This, bhikshus, is the 3rd benefit to be expected when one *has learned the teachings by ear, recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, penetrated them well by view.*

(4) One spontaneously born addresses him

9 [4] “Furthermore, bhikshus, a monk masters the Dharma: *sutta geyya, veyyākaraṇa, gāthā, udāna, iti, vuttaka, jātaka, abbhuta, dhamma and vedalla.*

He has learned those teachings by ear, recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, penetrated them well by view.

9.2 *Dying with a confused mind, he is reborn into a certain host of devas.*

There, however, the happy ones do not recite passages of the Dharma to him,

nor does a monk with psychic powers through the attainment of mastery of mind teaches the Dharma to an assembly of devas,

nor does a young deva teach the Dharma to an assembly of devas.

9.3 but, **one who is spontaneously born**²³ reminds another spontaneously born:

‘Do you recall, dear sir? Do you recall, dear sir, where we formerly lived the holy life?’²⁴

He²⁵ says thus: ‘I recall, dear sir! I recall, dear sir!’²⁶

His mindfulness [memory], bhikshus, is slow in arising, but, even then, this being quickly reaches distinction.

10 Suppose, bhikshus, there were **two friends who had played together in the mud.**

By some chance they were to meet one another later in life. Then, one friend would say to the other: ‘Do you recall this, my friend? Do you recall that, my friend?’

He (the other) would say: ‘I recall, my friend! I recall, my friend!’

11 Even so, too, a monk masters the Dharma: *sutta geyya, veyyākaraṇa, gāthā, udāna, iti, vuttaka, jātaka, abbhuta, dhamma and vedalla.*

He has learned those teachings by ear, recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, penetrated them well by view.

11.2 *Dying with a confused mind, he is reborn into a certain host of devas.*

There, however, the happy ones do not recite passages of the Dharma to him,

nor does a monk with psychic powers through the attainment of mastery of mind teaches the Dharma to an assembly of devas,

nor does a young deva teach the Dharma to an assembly of devas.

11.3 but, **one who is spontaneously born** reminds another spontaneously born:

‘Do you recall, dear sir? Do you recall, dear sir, where we formerly lived the holy life?’

He (the other) says thus: ‘I recall, dear sir! I recall, dear sir!’²⁷

His mindfulness [memory], bhikshus, is slow in arising, but, even then, this being quickly reaches distinction.

²³ Ie, the monk who is “spontaneously reborn” (*opapātika*) as a deva. [2.1.2]

²⁴ *Sarasi tvaṃ mārisa sarasi tvaṃ mārisa, yattha mayam pubbe brahma, cariyam acarimhāti.*

²⁵ Comy takes *opapātika* to simply mean “to newly arisen” amongst the devas, and the one who first arises addresses the one who has arisen after him (AA 3:171,9 f. It is possible to take *opapātika* as meaning a “non-returner” (*anāgāmi*) who visits the devas to teach them the Dharma.

²⁶ *So evam āha ‘sarāmi mārisa, sarāmi*

²⁷ *So evam āha ‘sarāmi mārisa, sarāmi mārisāti.*

11.4 This, bhikshus, is the 4th benefit to be expected when one *has learned the teachings by ear, recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, penetrated them well by view.*

12 These, bhikshus, are the 4 benefits to be expected when one *has followed the teachings by ear, recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, penetrated them well by view."*

— evaṃ —

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