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Mā Puñña Bhāyī Sutta

The “Do Not Fear Merit” Discourse | It 22

Dutiya Mā Puñña Bhāyī Sutta = Ma Puñña Bhāyī 2 The Second “Do Not Fear Merit” Discourse

Traditional: It 1.3.2 Khuddaka Nikāya, Iti,vuttaka 1, Eka Nipāta 3, Tatiya Vagga 2

Mettā Sutta (Ee, WT) The Lovingkindness Discourse¹

Theme: The 3 grounds of merit making

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003; rev 2010

1 Related suttas

1.1 The first half of **the Mā Puñña Bhāyī Sutta** (It 1.3.2/14-16) has a parallel in **the (Puñña) Mettā Sutta** (A 7.58a),² and this section is referred to once in **the Khuddaka Commentary** (KhpA 230) and twice in the Jātakas (**the Araka Jātaka**, J 169; **the Dhamma-d,dhaja Jātaka**, J 220). In the Araka Jātaka (J 169), similar words are ascribed to the Bodhisattva when he was the teacher Araka.³

1.2 In both (Puñña) Metta Sutta and the Mā Puñña Bhāyī Sutta, the Buddha declares that as a result of his practice of the three ground for merit, he enjoyed worldly happiness and well-being for a long time, and also rebirth as Mahā Brahmā, as Shakra, and “many hundred times I was a universal monarch,” with the latter Sutta adding more epithets to the mention of universal monarch [§3]. Clearly here these are the benefits of “merit” (*puñña*): characteristically life-affirming and this-worldly. In itself, such merit still keeps us within samsara, but it can be used as a foundation and launching pad for wholesome (*kusala*) action leading to spiritual awakening.

2 Terminology

2.1 SUTTA STRUCTURE AND THEME. Another interesting point is that in **the Mā Puñña Bhāyī Sutta** (It 22), initially, at the end of the prose section, the Sutta declares that the three reasons or grounds for the karmic blessings are given as giving, self-mastery and restraint [§4]. Subsequently, however, in the stanza section, the triad is restated as giving, a life of stillness [harmonious living], and a lovingkind mind [§5], which concurs with the traditional list of the three grounds of merit-making. “A lovingkind mind” (*metta-citta*) clearly refers to “cultivation” (*bhāvanā*). It is understandable here that for the laity and scholastics they should at least practise the cultivation of lovingkindness (*mettā bhāvanā*).

2.2 THE GROUNDS FOR MERIT-MAKING. The Sutta’s commentary explains “taming” or “self-mastery” (*dama*) as “the stilling of defilements such as lust by the collecting and stilling of the eye and other faculties”;⁴ “restraint” (*saññama* or *saṃyama*) is the restraint of the body (demeanour) and speech⁵ (ItA 1:78). This explanation does not seem helpful.

Of the three terms [§4], *dāna* is of course giving of food etc as merit-making. *Dama* is the taming of the five sense-faculties, that is, the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. *Saññama* is the control of the mind (the sixth sense-faculty), that is, the overcoming of the mental hindrances. The Commentary, however, reverses the last two explanations (ItA 1:78).

¹ For the sake of disambiguation, it would be proper to call it the “Do not fear” Lovingkindness Discourse, (**Mā Puñña Bhāyī**) **Metta S**.

² A 7.58a/4:88-91 @ 2.11a.

³ A:NB, *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 1999 §147. See **Araka S** (S 7.70), SD 16.17(2).

⁴ *Damassā ti cakkh’ādi,indriya,damanassa c’eva samādhāna,vasena rāg’ādi,kilesa,damanassa ca.*

⁵ *Saṃyamassā ti kāya,vacī,saṃyamassa.*

The meditation here is clearly that of the divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*).⁶ The triad here alludes to three “grounds for merit” (*puñña, kiriya vatthu*): giving (*dāna*), moral virtue (*sīla*), and mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*).⁷ A significant point to note here is that the closing of the Mā Puñña Bhāyī Sutta—from §5 onward (the verses)—is found in the closing half of **the Puñña, kiriya, vatthu Sutta 2** (It 60).⁸

2.3 SAMA, CARIYA. The Sutta’s Commentary explains *sama, cariya* as “abstaining from disharmony [restlessness] of body, etc, one conducts oneself with the harmony [stillness] of body, etc; the meaning is that one’s moral virtue is utterly pure.”⁹ The Dhammapada Commentary interestingly explains it as “with a conduct that stills all unwholesomeness.”¹⁰

Following the Commentaries, the term, which is here translated as “a calm [harmonious] conduct,”¹¹ can as such also mean “harmonious living,”¹² that is, a life moderated by the moral virtue and lovingkindness towards others. I think either sense can apply in this context, depending on the audience. If it is addressed to the general laity and scholastics, then *sama, cariya* is best rendered as “harmonious living” or “a peaceful life,” and if addressed to renunciant and lay practitioners, then “a life of stillness” gives the best sense.

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Mā Puñña Bhāyī Sutta

The “Do Not Fear Merit” Discourse

It 22

1 This was indeed spoken by the Blessed One, heard by me spoken by the Arhat.¹³

1.2 “Bhikshus, do not fear merit.”¹⁴ [15] This “merit,” bhikshus, is another name for happiness, desirable, pleasant, beloved and agreeable.¹⁵

For, I very well know, bhikshus, I have for a long time experienced the desirable, pleasant, beloved¹⁶ and agreeable fruits of meritorious deed performed.

2 Having cultivated a mind of lovingkindness for seven years, for seven aeons¹⁷ of world-constrictions and world-expansions,¹⁸ I did not return to this world.¹⁹ Whenever, bhikshus, a world was destroyed, I was reborn among the devas of streaming radiance (*ābhassarā*).²⁰

⁶ See *Brahma, vihāra* 38.5.

⁷ D 33,1.10(38)/3:218; A 8.36/4:241-341 @ SD 22.17; It 60/51= SD 22.17(2.1).

⁸ It 3.2.1/51 f @ SD 22.17 (2.1).

⁹ *Kāya, visam’ādini vajjetvā kāya, sam’ādi, caritaṃ, suvisuddhaṃ sīlan ti attho.*

¹⁰ ~ *ti sabbākusalāni sametvā caraṇena* (DhA 4:143) on Dh 388b.

¹¹ A 1:55; M 3:292 (×2); S 1:90, 101 f; It 16, 52; Dh 388; Miln 19; J 6:128; DhA 4:145.

¹² This sense of *sama, cariya* is famously found in *Sāleyyaka S* (M 41/1:285-290 @ SD 5.7) and elsewhere (M 3:292; J 2:261); or, they could be polysemous (eg Dh 388b). We also find *sama* (impartial, upright, of even mind) as opposed to *visama* (uneven, disharmonious, disagreeable) (eg A 1:74, 293 f; Sn 215, 468, 952).

¹³ *Vuttam h’etaṃ bhagavata, vuttam arahatā’ti me sutam.* This is said to be spoken by the laywoman **Khujj’uttarā**. See SD 57.26 (1.2.2.3); SD 16.14 (1).

¹⁴ “Merit,” *puñña*, given in the plural (*puññānam*) in Pali, but in modern English, “merit” is an uncountable noun. In the pl sense, it refers to “acts of merit.” On *merit*, see **Beyond good and evil**, SD 18.7 (6.3) *Puñña*.

¹⁵ The phrase “desirable, pleasant, beloved and agreeable” (*iṭṭhassa kantassa piyassa manāpassa*).

¹⁶ *Piyam*, omitted in A 7.58a here.

3 When the world unfolded [evolved] again,²¹ I was reborn in an empty Brahma-vimana [divine mansion].²² And there, bhikshus, I was Mahā Brahmā, the Vanquisher [Overcomer], Unvanquished, the All-seeing, the All-powerful.²³ And 36 times, bhikshus, I was Sakra, leader of the devas,²⁴ and many hundred times I was a universal monarch,²⁵ a just and righteous king,²⁶ conqueror of the world's 4 corners,

¹⁷ "Aeon," *kappa*, is divided into 4 phases of cosmic expansion, stable state, cosmic contraction, stable state (A 4.156, 7.62). **Pabbata S** says that an aeon would last longer than it would take a man (assuming he is long-lived) to wear down a mountain a league (7 mi =11.25 km) high, a league wide, a league round by stroking it once a century with a fine muslin (S 15.5).

¹⁸ *Satta samvaṭṭa, vivaṭṭa, kappe na-y-imaṃ lokam punar āgamāsim*. Buddhist cosmology speaks of a "pulsating" universe, that is, in modern terms, a cycle "big bang," steady state, "big crunch," steady state, ad infinitum. See **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1.2.1-3).

¹⁹ *Satta vassāni metta, cittaṃ bhāvetvā satta samvaṭṭa, vivaṭṭa, kappe na-y-imaṃ lokam punar-āgamāsim*. AA: He had attained to the absorptions with lovingkindness and thus did not return to this world, that is, the sense sphere (*kāma, loka*). (That is, he is reborn in Ābhassara, a 2nd-dhyana plane.) See foll n.

²⁰ *Ābhassarā*, the highest of the 3 Brahma worlds of the 2nd-dhyana plane. When the universe devolves through "fire," all lower worlds are destroyed, and the beings there re-arise in Ābhassara or in a parallel universe: see **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1.2.2/1:17), SD 25.2 & **Aggañña S** (D 27.10/3:84 f), SD 2.19 esp n on "mostly" at D 27.10a; Vism 13.30/414 (how the universe is destroyed), 13.41-44/416 f (the universe's destruction and re-evolution); ItA 1:76. On parallel universes, see **Kosala S 1** (A 10.29.2/5:59 f), SD 16.15; Kvu 13.1/476.

²¹ Presumably for the 8th time: Comy is silent.

²² "Brahma-vimana," *brahmā, vimāna*, ie, a divine domicile or "celestial mansion" of a Great Brahma (of the 1st dhyana form-realm). **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1) explains how Brahmā "falls" (*cavati*) from his 2nd-dhyana Ābhassara heaven and finds an empty brahma-vimana (without any mention of the deva-realm or dhyana-plane) (D 1,39 f/1:17), SD 25.1. Comy says that this brahma-world he is reborn into is of the 1st dhyana plane (ItA 1:76). Masefield's concern that Comy's equating with the 1st dhyana "does not seem to accord too well with the comparison to same at Vism 108: (sic) (It:M 21 n78) —which is uncalled for, since, as a rule, devas and brahmas "fall" (*cavati*) to a lower realm when they die.

²³ "Mahā Brahmā, ... almighty," *Mahā, brahmā abhibhū anabhibhūto aññad-atthu, daso vasa, vatti*. This is an abbreviated version of Mahā Brahmā's self-proclaimed divine titles: see **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1.42/1:18), SD 25.2. The cpd *aññad-atthu, dasa* = *aññad-atthu* (*añña*, "other" + *atthi* imp, "let it be (so)" + *dasa*, "seeing") (CPD & DP, sv). J Hartley Moore renders it as "comprehending the purpose of others," analyzing the cpd as *anya(d)-artha-drś*. The neut form *anyad* occurs at the beginning of a cpd in Skt. For the *u* in *atthu* instead of *a*, cf Franke, *Pali und Sanskrit*, 103. The collocation of *artha* and *drś*- is not unusual, being found, eg in the Skt cpd *artha, darśanam*, "perception of objects." (1908:35 n6). See Böthlingk & Roth, *Sanskrit Wörterbuch*, sv *anyad*. The term is often one of Mahā Brahmā's many epithets: It 4.13/122,7.

²⁴ The lifespan of devas in Tāvatiṃsa is equivalent to 36M human years (A 3.70.19/1:213).

²⁵ "Universal monarch," *cakka, vatti*, often rendered as "wheel-turner." **S Comy** explains: "For, having turned the wheel that has arisen, he is a wheel-turner (*cakka, vatti*) (*uppannañ hi cakkam vattetvā so cakka, vattī nāma hotī ti*) (SA 3:153). **Sn Comy**: "He is a ~ because he wields (*vatteti*) the wheel jewel (or, he has the wheel jewel turned); he turns the wheel with 4 characteristics (ie the conditions of welfare, *saṅgaha, vatthu*: generosity, pleasant or convincing speech, beneficial conduct and just impartiality) for the benefit of others; and there is turning of the wheels of posture (ie standing, walking, sitting, reclining) in this (*cakka, ratanam vatteti, catūhi sampatti, cakkehi vattati, tehi ca param vatteti, para, hitāya ca, iriyā, patha, cakkānam vatto etasmim atthī ti cakka, vattī*) (SnA 2:449, cf 454). On *iriyā, patha, cakka*, see DA 249 = MA 3:365 = CA 40; AA 1:120 = 2:284. **It Comy**: "For of these (seven jewels), the wheel-turning king unconquered, conquers" (*tesu hi rājā cakka, vatti cakka, ratanena ajitam jināti*) (ItA 1:77), which evokes kings who performed the horse sacrifice (*assa, medha*; Skt *aśva, medha*): see (**Pasenadi**) **Yañña S** (S 3.9/1:75 f), SD 22.11 (1.22). See also **Cakka, vatti Sīha, nāda S** (D 26/3:58-79), SD 36.10 (2).

²⁶ The rest of the sentence does not appear in (**Puñña**) **Metta S** (A 7.58a/4:89), SD 2.11a. Cf It:M 22 n82.

with a country blessed with stability, possessor of the 7 jewels.²⁷ So what need is there to speak of provincial kingship?

4 Of this matter, then, bhikshus, this occurred to me:

‘Now, of what deed of mine is this the karmic fruit, of what deed is the ripening, on account of which there was in me²⁸ such great power, such great majesty?’

Of this matter, bhikshus, this occurred to me:

‘This is indeed the fruit of 3 deeds of mine, the ripening of 3 deeds, on account of which I am now of such great power, such great majesty, that is to say, of giving, of taming, of restraint.’²⁹

5 ³⁰This is the matter [meaning] of what the Blessed One said;³¹ concerning which he said thus:³²

6	<i>Puññaṃ eva so sikkheyya āyat’aggam suk’udrayam dānañ ca sama,cariyañ ca metta,cittañ ca bhāvaye.</i>	One should indeed train in merit, fruiting in happiness, ³³ the best of what’s to come— cultivating generosity, [16] harmonious conduct, ³⁴ and cultivating a lovingkind heart.
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7	<i>Ete dhamme bhāvayitvā tayo sukha,samudraye³⁵ avyāpajjam sukham lokam paṇḍito upapajjatī ti.</i>	Having cultivated these three states that fruit in happiness, into a trouble-free ³⁶ happy world the wise is reborn.
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This, too, is a matter spoken by the Blessed One. Thus it was heard by me.

— evam —

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²⁷ *Cātur-anto vijitāvī janapada-t,thāvariya-p,patto satta, ratana, sampanno*, D 1:88, 2:16, 18, 19, 146, 198, 3:59, 75, 142, 146, 177; M 2:134, 146; A 4:89, 105; It 15; Sn p106 (cf SnA 450 = DA 1:250); cf D 2:169; M 2:146; Sn 552 = Tha 822, 914; Miln 37; Divy 467.12-16. The 7 jewels (*ratana*) are: the wheel jewel, the elephant jewel, the horse jewel, the gem jewel, the woman jewel, the houselord jewel, and the commander jewel (A 4:89). For details, see **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 17/2:169-199), SD 36.12.

²⁸ “There was in me,” *mayham...etad ahoṣi*. Comy: This thought occurred when the Blessed One reviewed the last time he was himself a wheel-turning monarch (ItA 1:78).

²⁹ *Dāna dama saññaṃa*. *Dāna* is of course giving of food etc as merit-making. *Dama* is taming of the 5 sense-faculties, ie, the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. *Saññaṃa* is the control of the mind (the 6th sense-faculty), ie, the overcoming of the mental hindrances. Comy, however, reverses the last two explanations (ItA 1:78). The meditation here is clearly that of the divine abodes. The triad here alludes to 3 “grounds for merit” (*puñña, kiriya vatthu*): giving (*dāna*), moral virtue (*sīla*), and mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*) (D 33,1.10(3)/3:218; A 8.36/4:241-341; It 60/-3.2.1/51 f), SD 22.17(2.1). See Intro (2.2) & foll n.

³⁰ From here on the whole passage is found in the closing half of **Puñña, kiriya, vatthu S 2** (It 60), SD 22.17(2.1).

³¹ *Attha* is polysemic: we can take “matter” as referring to the preceding, and “meaning” as given in the foll.

³² *Etam attham bhagavā avoca, tatth’etam iti vuccati*. This may be seen thus: the former phrase refers to the teaching in meaning (*attha*) (true reality), reflecting the 1st 2 noble truths; the latter is its purpose (*attha*).

³³ “Fruiting in happiness,” Be Ce *suk’udrayam* (preferred); Ee Se *suk’indriyam*.

³⁴ “Harmonious conduct,” *sama, cariyaca*, may refer to either “a life of harmony,” ie, a moral life, or “a life of stillness,” ie, a contemplative life: see Intro (2).

³⁵ Emended reading. Be Ce Se *sukha, samuddaye*.

³⁶ “Trouble-free,” *avyapajjam*, ie free from suffering by way of such trouble as sensual desire etc (ItA 1:79).