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(Dasaka) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta

The (Tens) Discourse to Jāṇussoṇi | A 10.177

(Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi The Discourse to Jāṇussoṇi (on Ancestor Worship)

Chinese Āgama SĀ 1041 = T2.272b8-272c17

Theme: Who can benefit from dedication of merit?

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003; rev 2010

1 The brahmin Jāṇussoṇi

1.1 Jāṇussoṇi was a brahmin of great wealth, often associated with other distinguished brahmins like Caṅkī, Tārukkha, Pokkhara,sātī and Todeyya.¹ He was a follower and great admirer of the Buddha. He had the habit of talking with well-known teachers of other schools and listening to their opinions of the Buddha, either to compare them with his own faith² in the Buddha or to discover their views. Two such well known conversations were with Todeyya,putta³ and the other with Pilotika.⁴

1.2 Jāṇussoṇi's home town was Sāvattthī, where he often visited the Buddha at Jetavana, consulting him on a wide range of issues. He reported his conversation with Pilotika to the Buddha who elaborated on it as **the Cūla Hatthi,padôpama Sutta** (M 27).⁵ Jāṇussoṇi also occasioned the Buddha to teach **the Bhaya,-bherava Sutta** (M 4).⁶ Among other topics that he raised with the Buddha were:

• eternalism and annihilationism	(Sabba) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta	S 12.47/2:76 f	SD 68.6
• the fruits of karma	(Kamma) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta	A 2.2.7/1:56	SD 83.16
• nirvana in this life	(Jāṇussoṇi) Nibbāna Sutta	A 3.55/ 1:157	SD 50.6
• the brahmins of the 3 knowledges	(Te,vijja) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta	A 3.59/1:166	SD 80.16
• the fearlessness of death	Abhaya Sutta	A 4.184/2:173	SD 14.8
• the ideals of various classes of people	Khattiya Sutta	A 6.52/3:362	SD 100.3
• true celibacy	Methuna Sutta	A 7.47/4:54	SD 21.9

1.3 He had a white chariot with a white canopy, silver fittings and white trappings, and drawn by four pure white mares, with white reins and goad. He would ride in this chariot dressed in white garments, turban, and sandals, and fanned by a white fan. Understandably his chariot was considered the finest in all Sāvattthī (S 5:4 f; cf M 1:175, 2:208).

¹ **Te,vijja S** (D 13,2/1:235), SD 1.8; Sn p115.

² **"Faith," saddhā.** There are 2 kinds of faith (*saddhā*): (1) "rootless faith" (*amūlaka,saddhā*), baseless or irrational faith, blind faith. (M 2:170); (2) "faith with a good cause" (*ākāravati,saddhā*), faith founded on seeing (M 1:320,8 401,23); also called *avecca-p,pasāda* (S 12.41,11/2:69). "Wise faith" is syn with (2). *Amūlaka* = "not seen, not heard, not suspected" (V 2:243 3:163 & Comy). **Gethin** speaks of two kinds of faith: the cognitive and the affective (eg ERE: Faith & Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963:387): "Faith in its cognitive dimension is seen as concerning belief in propositions or statements of which one does not—or perhaps cannot—have knowledge proper (however that should be defined); cognitive faith is a mode of knowing in a different category from that knowledge. Faith in its affective dimension is a more straightforward positive response to trust or confidence towards something or somebody ... the conception of *saddhā* in Buddhist writings appears almost, if not entirely affective, the cognitive element is completely secondary." (Gethin 2001:107; my emphases).

³ **(Deva) Saṅgārava S** (M 100/2:209), SD 10.9.

⁴ **Cūla Hatthi,padôpama S** (M 27/1:175-179), SD 40a.5.

⁵ **Cūla Hatthi,padôpama S**: see prec n.

⁶ **Bhaya Bherava S** (M 4/1:16-24), SD 44.3.

1.4 According to Buddhaghosa, “Jāṇussoṇi” is not his personal name, but a title⁷ given to him as chaplain to the king of Kosala. He accounts for a whole chapter in the Sainyutta—the **Jāṇussoṇi Vagga**—in the Book of Tens (*dasaka nipāta*) of the Aṅguttara Nikāya. In **the (Brāhmaṇa) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** (A 3.59), he declares that religious sacrifices and offerings should be made to the brahmins, but the Buddha answers that only “those with the three knowledges” (*te, vijja*) are worthy of such offerings, and goes on to elaborate. Jāṇussoṇi then takes refuge as a lay-follower (A 3.59).⁸

1.5 SUTTA HIGHLIGHTS

1.5.1 The (Dasaka) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta is basically about the dedication of merit (erroneously called “transference”)⁹ [3]. Jāṇussoṇi asks the Buddha about the efficacy of giving, that is, whether the departed would receive any offerings made to them. The Buddha answers by saying that only the “departed” (*peta*) can receive such offerings and, in fact, need the merits of such wholesome deeds.

1.5.2 In connection with the brahminical giving to their departed (*peta*), the Buddha tells Jāṇussoṇi, “For, brahmin, while he [the departed] remains there, it *is* a place where [it *is* possible that] the giving would accrue to him.” [§6.2]. This is an irony (which Jāṇussoṇi) might not at first notice. What the Buddha is effectively saying is that the departed (in the brahminical belief and practice) “remains there,” that is, as pretas.

In **the Tirokuḍḍa Sutta** (Khp 7 = Pv 1.5), however, the merits of the offerings are dedicated to the pretas, done with lovingkindness, so that “they wholeheartedly¹⁰ rejoice.”¹¹ In other words, the state of the departed is transformed into something wholesome. This means that there is a possibility for them to rise from that state for a higher rebirth, or that new good karma will be generated by them so that they are reborn into a better state soon enough.

1.5.3 Just being good is not enough

1.5.3.1 This Sutta also discusses why some animals lead good lives. The explanation given bears significantly on the nature of good karma (such as being generous), and how it works along with bad karma. The message is that it is not enough just being generous, but we need to be morally virtuous, too. The Sutta theme, however, is that “the giver is never fruitless” [§35.2], that is to say that, we will reap the karmic benefits of our generosity and such deeds, but the quality of life depends on our moral virtue.

1.5.3.2 The same message is found in **the Puñña, kiriya, vatthu Sutta** (A 8.36), which discusses the 3 grounds of merit-making, that is, giving (*dāna*), moral virtue (*sīla*) and mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*). A

⁷ The name *jāṇussoṇi* or *jāṇussoṇi* is not a name given by his parents, but a position or office (*ṭhān’antara*), a title for the position of a royal chaplain or purohit (MA 1:109). The Skt form was prob *jānu + soni*, where *jānu* means “knee(s)” and *soni* = *savana* (SED: 1 savana), the pressing out of the *soma* juice (prob *Nelumbo nucifera* or the sacred lotus), done at three periods of the day, and its libation (offering to the sacred fire and also drunk). We may conjecture that *jāṇussoṇi* means “one who crushes the soma with his knee.”

⁸ **(Tika) Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 3.59/1:166-168), SD 80.16.

⁹ On the misconception of “transference of merit,” see SD 2.6a (3). On the levels of religious language, see **Neyy’attha Nīt’attha S** (A 2.3.4-5/1:60), SD 2.6b.

¹⁰ “Wholeheartedly,” *sakkaccaṃ*. PvA:BM has “respectfully.” This is what empowers the departed, uplifting them from their suffering state, that is, to say, their own wholesome mental state such as by wishing their living relatives well as shown here. See SD 2.7 (1).

¹¹ This sentence is salient in referring to how the preta's existential or spiritual state is positively transformed. see SD 2.7 (1).

person who rarely practises generosity, has little moral virtue, and *no* mental cultivation, says the Sutta, is reborn amongst humans, but into unfavourable circumstances (A 8.36,3). In a similar case, where the person does have *some* moral virtue, he is reborn as a human into *favourable* circumstances (A 8.36,4).

In the case of those of who show great generosity *and* great moral virtue, they are reborn in any of the sense-world heavens (A 8.36,5-10). The Sutta further notes that in each heaven, their celestial leader surpasses the other devas of their respective realms in 10 blessings.¹² All this is the result of practising the 3 grounds for merit.¹³

In short, for really good heavenly rebirth, we need to have great track record of generosity, moral virtue and mental cultivation. It is moral virtue that is the decisive factor in the quality of life that we create for ourselves in due course. In other words, it is not enough just being generous, even kind (such as doing social work), but we need to be morally virtuous, too (to have a wholesome motive behind our actions). **The (Dasaka) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta** (A 10.177) highlights just this point [10-35].

2 Ancestor worship

2.1 The sutta opens with Jāṇussoṇi's question on what in later Hinduism came to be known as *śrāddha* (P *saddha*), a brahminical ceremony to honour the departed, usually one's parents, grandparents and great grandparents. The ceremony is both socially and religiously incumbent on all male Hindu householders. Such a practice has led to the importance of the birth of sons in traditional Indian society to ensure that there will be male descendants to perform the *śrāddha* after ones' death.

2.2 The purpose of the ceremony is to spiritually nourish, protect and support the departed (Skt *preta*) in their journey from the lower to higher realms, preceding their reincarnation on earth. These rites are performed between the 11th and 31st days after death,¹⁴ depending on caste traditions, and at regular intervals thereafter. The first annual death anniversary is observed by a *śrāddha* ceremony that enables the departed (*preta*) to be admitted into the assembly of forefathers (*pitṛ*). Buddhists, on the other hand, perform a merit-dedication ceremony on the 7th day of death and optionally yearly thereafter.

2.3 In addition to annual observances, the rite is also performed on special occasions, such as eclipses or at pilgrimage centres. Particular merit is attached to ceremonies performed at Gayā (where the Buddha was awakened), Allahābād and Kurukshetra. *Śrāddha* also serves to unite the living and the departed. Descendants of common ancestors are sometimes defined as *sa,piṇḍa*, comprising those who commensally eat *piṇḍas* (balls of rice offered at *śrāddha* feasts).¹⁵

2.4 Early Buddhism accepts the notion of *preta* (P *peta*), the departed, but they are regarded as members of a realm of suffering beings (*peta,yoni, petti,visaya, pitti,visaya*).¹⁶ In this sutta, we can notice a hint of the early brahmanical conception of *preta*. The notion of the suffering *peta* becomes fully deve-

¹² That is, in divine lifespan, divine beauty, divine happiness, divine fame, divine lordship, divine form, divine sound, divine fragrance, divine taste, and divine touch.

¹³ A 8.36/4:241-243 (SD22.17).

¹⁴ According to Basham, "nowadays performed ten days after the funeral and optionally at intervals later" (1989: 18). The summary here is taken mostly from Micropaedia entry in Ency Brit (15th ed, 1983).

¹⁵ See eg David M Knipe, "Sapīṇḍīkarana: The Hindu rite of entry into heaven," in Frank Reynolds & Earle H Waugh (eds), *Religious Encounters with Death: Insights from the history and anthropology of religions*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ Press, 1977.

¹⁶ See PvA:BM 35 n60 & **Tiro,kuḍḍa S** (Khp 7), SD 2.7 n11.

loped in the late Canonical work, Peta, vatthu, and the Commentaries. Early Buddhism and other *śramaṇa* or ascetic reform groups were against such meaningless and exploitative rituals.¹⁷

2.5 Furthermore, we should not jump into the conclusion that the Buddhist ritual of “merit transference” comes from the pre-Buddhist brahminical sacrament, as Wendy O’Flaherty cautions us:

To postulate *śrāddha* as the “source” of transfer of merit in Buddhism is to ignore the stark chronological fact that the *śrāddha* first appears in the *Gṛhya Sūtras* roughly contemporaneous with Buddhism, and that many Vedic doctrines continued to develop under Buddhist influence. One, can of course, find earlier traces of merit transfer in Vedic texts, but it is impossible to isolate them and fix them in time. Rather than looking for one central “source” which was then embroidered by “secondary influences” like a river fed by tributary streams, it would be better to picture the intellectual fountainhead of ancient India as a watershed consisting of many streams—each an incalculably archaic source of contributing doctrines—Vedic, Ājīvaka, Jaina, Dravidian, and tribal. (Wendy O’Flaherty, *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, 1980:xviii)

3 “Transference” of merit?

3.1 The oldest sections of the Pali Canon—the 4 Nikāyas—have only 4 references that record or suggest any kind of “*transference* of merit.”¹⁸ If we include the 5th Nikāya, then we might add a further reference, that of **the Tirokuḍḍa Sutta** (Kh 7).¹⁹ The first canonical references are found in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), Sutta 6 of **the Pāṭali,gāma Vagga** in the Udāna (U 8.6), and **the Mahā,vagga** of the Vinaya (V 1:229)—all belonging to a relatively late canonical stratum. The text runs thus:²⁰

In whatever place a wise man sets up his home,
Should here feed the virtuous and restrained who live the holy life.

To the deities there he should make offerings.
Thus revered they would revere him, thus honoured they would honour him.

They will show him compassion as a mother would her own child.
A man for whom the deities show compassion always sees good fortune.

(D 16,1.31/2:88 = U 8.6/89 = V 1:229)

¹⁷ Cf the well known but problematic statement, *pamuñcatu saddham*, “give up the *śrāddha*” (V 1:7; D 2:39; Sn 1146); see also D 1:9 (loc *saddhe*); A 5:469-273; J 2:360 (*saddhā, bhattaṃ*). See **Āyācana S** (S 6/12), SD 12.2 (3.2.2).

¹⁸ For a helpful evaluation of the “*transference of merit*” in Hīnayāna Buddhism, see **G Schopen**, “Two problems in the history of Indian Buddhism: The layman/monk distinction and the doctrines of the transference of merit” (ch 2 of *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*), 1997:36-43. **Alexander Wynne**, in his important essay, “How Old is the Suttapiṭaka?” says that “the idea of the transference of merit is found in only two separate occurrences in the four principle [sic] Nikāya-s” (2003:9)

¹⁹ See next discourse, **Tiro,kuḍḍa S** (Kh 7), SD 2.7.

²⁰ *Yasmim padese kappeti vāsaṃ paṇḍita, jātiko | silavant’ettha bhojetvā saññate brahmacāriye. ||*
Yā tattha devatā assuṃ tāsāṃ dakkhiṇaṃ ādise | tā pūjitā pūjayanti mānitā mānayanti naṃ ||*
Tato naṃ anukampanti mātā puttāṃ va orasaṃ | devatā’nukampito poso sadā bhadrāni passatī ti ||
Walshe’s tr (D:W 238) is a somewhat forced. [*Here D; but V U *āsuṃ*.]

3.2 “Offerings to the devas” (*deva, balī*) also forms one of the 5 offerings (*pañca, balī*) mentioned in the **Ādiya Sutta** (A 5.41/3:45 f).²¹ These 5 offerings were actually traditional social duties by way of offerings to relatives and guests, civic duty to the government (paying taxes, etc), and religious duties to the departed and the devas. These duties or offerings were not instituted by the Buddha but common non-Buddhist practices that were tolerated.²²

3.3 In the **Nanda, mātā Sutta** (A 7.50), Nanda, mātā of Veḷukaṅṭha offers a meal to the Sangha headed by Sāriputta and Moggallāna, and dedicates the merit to Vessavaṇa, one of the 4 great kings: “Bhante, may the goodness through the merit of this giving be for the happiness of the great king Vessavaṇa!”²³ Notice here that the dedication of merit is in fact a form of lovingkindness cultivation.

3.4 The fourth canonical text alluding to “**dedication of merit**” (or in this case, ancestor worship) is the Jāṇussoṇi Sutta (A 10.177/5:269-173), that is, this sutta we are studying now.²⁴ It is very useful here, too, to carefully examine the short but important **Neyy’attha Nī’tattha Sutta** (A 2.3.4-5) where the Buddha reminds us to make sure what level of language the sutta or text is using and understand accordingly.²⁵

4 Dealing with the departed

4.1 The popular conception of “hungry ghosts” and post-Buddha religious practices connected with the departed, as we have seen, have very little support from the early canon, but mostly arose from a blend of commentarial sources, later Buddhism and local cultures. Such notions and ceremonies have arisen from the needs and quirks of the culture and time.

From Schopen’s seminal works, such as his ideas expressed in *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks* (1997), we can deduce that the “transference of merit” (or more correctly, “dedication of merit”) and other this-worldly rituals became common even amongst the monastics through the rise of religious materialism and laicization of the monastic members during the post-Buddha period in India. Even today, we do see, although not so commonly, monastic members performing such rituals, too.

Monastics who are well versed in the Dharma or under the tutelage of wise teachers would not see the need for rituals, or even any display of grief at the loss of parents or those who are or were close to them. At the end of their meditations or pujas, or any suitable times, they could mindfully direct their calm and clear minds to cultivating lovingkindness and dedicating merits to the deceased. After all, the monastic is a renunciant, member of a global spiritual family, and their conception of family should be broadened, too.

4.2 Religious cultures evolve and change. An important aspect of religious culture is rituals. Meaningful ceremonies play a vital role in our spiritual and social health. The ultimate purpose of ceremonies for the dead is to literally and figuratively bury or burn them so that the living can move on wholesomely with their lives. Beyond this, such ceremonies can be, and often are, manipulated for superstitious, political and commercial ends.

²¹ See **Ādiya S**, SD 2.1 (2)-(4) & A 10.177,5 nn.

²² See eg **Alabbhaniya Thāṇa S** (A 5.48 stanzas) for the Buddha’s open approach. See SD 2.1 (4).

²³ *Yad-idaṃ bhante dāne puññaṃ hitaṃ Vessavaṇassa mahārājassa sukhāya hotū ti* (A 7.50.2/4:65).

²⁴ On “transference of merit” in traditional Sinhalese Buddhism, see R Gombrich, 1971a:226-242.

²⁵ On the levels of religious language, see **Neyy’attha Nī’tattha S** (A 2.3.4-5/1:60), SD 2.6b.

4.3 Informed Buddhists today have direct access to the Buddhist canon and a better understanding of the Buddha's teachings than the previous generations.²⁶ There is also a growing overflow of monastic ritual duties, even a role-reversal, between the modern monastics and the Buddhist laity. Ironically, such role reversals is no radical innovation, but a re-manifestation of traditional roles, such as practice of meditation and the performance of the last rites by the laity,²⁷ which was common in the Buddha's time.

In the Buddha's time, a monastic was a monk or a nun, never a priest, that is, one who performs ceremonies or acts as a religious intermediary on behalf of another. In his last days, the Buddha himself admonishes Ānanda:

Do not worry yourselves about **the funeral rites** [relic worship],²⁸ Ānanda. Come now, Ānanda, you should strive for your own good, devote yourselves to your own good, and dwell with your minds tirelessly, zealously devoted to your own good.²⁹ There are wise kshatriyas, wise brahmins and wise houselords who are devoted to the Tathāgata: they will take care of the funeral rites.
(D 5,10/2:141), SD 22.8

In short, it was the lay people, not the monastics, who saw to the last rites of the Buddha's remains. Early Buddhism, then, is more concerned with the living, and living the Dharma. For, ultimately, there are not "dead," only passing moments, and a turning-point where the body must die, and our consciousness is reborn according to our karma. How we act right now decides the quality of our life, and how it will be like in due course.³⁰

5 Significance

5.1 How then, did monastics end up as priests, priestesses, ritual virtuosi and religious professionals? Basically, this started with the urbanization of the monastic order. In **the Anāgata, bhaya Sutta 4** (A 5.80), the Buddha warns us of the growing materialism in the order:

- Monks, in the long road to the future, there will be monks who,
- (1) Longing for fine robes, will forsake rag-robes and leave the forest and solitary dwelling, and move into urban areas and metropolises, and commit many improper and unseemly deeds...
 - (2) Longing for good almsfood ... , will move into urban areas and metropolises, and commit many improper and unseemly deeds...
 - (3) Longing for comfortable quarters ("beds and seats") ... , will move into urban areas and metropolises, and commit many improper and unseemly deeds ...
 - (4) Living with nuns, probationers and novices, will not delight in the holy life and either will commit some foul deed or return to lay life.

²⁶ This is not to suggest that the further back we go in time, the less we know about the teaching. This statement is, however, especially true of the post-colonial period.

²⁷ See eg **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16,

²⁸ "Funeral rites," *sarīra, pūja*, lit "worship of the bodily remains." The Buddha here is indirectly reminding Ānanda of the need of his own spiritual cultivation (ie to gain arhathood since he is still a streamwinner). However, the general tone of the Buddha's reply, as is clear from the next sentence, is that all monastics should not be concerned with such rituals. **See Intro (7.1).**

²⁹ "Your own good," *sad-atthe*. Be *sār'atthe*, "the essence of good; the essential goal." Ānanda is merely a streamwinner, and the Buddha is here urging him to work on for the "highest good," viz, arhathood (*uttam'atthe arahatte ghaṭṭetha*) (DA 2:583).

³⁰ On "What really are pretas?" see SD 48.1 (3.2.4).

- (5) Living with monastery attendants and novices, will enjoy their various hoarded goods, and mark out their lands and crops. (A 5.80/3:108-110)

5.2 In short, the urban monks are just as likely—perhaps even more so due to their surplus time and income—to enjoy the pleasures of senses. In the Buddha’s words recorded **the Maṇi,cūḷaka Sutta** (S 42.10):

For whomever gold and silver are allowable, for him the 5 cords of sense-pleasure are allowable, too. For whomever the 5 cords of sense-pleasure are allowable, you can for sure consider him as one who neither has the quality of a recluse nor is he a son of the Sakya. (S 42.10/4:326)

5.3 On the bright side, after 2500 years, we still have practitioners of the forest tradition in Sri Lanka and SE Asia who keep closely to the Buddha’s teachings. We also see the growing trend of serious lay practitioners, teachers and workers. In terms of spiritual commitment, while the monastic forest tradition lies at the heart of the Dharma-centred community, the serious lay workers form a sort of second concentric circle. The third circle comprises the laymen willing to learn from both and to work for their own spiritual liberation. Others just stand and wait outside the walls.

6 Insights into merit and rebirth

6.1 The Jāṇussoṇi Sutta presents some very interesting insights into early Buddhism. There is, for example, a whole section [§7] that shows the complex manner how good and bad karma interact in one’s life. One who is in the habit of giving gifts to religious people but follows the tenfold course of unwholesome action (or more simply, breaking the 5 precepts), brings one a good rebirth, but as well-cared animals or pets!

6.2 On the other hand, one who keeps to the tenfold course of wholesome actions *and* gives gifts to religious practitioners, will benefit from the enjoyment of sense-pleasures fitting their station whether as human beings or as divine beings. This insight should be reflected upon alongside the Buddha’s statement in **the Nibbedhika (Pariyāya) Sutta** (A 6.63) that sense-objects are not “sensual objects” “but in the noble discipline, they are ‘cords of sensual desire’.”³¹ That is, they are to be understood as our own projections of desire onto those external sense-objects.

6.3 Another important insight found in this Sutta is found in **§6** where it is stated that besides blood relatives, any well-meaning person may dedicate merit to the departed. While the brahmanical *śrāddha*³² can only be performed by the departed’s son, the Buddhist merit-dedication is not merely a family affair, that is, there is a broader concept of “family” beyond the biological. See, for example, **the Paṭhavī Sutta** (S 15.2/2:179) where in our seemingly endless journey in *samsāra*, it is difficult to meet one who has not been a relative.

6.4 Compare the passage on the karmic fate of the one who gives alms but does not keep the precepts [§§2-3] with **the Sumanā Rāja,kumārī Sutta** (A 5.31), where we have a case of one who keeps the precepts but does not give alms. In this latter case, the morally virtuous (who does not give) will still be reborn in a happy or heavenly state, but he would not enjoy the greater happiness of one who is both morally virtuous and practises charitable giving.³³

³¹ A 6.63.3/3:411 (SD 6.11).

³² See SD 48.1 (1.1.1.3).

³³ A 5.31/3:32-34 (SD 22.14).

6.5 In the Dānūpapatti Sutta (A 8.35), the Buddha briefly states that we are capable of actually choosing a happy rebirth on these two conditions:³⁴

- (1) we must make a sustained and fervent wish to be reborn in that happy state; and, more importantly,
- (2) we must be morally virtuous.

The (Dasaka) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta (A 10.177) explains the second point—that of being morally virtuous—as the keeping to the 10 courses of wholesome karma [§§27-35].

Peta,vatthu: Primary sources

- Pv:BK **Elucidation of the Intrinsic Meaning, the so-named Commentary on the Petavatthu**
[Paramatthadīpanī] tr U Ba Kyaw & P. Masefield, London: PTS, 1980.
- Pv:G **Stories of the Departed (*Peta-Vatthu*) together with excerpts from the frame stories from Dhammapāla’s Commentary.** Tr Henry Snyder Gehman, London: Pali Text Society, 1938, rev 1973. See Intro pp ix-xii.

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- (1) Heinz Bechert, “Buddha-field and transfer of merit in Theravāda source.” 1991-1992.
- (2) Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine*, 1970:188-193.
- (3) Richard Gombrich, “Merit transference in Sinhalese Buddhism,” 1971.
- (4) Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, history and practices*, 1990:42-44.
- (5) Maria Hibbets, “The ethics of esteem.” On *śrāddha* or Vedic ancestral worship, 2000.
- (6) Charles F Keyes, “Merit-transference in the kammic theory of popular Theravāda Buddhism.” 1983.
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- (14) A Wezler, “On the gaining of merit and the incurring of demerit through the agency of others,” 1997.

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³⁴ A 3.85/4:239-241 (SD 23.12).

(Dasaka) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta The (Tens) Discourse to Jāṇussoṇi

A 10.177

[269] 1 Then the brahmin Jāṇussoṇi approached the Blessed One, and having gone up to the Blessed One, exchanged courtesies with him.

Having exchanged courtesies, he sat down at one side.

Do the departed receive our offerings?

1.2 Sitting thus at one side, the brahmin Jāṇussoṇi said this to the Blessed One:

1.3 ³⁵“Master Gotama, we are brahmins. We make offerings, we worship ancestors,³⁶ saying:

‘May this giving accrue onto (our) relatives and blood relations;³⁷ may (our) departed (*petā*) relatives and blood relations partake of this giving!’³⁸

Surely, Master Gotama, this giving accrues onto (our) relatives and blood relations; surely, the departed relatives and blood relations partake of this giving.”³⁹

1.4 **“In the right place, brahmin, they accrue, *not* in the wrong place.”⁴⁰**

“Master Gotama, what is the right place where it would accrue, what is *not* the right place?”

The wrong places (*aṭṭhana*)

2 (1) “Here, brahmin, a certain person is⁴¹

1 one who **takes** life

pāṇātipātī,

2 one who takes the not-given

ādinn’ādānī,

3 one who indulges in sexual misconduct

kāmesu micchācārī,

³⁵ From here [§1.3] until §9, qu by Dhammapāla (**PvA 27 f**) to explain why *only* pretas benefit from dedication of merit.

³⁶ *Mayam assu bho gotama brāhmaṇa nāma. Dānāni dema saddhāni karoma. Saddhāni,* acc 3 pl of *saddha*, “ancestral offerings,” Skt *śrāddha* (note the short final *-a*, whereas *saddhā*, meaning “faith,” has a long final *-ā*). A brahmanical ceremony (social and religious) to honour of the departed as well as an annual memorial ritual. Called *puññāni* in a quotation at PvA 27. See (2) above.

³⁷ “Blood relatives” (*ñāti,sālohita*), which Comy glosses as those of the same blood, connected by the same womb, such as sons and daughters, and other such connections (*samāna,lohite eka,yoni,sambadhe putta,dhītādayo avasesa,bandhave ca*, SnA 2:447,7); or *nāti* as “on the side of mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law” (*sassu,sasura,pakkhikā*) (MA 1:159; SA 3:286; AA 2:333, 5:51) and *sā,lohita* as “related by the same blood, such as by father, grandfather, etc” (*eka,lohita,sambaddhā pīti,pitāmahādayo*) (MA 1:159; AA 5:51), “of the same blood, such as brother, sister, uncle, etc” (*samāna,lohita bhāti,bhagini,mātulādayo*) (SA 3:286), “of the same blood, such as brothers, sisters, etc” (*samāna,lohita bhāti,bhagini,ādayo*) (AA 2:333).

³⁸ *Idaṃ dānaṃ petānaṃ ñāti,sālohitānaṃ upakappatu, idaṃ dānaṃ petā ñāti,sālohitā paribhuñjantu* (A 10.177.-1/5:269). Cf **Tirokuḍḍa S**: *ito dinnam petānaṃ upakappati* (Kh 7.8), SD 2.7. See Intro (3) above.

³⁹ *Kacci taṃ, bho gotama, dānaṃ petānaṃ ñāti,sālohitānaṃ upakappati; kacci te petā ñāti,sālohitā taṃ dānaṃ paribhuñjantī ti?*

⁴⁰ *Ṭhāne kho, brāhmaṇa, upakappati, no aṭṭhānē ’ti*, alt tr “It is possible, brahmin, for it to accrue, not impossible.” Qu at PvA 27,24.

⁴¹ These are the 10 unwholesome courses of karma (*akusala kamma,patha*) (D 3:269, 290; M 1:287; A 5:266, 275-278): (1-3) bodily karma; (4-7) verbal karma; (8-10) mental karma. Their positive counterparts are the 10 wholesome courses of action (*kusala kamma,patha*) [§4]. See **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41/1:285-290), SD 5.7.

4	one who speaks false speech	<i>musāvādī,</i>
5	one who speaks divisive speech	<i>pisunā,vāco,</i>
6	one who utters harsh speech	<i>pharusā,vāco,</i>
7	one who utters frivolous talk	<i>samphappalāpī,</i>
8	one who is covetous	<i>abhijjālu,</i>
9	one who is malevolent	<i>vyāpanna,citto,</i>
10	one who has false views	<i>micchā,diṭṭhiko.</i>

2.2 With the body's breaking up, after death, he arises in **hell** (*niraya*). There he is sustained by the food taken by hell-beings, and so he remains there.

For, brahmin, while he remains there, it is *not* a place where [*not possible that*] the giving would accrue to him.

- 3 (2) Here again, brahmin, a certain person is
one who takes life,
one who takes the not-given,
one who indulges in sexual misconduct,
one who speaks false speech,
one who speaks divisive speech,
one who utters harsh speech,
one who utters frivolous talk,
one who is covetous,
one who is malevolent,
one who has false views.

3.2 With the body's breaking up, after death, he arises in **the animal womb**. There he is sustained by the food taken by animals, and so he remains there.

For, brahmin, while he remains there, it is *not* a place where [*not possible that*] the giving would accrue to him.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 4 (3) Here again, brahmin, a certain person is | |
| one who abstains from taking life | <i>pāṇātipātā paṭivirato,</i> |
| one who abstains from taking the not-given | <i>ādinn'ādānā paṭivirato,</i> |
| one who abstains from sexual misconduct | <i>kāmesu micchācārā paṭivirato,</i> |
| one who abstains from false speech | <i>musāvādā paṭivirato,</i> |
| one who abstains from divisive speech | <i>pisunāya [270] vācāya paṭivirato,</i> |
| one who abstains from harsh speech | <i>pharusāya vācāya paṭivirato,</i> |
| one who abstains from frivolous talk | <i>samphappalāpā paṭivirato,</i> |
| one who is not covetous | <i>anabhijjālu,</i> |
| one who is not malevolent | <i>avyāpanna,citto,</i> |
| one who has right views | <i>sammā,diṭṭhiko.</i> |

4.2 With the body's breaking up, after death, he will arise in the company of **human beings**. There he is sustained by the food taken by humans, and so he remains there.

For, brahmin, while he remains there, it is *not* a place where [*not possible that*] the giving would accrue to him.

- 5 (4) Here again, brahmin, a certain person is
one who abstains from taking life,
one who abstains from taking the not-given,
one who abstains from sexual misconduct,

*one who abstains from false speech,
one who abstains from divisive speech, [270]
one who abstains from harsh speech,
one who abstains from frivolous talk,
one who is not covetous,
one who is not malevolent,
one who has right views.*

5.2 With the body's breaking up, after death, he will arise in the company of **devas**. There he is sustained by the food taken by devas, and so he remains there.

For, brahmin, while he remains there, it is *not* a place where [*not possible that*] the giving would accrue to him.

The right place (*thāna*)

6 (5) Here again, brahmin, a certain person is
*one who takes life,
one who takes the not-given,
one who indulges in sexual misconduct,
one who speaks false speech,
one who speaks divisive speech,
one who utters harsh speech,
one who utters frivolous talk,
one who is covetous,
one who is malevolent,
one who has false views.*

6.2 With the body's breaking up, after death, he arises in **the realm of the departed**.⁴² There he is sustained by the food taken by the departed beings, and so he remains there. But whatever friends, companions, relatives, or blood relations⁴³ offer here sustains him there, by that (offering) he remains there.⁴⁴

For, brahmin, while he remains there, **it is a place** where [*is possible that*] the giving would accrue to him."⁴⁵

⁴² *Petti,visaya*: see **Tiro,kuḍḍa S** (Kh 7 = Pv 1.5), SD 2.7 (3).

⁴³ It is important to note here that besides blood relatives, any well-meaning person may dedicate merit to the departed. While the brahmanical *śrāddha* [2] can only be performed by the departed's son, the Buddha says that merit-dedication is not merely a family affair, ie, he teaches a broader concept of "family" beyond the biological, ie, an existential, or even spiritual, family. See, eg, **Paṭhavī S** (S 15.2/2:179) where in our seemingly endless journey in *saṃsāra*, it is difficult *not* to meet one who has been a relative.

⁴⁴ "Sustains him there, by that (offering) he remains there," *tena so tattha yāpeti, tena so tattha tiṭṭhati*, lit "by that he is sustained there; by that he remains there." Here we have perhaps the earliest Buddhist conception of pretas, ie, simply what we today would know as "the departed." However, they are not a realm unto themselves, but refer to those who because of a poorly cultivated mind, such as dying with great attachment to their erstwhile existence or possessions, are stuck in a sort of intermediate realm or limbo. These beings, if they are in our proximity, can be liberated through our lovingkindness cultivation when directed towards them. On **pretas**, see **Tiro,kuḍḍa S** (Kh 7 = Pv 1.5), SD 2.7 (3).

⁴⁵ On the irony of this statement, see (1.5.2). On how to help the departed, see **Tiro,kuḍḍa S** (Kh 7 = Pv 1.5), SD 2.7. On how a preta is liberated, see SD 2.7 (1.1+1.4).

Departed relatives are always there

7 “Suppose, master Gotama, that the departed relative or blood relation does not arise there, who would partake of the offering?”

“Then, brahmin, other departed relatives or blood relations who have arisen there would partake of that offering.”

8⁴⁶ “Suppose, master Gotama, neither that departed relative or blood relation, nor other relatives or blood relations were to arise there, who then would partake of the offering?”

“That, brahmin, is impossible, there is no way that that realm would, after such a long time, be empty of [271] departed relatives or blood relations.⁴⁷”

9 For, indeed, brahmin, the giver is never fruitless.”⁴⁸

Bad rebirth, good treatment⁴⁹

10 “Has master Gotama any idea regarding the impossible?”⁵⁰

“Brahmin, I *do* have an idea regarding the impossible!”⁵¹

(1) THE CHARITABLE BUT IMMORAL (REFRAIN)

11 Here, brahmin, a certain person is	
one who takes life	<i>pāṇātipātī,</i>
one who takes the not-given	<i>ādinn’ādānī,</i>
one who indulges in sexual misconduct	<i>kāmesu micchācārī,</i>
one who speaks false speech	<i>musāvādī,</i>
one who speaks divisive speech	<i>pisunā,vāco,</i>
one who utters harsh speech	<i>pharusā,vāco,</i>
one who utters frivolous talk	<i>samphappalāpī,</i>
one who is covetous	<i>abhijjālu,</i>
one who is malevolent	<i>vyāpanna,citto,</i>
one who has false views	<i>micchā,ditṭhiko.</i>

⁴⁶ From hereon, I have added para numbers, not numbered in Ee.

⁴⁷ *Aṭṭhānaṃ kho etaṃ brāhmaṇa anavakāso, yaṃ taṃ ṭhānaṃ vivittaṃ assa iminā dīghena addhunā, yad idaṃ petehi ñāti,sālohitehi.* (A 10.177/5:270 f). See **Paṭhavī S** (S 15.2/2:179). On our being a common family through time, see **Mātā S** (S 15.14/2:189), **Pitā S** (S 15.15/2:189), **Bhātā S** (S 15.16/2:189), **Bhaginī S** (S 15.17/2:189), **Putta S** (S 15.18/190), **Dhītā S** (S 15.9/2:190).

⁴⁸ *Api ca, brāhmaṇa, dāyako’pi anipphalo* [§§35-36]. **A-ni-p,phala**, “not without fruit, not unrewarded, not without merit,” a double neg (**Udena S**, U 7.10/79,21, pl ~ā[ni]; = *na nipphalā sampatta,sāmañña,phalā*, UA 384) = DhA 1:222,2; (**Saddha**) **Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 10.177/5:271,1, 273,8 f, *dāyako pi ~o*), qu PvA 28,27; **Tirokuḍḍa S**, *dāyaka ca ~ā*, Khp 7.6/6* (KhpA 212) = Pv 1.5.5/11* (PvA 28) ≈ 18. The PvA qu that starts at §1.3 ends here (PvA 27 f).

⁴⁹ Cf the case where one keeps the precepts, but does *not* give: the one who gives is said to surpass the non-giver in life-span, beauty, happiness, honour, and power: see **Sumanā S** (A 5.31/3:32-34), SD 22.14.

⁵⁰ *Aṭṭhāne pi bhavaṃ Gotamo parikkappaṃ vadatī ti*, lit “Could master Gotama speak regarding an assumption (*parikkappa*) regarding the impossible.” **Parikkappa** means “inclination, determination” (DPL), “1. preparation, intention, stratagem (Tha 940); 2. assumption, supposition, surmise (A 1:197, 5:271; DhA 308)” (PED); Skt **parikalpa**: “surmise, assumption, hypothesis, figment of imagination” (BHSD). I render *parikkappa* here and foll sentence as “idea”: cf “stratagem,” Tha:N 940 f. In other words, the question is about what kind of karmic fruit is impossible when certain actions (say, moral virtue) are missing.

⁵¹ The “impossibility” (*aṭṭhāna*) here is that keeping the precepts creates bad karma, or that doing “good works” alone with create good karma, in either case, to bring good rebirth or true happiness; and also that true-hearted giving does not bear fruit. These are “impossible.”

12 (But) he is **a giver** of food, drink, cloth, vehicle, garlands, scents, ointments, bed, dwelling, and lights to a recluse or a brahmin.

REBIRTH AS A WELL-TREATED ELEPHANT

With the body's breaking up, after death, he arises in the company of **elephants**. There he would be *a recipient of food, drink, garlands and various adornments*.

13 Here, brahmin, whoever
takes life,
takes the not-given,
indulges in sexual misconduct,
speaks false speech,
speaks divisive speech,
utters harsh speech,
utters frivolous talk,
is covetous,
is malevolent,
has false views,

(on that account), with the body's breaking up, after death, arises in the company of *elephants*.

14 (But) since he is *a giver of alms* to a recluse or a brahmin, he would there be a recipient of food, drink, garlands and various adornments.

(2) THE CHARITABLE BUT IMMORAL

15 Here, brahmin, a certain person
takes life,
takes the not-given,
indulges in sexual misconduct,
speaks false speech,
speaks divisive speech,
utters harsh speech,
utters frivolous talk,
is covetous,
is malevolent,
has false views.

16 (But) he is *a giver* of food, drink, cloth, vehicle, garlands, scents, ointments, bed, dwelling, and lights to a recluse or a brahmin.

REBIRTH AS A WELL-TREATED HORSE

With the body's breaking up, after death, he will arise in the company of **horses**. There he would be a recipient of food, drink, garlands and various adornments.

17 Here, brahmin, whoever
takes life,
takes the not-given,
indulges in sexual misconduct,
speaks false speech,
speaks divisive speech,
utters harsh speech,
utters frivolous talk,

*is covetous,
is malevolent,
has false views,*

will, with the body's breaking up, after death, arise in the company of *horses*.

18 (But) since he is a *giver of alms* to a recluse or a brahmin, he would there be a recipient of food, drink, garlands and various adornments.

(3) THE CHARITABLE BUT IMMORAL

19 Here, brahmin, a certain person

*takes life,
takes the not-given,
indulges in sexual misconduct,
speaks false speech,
speaks divisive speech,
utters harsh speech,
utters frivolous talk,
is covetous,
is malevolent,
has false views.*

20 (But) he is a *giver* of food, drink, cloth, vehicle, garlands, scents, ointments, bed, dwelling, and lights to a recluse or a brahmin.

REBIRTH AS A WELL-TREATED COW

With the body's breaking up, after death, he will arise in the company of **cows**. There he would be a recipient of food, drink, garlands and various adornments.

21 Here, brahmin, whoever

*takes life,
takes the not-given,
indulges in sexual misconduct,
speaks false speech,
speaks divisive speech,
utters harsh speech,
utters frivolous talk,
is covetous,
is malevolent,
has false views,*

will, with the body's breaking up, after death, arise in the company of *cows*.

22 (But) since he is a *giver* of alms to a recluse or a brahmin, he would there be a recipient of food, drink, garlands and various adornments.

(4) THE CHARITABLE BUT IMMORAL (3)

23 Here, brahmin, a certain person

*takes life,
takes the not-given,
indulges in sexual misconduct,
speaks false speech,
speaks divisive speech,
utters harsh speech,*

*utters frivolous talk,
is covetous, [272]
is malevolent,
has false views,*

24 (But) he is a *giver* of food, drink, cloth, vehicle, garlands, scents, ointments, bed, dwelling, and lights to a recluse or a brahmin.

REBIRTH AS A WELL-TREATED CHICKEN (5)

With the body's breaking up, after death, he will arise in the company of **chickens**. There he would be a recipient of food, drink, garlands and various adornments.

THE CHARITABLE BUT IMMORAL

25 Here, brahmin, whoever
*takes life,
takes the not-given,
indulges in sexual misconduct,
speaks false speech,
speaks divisive speech,
utters harsh speech,
utters frivolous talk,
is covetous,
is malevolent,
has false views,*

will, with the body's breaking up, after death, arise in the company of *chickens*.

26 (But) since he is a giver of alms to a recluse or a brahmin, he would there be a recipient of food, drink, garlands and various adornments.

Good rebirth, good treatment

(1) THE MORAL AND CHARITABLE: GOOD HUMAN REBIRTH (REFRAIN)

27 Here again, brahmin, a certain person is
one who **abstains** from taking life
one who abstains from taking the not-given
one who abstains from sexual misconduct
one who abstains from false speech
one who abstains from divisive speech
one who abstains from harsh speech
one who abstains from frivolous talk
one who is not covetous
one who is not malevolent
one who has right views

*pāṇātipātā paṭivirato,
ādinnaḍānī paṭivirato,
kāmesu micchācārī paṭivirato,
musāvādā paṭivirato,
pisunāya vācāya paṭivirato,
pharusāya vācāya paṭivirato,
samphappalāpā paṭivirato,
anabhijjālu,
avyāpanna, citto,
sammā, diṭṭhiko.*

28 (And) he is a **giver** of food, drink, cloth, vehicle, garlands, scents, ointments, bed, dwelling, and lights to a recluse or a brahmin. With the body's breaking up, after death, he will arise in the company of **human beings**. There he would enjoy⁵² the 5 cords of human sensual pleasures.⁵³

29 Here, brahmin, whoever
abstains from taking life,
abstains from taking the not-given,
abstains from sexual misconduct,
abstains from false speech,
abstains from divisive speech,
abstains from harsh speech,
is not covetous,
is not malevolent,
has right views,

will, with the body's breaking up, after death, arise in the company of human beings.

30 Since he is a **giver** of alms to a recluse or a brahmin, he would there enjoy *the 5 cords of human sense-pleasures*.⁵⁴

(2) THE MORAL AND CHARITABLE: DIVINE REBIRTH

31 Here again, brahmin, a certain person
abstains from taking life,
abstains from taking the not-given,
abstains from sexual misconduct,
abstains from false speech,
abstains from divisive speech,
abstains from harsh speech,
is not covetous,
is not malevolent,
has right views,

32 (and) he is a **giver** of food, drink, cloth, vehicle, garlands, scents, ointments, bed, dwelling, and lights to a recluse or a brahmin. With the body's breaking up, after death, he will arise in the company of **devas**.⁵⁵ There [273] he would enjoy the 5 cords of divine sensual pleasures.⁵⁶

33 Here, brahmin, whoever
abstains from taking life,
abstains from taking the not-given,
abstains from sexual misconduct,
abstains from false speech,

⁵² "He would enjoy," *lābhī*, lit "he is a recipient of," or "attainer; who enjoys" (A 1:24, 2:85 f, 4:400; Pug 51; Vbh 332), as in *jhāna, lābhī*, attainer of absorption (It 42; DA 3:86; AA 1:231; ThaA 1:35, 2:250; ApA 122; J 1:140, 2:438; PmA 3:563).

⁵³ *Mānusakānaṃ pañcannaṃ kāma, guṇānaṃ*.

⁵⁴ The PTS tr by F L Woodward abruptly ends here (A:W 5:183)! Many scholars have voiced the serious and numerous inaccuracies and deficiencies in Woodward's tr of the Aṅguttara. To date (2008), this sutta has not be fully translated into English elsewhere.

⁵⁵ **Saṅkhār'upapatti S** (M 120) teaches how one might choose a happier rebirth, up to the highest heavens: see SD 3.4.

⁵⁶ *Dibbānaṃ pañcannaṃ kāma, guṇānaṃ*. This clearly alludes to rebirth in the sense-world heavens, but not the higher realms of form (*rūpa, loka*) or of formlessness (*arūpa, loka*), which are the result of deep meditation.

*abstains from divisive speech,
abstains from harsh speech,
is not covetous,
is not malevolent,
has right views,*

will, with the body's breaking up, after death, arise in the company of devas.

34 Since he is a giver of alms to a recluse or a brahmin, he would there enjoy *the 5 cords of divine sense-pleasures*.

35 For indeed, brahmin, **the giver is never fruitless.**⁵⁷

Jāṇussoṇi goes for refuge

36 "It's marvellous, master Gotama! It's wonderful, master Gotama! For thus far it is enough just to give gifts, to perform ancestral offerings, that the giver is never fruitless."

"That's the way it is, brahmin. The giver is never fruitless."

37 "Wonderful, master Gotama! Wonderful, master Gotama! Just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned, or were to reveal what was hidden, or were to show the way to one who was lost, or were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms,

in the same way master Gotama has, in numerous ways, made the Dharma clear.

I go to master Gotama for refuge, and to the Dharma, and to the community of monks, too.

May master Gotama remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth for life."⁵⁸

— evaṃ —

Bibliography

[See also Tiro,kuḍḍa Sutta = SD 2.7 Bibliography]

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Pv:G **Stories of the Departed (*Peta-Vatthu*) together with excerpts from the frame stories from Dhammapāla's Commentary.** Tr Henry Snyder Gehman, London: Pali Text Society, 1938, rev 1973. See Intro pp ix-xii.

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⁵⁷ *Dāyako pi anipphalô ti*. The pl form of this sentence—*dāyakā ca anipphalā*—appears in **Tiro,kuḍḍa S** (Kh 7.6b), SD 2.7.

⁵⁸ This is an example of an individual refuge-going: see SD 44.2 (2.3). This is also one of at least 12 occasions when Jāṇussoṇi goes to the 3 jewels for refuge: see SD 44.3 (2.4).

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