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(Mahānāma) Gilāyana Sutta

(Mahānāma) Gilāna Sutta The Discourse on the Ill (to Mahānāma) | S 55.54
or (Mahānāma) Roga Sutta The (Mahānāma) Discourse on Sickness

Theme: How to die as a saint, and the layman arhat

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

1 Mahānāma and related suttas

1.1 Mahānāma is a Sakya rajah, the son of Amit'odana, a brother of Suddh'odana (the Buddha's father). As such, he was the Buddha's cousin, and also Anuruddha's older brother. He is declared by the Buddha to be "the chief of those who give choice almsfood" (A 1:26). His life is given in the Aṅguttara Commentary (AA 1:393), where he is said to have fed the order at Kapilavatthu (his home town) for a whole year.

1.2 In the (Upāsaka) Mahānāma Sutta 1 (A 8.25), the Buddha teaches Mahānāma on the qualities of a true lay follower.¹ A number of other teachings on lay practice given to Mahānāma are found mostly in the Sotāpatti Saṃyutta (book 55 of the Saṃyutta Nikāya):

- **Kaṅkheyya (or Sakambhiya) Sutta** (S 54.12/5:327 f), on the difference between the trainee (*sekha*) and the Buddha, and on the benefits of breath meditation;
- **Mahānāma Suttas 1-2, Godha Sutta, and Sarakāni Suttas 1-2** of the Sarakāni chapter in the Sotāpatti Saṃyutta (S 55.21-25/5:369-380)—all concerning streamwinning;
- **(Upāsaka) Mahānāma Sutta 2** (S 55.37/5:395), on the qualities of a lay followers;
- **(Sotāpanna) Mahānāma Sutta** (S 55.49/5:403), on the qualities of a streamwinner;
- **(Mahānāma) Gilāyana Sutta** (S 55.54/5:408-410), on how to die as a saint (this Sutta).

In the **Cūḷa Dukkha-k,khandha Sutta** (M 14/1:91-95), the Buddha explains to Mahānāma, why the latter, although a once-returner, still feels sensual lust.

1.3 BEDSIDE COUNSELLING

1.3.1 Both, in the case of the dying Dīgh'āvu (who thinks of his father), as recorded **the Dīgh'āvu Sutta** (S 55.3), and in the case of the dying Mahānāma (who was thinking of his family and so on), the Buddha advises them, in turn, to let go of worldly thoughts.² Finally, the Buddha comforts Mahānāma (who was unable to become a monk due to family responsibilities),³ that if he were to let go of all ideas of the self, not identifying with any idea of self, he would be liberated, and his awakening would be no different from that of any monk. [3.1]

1.3.2 A similar theme is found in **the Nakula Sutta** (A 6.16), where the lady Nakula,mātā admonishes her husband Nakula,pitā, lying severely ill on his bed, to let go of all longings at the moment of dying. Both these couple are streamwinners. In the case of Nakula,pitā, on account of his wife's counselling, he recovers, and they both then visit the Buddha, who praises Nakula,mātā's wisdom.⁴

¹ A 8.25/4:220-222 @ SD 6.3.

² **Dīgh'āvu S** (S 55.3/5:344-347), SD 23.16.

³ See SD 4.9 (1.2).

⁴ A 6.16/3:295-298 @ SD 5.2.

2 Death studies

2.1 In the Dhānañjāni Sutta (M 97),⁵ Sāriputta guides the dying brahmin, Dhānañjāni, through a similar series of reflections as those of the (Mahānāma) Gilāyana Sutta, but stops when the brahmin attains to the Brahmā world, and was later reproached by the Buddha for having done so. **The Saṅkhār'upapatti Sutta** (M 120/3:99-103)⁶ similarly deals with choosing a good rebirth and makes an interesting comparative study with the (Mahānāma) Gilāyana Sutta. Such suttas are important Buddhist texts in Buddhist Psychology, especially Death Studies. Both these suttas clearly show that a dying person may be guided by a skillful person to be reborn in a higher plane or even attain liberation itself.

2.2 The (Dve) Roga Sutta (A 4.157),⁷ declares that there 2 kinds of illness: the illness of the body and the illness of the mind, and that no one, except the arhats, could claim to be mentally healthy for even a moment. This (Mahānāma) Gilāyana Sutta should be studied with **the (Gati) Mahānāma Suttas 1-2** (S 55.21-22), wherein Mahānāma, concerned with how he would die, is reassured by the Buddha.⁸ A fuller survey on karma, death and rebirth has been done in **SD 48.1**.

3 Laymen arhats

3.1 SAMENESS OF SAINTHOOD. The (Mahānāma) Gilāyana Sutta closes with a very significant remark that the dying wise layman has “‘directed [his mind] to the cessation of self-identity’—then, Mahānāma, there is no difference between a lay follower who is thus freed in mind and a monk who has been freed in mind for a hundred years, that is, there is no difference between the one liberation and the other” [§19].⁹ This means that the layman dies an arhat. There are only two canonical cases of layman arhats, Yasa (who later renounced, V 1:17) and Bāhiya Dāru,cīriya (who died shortly).¹⁰

3.2 SOCIAL EQUALITY BETWEEN MONASTIC AND LAY

3.2.1 An interesting feature of the (Mahānāma) Gilāyana Sutta is that the dying layman is addressed as **āyasmā** [§7], usually translated as “venerable” when referring to monastics. Similarly, in **the Dhānañjāni Sutta** (M 97),¹¹ the dying brahmin Dhānañjāni, is addressed by his servant as **bhante**, which is usually translated as “venerable sir” when used for addressing monks (M 97,27.1/2:191 f).

⁵ **Dhānañjāni S** (M 97/2:193-195), SD 4.9.

⁶ **Saṅkhār'upapatti S** (M 120/3:99-103), SD 3.4.

⁷ **(Dve) Roga S** (A 4.157.1/2:142 f), SD 5.4(5) (abridged).

⁸ **(Gati) Mahānāma S 1** (S 55.21/5:369-371), SD 23.1a & **(Gati) Mahānāma S 2** (S 55.22/5:371), SD 23.1b.

⁹ See SD 16.7 (1.1.1.2).

¹⁰ **Bāhiya Dāru,cīriya**, U 1.10/6-9; Ap 2:475 ff; AA 1:282; DhA 2:209 ff; UA 77 ff. **Kathā,vatthu** (Kvu 4.1/267) mentions Yasa, Uttiya the householder and Setu the brahmin youth as examples of layman arhats. **Milinda,pañha**, too, states that a lay person can become an arhat, but adds that a layman who attains arhathood either renounces the world that day itself or he would pass away into final nirvana on that very day (Miln 264-266; cf 242 ff, 246 ff). Majjhima Comy mentions Santati the privy councillor, Ugga,sena the seth's son, and the boy Vīta,soka as examples of layman arhats (MA 3:196). [“Seth” is the modern Indian cognate for *set̥thī*, and is found in the OED.] In **Tevijja Vaccha,gotta S** (M 71), when Vacchagotta asks, “Master Gotama, is there any householder who, without abandoning the householder's fetters, when the body has broken up, makes an end of suffering?” the Buddha answers there is none (M 71.11/1:483). Cf Dh 142. On laymen arhats, see **Naḷaka,pāna S** (M 68), SD 37.4 (4) & **Laymen saints**, SD 8.6 (13) Why no mention of lay arhats? On destiny of laymen arhats, see SD 8.6 (19) & **Sabba Kamma,jaha S** (U 3.1), SD 39.3 (1.4.4).

¹¹ M 97/2:193-195 (SD 4.9).

3.2.2 Clearly, according to the suttas, there is no difference in the social status of the monastic and the lay. Not only does one loses one’s class distinction upon renouncing as a monastic. While the Buddha himself is often referred to as a “Sakya son” (*sakya,putta*),¹² the monks, too, are referred “sons of the Sakya” (*sakya,puttiya*).¹³ While the former term may be said to be a social term, the latter is a spiritual one. In monastic terms, they have the same sense of “true renunciants.

Similarly, as we have noted [3.2.1], there was **no social distinction between the lay and the ordained** in the Buddha’s time. They were both addressed by juniors in the same way as *bhante* (“sir”) or *āyasma* (“venerable sir”). Another common mode of address universally used is *āvuso* (“friends” or “brothers”), often used only amongst the monks themselves.¹⁴ The monks, too, addressed one another with the same words.

The nuns would be addressed as *ayyā* (“noble sister”), which was also used amongst the nuns themselves when addressing seniors. After the Buddha’s time, the senior monastics would address juniors by name.¹⁵

3.2.3 In Thailand, even today, the word *ajahn* (from Skt *ācārya*, P *ācariya*), meaning “teacher,” is used as a respectful way of addressing either a monk or a lay person (male or female) who is a teacher (both secular or religious). This mode of address is very similar to the Chinese *sifu* and the Japanese *sensei*.¹⁶

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(Mahānāma) Gilāyana Sutta

The Discourse on the Ill (to Mahānāma)

S 55.54

[408]

1 At one time the Blessed One was dwelling amongst the Sakyas in Nigrodha’s Park near Kapilavatthu.

Mahānāma

2 At that time, some monks were engaged in robe-making for the Blessed One, thinking, “At the end of three months, with the completion of this robe, the Blessed One will go on a walking tour.”¹⁷

¹² D 1:87 f, 111 f, 127 f, 224, 236; M 1:284, 290, 330; S 5:352; A 1:180, 3:30, 341, 4:340; U 78; Sn p103, p116, 991, 996; V 1:35, 245. Other Sakya monks are also described as *sakya,putta* (eg Upananda, V 3:210 f; Hatthaka, V 4:1).

¹³ D 3:6, 130-133; M 2:99 (a common term for all monks, incl the Buddha); S 3:240, 325 f; A 3:251, 4:202; U 44 f. See Sukumar Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries in India*, London, 1962:35-44 (ch 1).

¹⁴ See eg (Mahānāma) *Gilāyana S* (S 55.54/5:408-410), SD 4.10.

¹⁵ See *Mahā,parinibbāna S* (D 16,6) + n, SD 9.

¹⁶ For more details, see *Dhānañjāni S* (M 97), SD 4.9 (4).

¹⁷ *Tena kho pana samayena sambahulā bhikkhū bhagavato cīvara,kammaṃ karonti, “Niṭṭhita,cīvaro bhagavā te,mās’accayena cārikaṃ pakkamissatīti.* As at *Bhaddāli S* (M 65/1:438,9), SD 56.2; *Thapati S* (S 55.6/5:348,11), SD 42.7; (Mahānāma) *Gilāyana S* (S 55.54/5:408,9), SD 4.10; *Mahānāma S 1* (A 11.12/5:328,12); *Mahānāma S 2* (A

3 Mahānāma the Sakya heard, “It is said that some monks are making a robe for the Blessed One, thinking that at the end of three months, with the completion of this robe, the Blessed One will go on a walking tour.”

Then Mahānāma the Sakya approached the Blessed One and having saluted him, sat down at one side. Sitting thus at one side, Mahānāma the Sakya said this to the Blessed One:

4 “Bhante, I heard it was said that¹⁸ some monks are making a robe for the Blessed One, thinking that at the end of three months, with the completion of the robe, the Blessed One will go on a walking tour.

But, bhante, I have neither heard nor learned it before the Blessed One himself how a wise lay follower¹⁹ who is sick, in pain, seriously ill, should be admonished by another wise lay follower?”

Limbs of streamwinning

5 “A wise lay follower, Mahānāma, who is sick, in pain, seriously ill, should be admonished by a wise lay follower with **the 4 assurances**:²⁰

- (1) RECOLLECTION OF THE BUDDHA. ‘Let the venerable one²¹ be assured. Venerable, you have wise faith²² in the Buddha thus:²³

So too, is he the Blessed One:²⁴ for, he is
arhat [worthy]
the fully self-awakened one,
accomplished in wisdom and conduct,
well-farer,
knower of the worlds,
peerless guide of persons to be tamed,
teacher of gods and humans,

*Iti pi so bhagavā
araham
sammā,sambuddho
vijjā,carāṇa,sampanno
sugato
loka,vidū
anuttaro purisa,damma,sārathī
satthā deva,manussānaṃ*

11.13/5:332,28); **Nandiya S** (A 11.14/5:335,8). “Walking tour,” *cārika*, ie, on a Dharma teaching peregrination. For details of such tours, see SD 27.6b (3.2.1).

¹⁸ “I heard it was said that,” *sutam etam ... kira*, lit “It is heard thus ... it is said that...”

¹⁹ “A wise lay follower,” *sapañño upāsako*, here refers to a streamwinner (SA 3:291).

²⁰ “Assurances,” *assāsaniyā dhammā*, things that bring solace or comfort (*assāsa*), a word that also tr as (1) inhalation, breathing; (2) ease, relief; (3) self-confidence, assurance. Here, it refers to 4 limbs of streamwinning (*sotāpatti-y-aṅga*, S 12.4110-14/2:69 f): see “**Entering the stream**,” SD 3.3. Cf the 4 self-assurances of **Kesaputtiya S** (A 1:192 f), SD 35.4a and **Apaṇṇaka S** (M 60), SD 35.5. The verses on the Three Jewels are also found at S 1:219 = A 3:312 (qu by Vism 198).

²¹ “The venerable one,” *āyasmā*, like *bhante* (venerable sir), is usu used in addressing monks but is here used for lay followers. The Buddha’s instruction is given in the 3rd person, using *āyasmā* for the dying “wise lay followers.” Once the instructions to the dying layman reach that of heavenly rebirth, the mode of address changes to “Friend” (*āvuso*). See below §9b. On *āyasmā*, *bhante* and *āvuso*, see **Dhānañjāni S** (M 97), SD 4.9 (5).

²² “Wise faith,” *avecca-p,pasāda*, ie faith or confidence through understanding. *Pasāda* refers to a faith that is characterized by mental lucidity and serenity, and also a personal radiance. The early texts speak of 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 or understanding (M 1:320,8, 401,23). “Wise faith” is syn with (2). *Amūlaka* = “not seen, not heard, not suspected” (V 2:243 3:163 & Comy).

²³ On the Buddha’s 9 virtues, see **Buddhānussati**, SD 15.7 (3).

²⁴ Alt tr: “For the following reasons, too, he is the Blessed One [the Lord] ...” On the meaning of *iti pi so*, see **Buddhānussati**, SD 15.7 (2.2).

awakened,
blessed.²⁵

buddho
bhagavā'ti.

(2) RECOLLECTION OF THE DHARMA. Venerable, you have wise faith in the Dharma, thus:²⁶

Well-taught
is the Blessed One's Dharma [teaching and truth],
visible here and now,
immediate [not having to do with time],
inviting one to come and see,
accessible [leading up to the goal],
to be personally known by the wise.

Svākkhāto
bhagavatā dhammo
sandiṭṭhiko
akāliko
ehi,passiko
opanayiko
pacattaṃ veditabbo viññūhīti.

(3) RECOLLECTION OF THE SANGHA. Venerable, you have wise faith in the community of holy disciples [the sangha], thus:²⁷

of good conduct
is the Blessed One's community of holy disciples;
of upright conduct
is the Blessed One's community of holy disciples;
of right conduct
is the Blessed One's community of holy disciples;
of proper conduct
is the Blessed One's community of holy disciples.

Supaṭipanno
bhagavato sāvaka,saṅgho
uju,paṭipanno
bhagavato sāvaka,saṅgho
ñāya,paṭipanno
bhagavato sāvaka,saṅgho
sāmīci,paṭipanno
bhagavato sāvaka,saṅgho.

These four pairs of persons,
the eight individuals
are this Blessed One's community of holy disciples:
worthy of offerings,
worthy of hospitality,
worthy of gifts,
worthy of salutation with the lotus-palms,
incomparable supreme field of merit for the world.

yad idaṃ cattāri purisa,yugāni
aṭṭha,purisa,puggalā
esa bhagavato sāvaka,saṅgho
āhuneyyo
pāhuneyyo
dakkhiṇeyyo
añjalī,karaṇīyo
anuttaraṃ puñña-k,khettaṃ lokassāti.

(4) MORAL VIRTUE. Venerable, you have virtues dear to the noble ones²⁸—unbroken, untorn, unmixed, spotless, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, giving rise to concentration.²⁹ **[409]**

Letting go of sensual pleasures

6 (1) After the wise lay follower who is sick, in pain, seriously ill, has been admonished by a wise lay follower with **the 4 assurances**, he should be asked,

7 'Venerable [āyasmā], are you thinking of³⁰ your mother or father?'

²⁵ PTS text abridges the virtues of the 3 jewels with *peyyālā*, but here given in full.

²⁶ On the 6 virtues of the Dharma, see *Dhammānussati*, SD 15.9 (2).

²⁷ On the 9 virtues of the Sangha, see SD 15.10a (4).

²⁸ "Virtues dear to the noble ones," *ariya,kantāni sīlāni*. The virtues of the noble ones are explained at Vism 221 f. SA says that the noble ones do not violate the five precepts; hence, these virtues are dear to them (SA 2:74).

²⁹ "Unbroken, ... giving rise to concentration," *akhaṇḍehi acchiddehi asabalehi akammāsehi bhujissehi viññūpa-saṭṭhehi aparāmaṭṭhehi samādhi,sarivattanikehi*. See UA 268.

³⁰ "Thinking of," *apekhā*, also tr as "longing for, anxious about."

If he were to say thus, 'I am thinking of my mother and father,'
then he should be told:

7.2 'But, venerable, you, good sir, are subject to death.

Whether or not, venerable, you think of your mother and father, you will die all the same.
So let go of thinking of your mother and father.'

8 (2) If he were to say thus, 'I have let go of thinking about my mother and father,' he should be asked,

'Venerable, are you thinking of your wife and children?'

If he were to say thus, 'I am thinking of my wife and children,'
then he should be told:

8.2 'But, venerable, you, good sir, are subject to death.

Whether or not, venerable, you think of your wife and children, you will die all the same.
So let go of thinking of your wife and children.'

9 (3) If he were to say thus, 'I have let go of thinking of my wife and children,'
then he should be asked,

'Venerable, are you thinking of the 5 cords of human sense-pleasure?'³¹

If he were to say thus, 'I am thinking of the 5 cords of human sense-pleasure,'
then he should be told:

9.2 'But, avuso [friend],³² heavenly sense-pleasures are more excellent and more sublime than human sense-pleasures.

Venerable, it would be good if your mind let go of human sense-pleasures,
and you set your mind on³³ the heaven of the 4 great kings [Cātum,mahārājika].'

Letting go of the heavens

10 (4) If he were to say thus,

'My mind has let go of human sense-pleasures and it is set on the heaven of the 4 great kings,'
then he should be told: **[410]**

10.2 'But, avuso, the devas of the heaven of the 33 [Tāva,tīm̐sa] are more excellent and more sublime than those of the heaven of the 4 great kings.

Venerable, it would be good if your mind let go of the heaven of the 4 great kings,
and you set your mind on the heaven of the 33 devas.

11 (5) If he were to say thus,

'My mind has let go of the heaven of the devas of the 4 great kings and it is set on the heaven of the thirty-three devas,'

then he should be told:

11.2 'But, avuso, the heaven of the Yāma devas is more excellent and more sublime than the heaven of the thirty-three devas.

Venerable, it would be good if your mind let go of the heaven of the thirty-three devas,
and you set your mind on the heaven of the Yāma devas.'

³¹ *Mānūsaka pañca kāma,guṇa*. Cf (Saddha) **Jāṇussoṇī S** (A 10.177.7fg/5:273 f), SD 2.6a. See also It 94.

³² *Āvuso* ("Friend"), a vocative of *āyasmā*. Before this, the dying layman is addressed as "venerable" (*āyasmā*): see §5 n.

³³ "You set your mind on," *adhimocehi*, caus pr 3 sg of *adhimuccati*, "inclines to; concentrates on."

12 (6) If he were to say thus,

‘My mind has let go of the heaven of the thirty-three devas and it is set on the heaven of the Yāma devas,’

then he should be told:

12.2 ‘But, avuso, the heaven of the Tusita devas [the contented devas] is more excellent and more sublime than the Yāma devas.

Venerable, it would be good if your mind let go of the heaven of the Yāma devas,
and you set your mind on the Tusita devas.’

13 (7) If he were to say thus,

‘My mind has let go of the heaven of the Yāma devas and it is set on the heaven of the Tusita devas,’
then he should be told:

13.2 ‘But, avuso, the heaven of the Nimmāṇa,rati devas [who delight in creating] is more excellent and more sublime than the heaven of the Tusita devas.

Venerable, it would be good if your mind let go of the heaven of the Tusita devas,
and you set your mind on the Nimmāṇa,rati devas.

14 (8) If he were to say thus,

‘My mind has let go of the heaven of the Yāma devas and it is set on the heaven of the Nimmāṇa,rati devas,’

then he should be told:

15 ‘But, avuso, the heaven of the Para,nimmita,vasavatti devas [who lord over others’ creating] is more excellent and more sublime than the heaven of the Nimmāṇa,rati devas.

Venerable, it would be good if your mind let go of the heaven of the Nimmāṇa,rati devas,
and you set your mind on the the Para,nimmita,vasavatti devas.

16 (9) If he were to say thus, ‘My mind has let go of the Nimmāṇa,rati devas and it is set on the Para.nimmita,vasavatti devas,’ then he should be told:

17 ‘But, avuso, the Brahmā world is more excellent and more sublime than the Para.nimmita,vasavatti devas.

Venerable, it would be good if your mind let go of the Para.nimmita,vasavatti devas,
and it is set on the Brahmā world.’

Letting go of self-identity

18 (10) If he were to say thus, ‘My mind has let go of the Para.nimmita,vasavatti devas and it is set on the Brahmā world,’ then he should be told:

18.2 ‘But, avuso, even the Brahmā world is impermanent, uncertain,³⁴ trapped in self-identity.’³⁵

Venerable, it would be good if your mind let go of the Brahmā world
and you direct³⁶ your mind to the cessation of self-identity.’³⁷

³⁴ “Uncertain,” *adhuva*, more usu *addhuva*, “not fixed, not permanent, uncertain, doubtful” (CPD).

³⁵ “Trapped in self-identity,” *sakkāya pariyāpanno*, lit “included in self-identity”; alt tr “enmeshed in self-identity.” Childers (DPL): “included, contained, belonging to.” As in *Sīha S* (S 22.78) where the devas who regard themselves as permanent, stable and eternal are really “impermanent, unstable, not eternal, trapped in self-identity” (S 3:85). The Comy there explains the expression as “included within the five aggregates.” Thus when the Buddha teaches them the Dharma sealed with the three characteristics [impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, not-self], exposing the faults in the round of existence, the fear of knowledge enters them. (SA 2:288).

³⁶ “Direct,” *upsamharāhi*, ie “draw or collect (your mind) towards.”

19 (11) If he were to say thus, ‘My mind has turned away from the Brahmā world and is directed to the cessation of self-identity,’—

then, Mahānāma, there is no difference between a lay follower who is thus freed in mind and a monk who has been freed in mind for a hundred years,³⁸ that is, there is no difference between the one liberation and the other.”³⁹

— evaṃ —

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³⁷ “Cessation of self-identity,” *sakkāya,nirodha*, a syn of the 3rd noble truth = nirvana: D 3:216 (*antā*), 3:240; M 1:299; S 3:159, 5:410; A 2:33, 2:165, 3:246, 3:401; see also DA 3:992, AA 3:153; *sakkāya = te,bhūmaka,vaṭṭa* (“cycles of the 3 worlds,” ie sense, form, and formless worlds) (AA 3:404). This instruction is to direct the dying person’s mind away from rebirth in the Brahmā world towards the attainment of nirvana. On a simple level, the overcoming of *sakkāya,diṭṭhi* (“self-identity view”) leads to streamwinning: see **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3(5.1).

³⁸ I follow the Thai Pali here. See S:B 1961 n371.

³⁹ “Between the one liberation and the other,” *vimuttiyā vimuttiṃ*, as in **Sumana Rāja,kumāra S** (A 5.31/3:34), SD 22.14, in ref to arhathood of two monks, one of was a generous layman, and the other not. Comy says that when one liberation is compared to the other, there is no difference to be found (SA 3:292). In effect, this is a statement that the dying layman has become an arhat. See Intro (3) Laymen arhats above.