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Nakula Sutta

The Nakula Discourse | A 6.16

WT Be **Nakula,pitu Sutta** The Discourse to Nakula's Father

Theme: How a wise, loving wife counsels a dying husband

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003, 2011

1 Bhaggā

1.1 The name **Bhaggā** refers to a tribe as well as a country, lying between Vesālī and Sāvattthī. Its capital is **Surṃsumāra,giri**, where the Buddha spends his eighth rains retreat.¹ The town is so called because it is said that when it was being built, a crocodile (*surṃsumāra*) made a noise in a nearby lake.² The Buddha visits the Bhaggā country several times.³ **The Anumāna Sutta** (M 15),⁴ **the Māra Tajjanīya Sutta** (M 59)⁵ and **the Bodhi Rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M 85)⁶ are given there, and 4 rules for the monks are introduced there, too.⁷

It is during the Buddha's stay at Surṃsumāra,giri that he sees, with his divine eye, Moggallāna meditating at Kalla,vāla,mutta, troubled by drowsiness, and appears before him to admonish him.⁸ This event shows that the Buddha visits Bhaggā country during the very first year of his public ministry.

1.2 Bodhi Rāja,kumāra, the son of Udena of Kosambi, lives in the Kokanada (red lotus) palace in Bhaggā country,⁹ apparently as his father's viceroy, meaning that the Bhaggās are subject of Kosambī.¹⁰ The elder **Siri,maṇḍa**, who, reflecting on the benefits of the confession of faults, goes on to attain arhathood, lives here, too.¹¹ On another occasion, the Buddha, while staying in Bhaggā, sees **Anuruddha**, in the Bamboo Grove in Cetī country, reflecting on the thoughts of the great man, and appears before him to admonish him.¹² Sigāla,pitā, as a monk goes to Bhaggā to meditate and becomes an arhat there.¹³

1.3 Bhesakaḷa,vana or Bhesakaḷā Forest is so called because it is haunted by the yakshini Bhesakaḷā,¹⁴ or the yaksha Bhesaka.¹⁵ It is said that once when Moggallāna is staying in the Bhesakaḷā Forest, Māra enters his stomach to trouble him, but Moggallāna through his psychic power, recognizes this Māra to be his own nephew in the distant past—the embarrassed Māra then leaves him!¹⁶

¹ VA 862; AA 2:124.

² MA 2:65; SA 2:181.

³ Eg V 2:127, 4:115, 198; A 2:61, 4:65.

⁴ M 15/1:95-100.

⁵ M 59/1:332-338.

⁶ M 85/2:91-97.

⁷ Monks are allowed to step on cloth for use after the feet are washed (V 2:127); **Pāc 56** on not kindling a fire when not sick (V 4:115 f); **Sekh 55** on not accepting a drinking vessel with food-soiled hands (V 4:198); **Sekh 56** on not throwing away bowl-washing with rice-grains when amongst houses (V 4:199). Cf V 5:145; VA 1305.

⁸ (**Moggallāna**) **Pacalā S** (A 7.58/4:185), SD 4.11.

⁹ V 2:127, 4:199; M 2:91; J 3:157; DhA 3:134 f; MA 3:321.

¹⁰ *Cambridge History of India* (1:175) says that the Bhaggās are members of the Vajjī confederacy.

¹¹ Tha 447-452; ThaA 2:187 f.

¹² **Anuruddha Mahā,vitakka S** (A 8.30/4:228 f), SD 19.5.

¹³ Tha 18; ThaA 1:74.

¹⁴ S 2:249.

¹⁵ ThaA 1:75.

¹⁶ M 1:332 f; ThaA 3:180; cf Tha 1208.

When **Nakula,pitā and Nakula,mātā**, the parents of the monk **Nakula**,¹⁷ first meet the Buddha in the Bhesakaḷā Forest, they immediately fall at his feet, lovingly calling him “son” and asking why he had been away for so long! It is said that they had been the Bodhisattva’s parents, uncle and aunt on both sides, and grandparents, for 500 births each. The Buddha speaks the Dharma to them and they attain stream-winning.¹⁸

The Buddha again visits the couple in their old age, and they offer almsfood to the Buddha and the monks. At the end of the offering, they declare their wish to be together again in future lives. The Buddha then declares them to be foremost of his lay disciples who have mutual trust (*vissāsikā*).¹⁹ The couple is often mentioned amongst the eminent disciples.²⁰

2 Related suttas

2.0 The Nakula Sutta is significant in at least two ways:

- (1) It is a testimony of nuptial harmony and happiness in the life of Nakula,pitā and Nakula,mātā, who can be said to be the ideal Buddhist couple.
- (2) It is a teaching on how to die well, that is, “not to die with longing” (*mā...sāpekho kālaṃ akāsi*).

2.1 A LOVING COUPLE

2.1.1 In the Nakula Sutta, we see Nakula,pitā, gravely ill and heavy “with longing” (*sāpekho*), that is, with attachment and concern towards his wife and family. The Saṃyutta Nikāya relates that even after taking some medicine, Nakula,pitā is unable to recover (AA 3:349). Nakula,mātā then consoles him with 6 statements.

The Aṅguttara Commentary says that Nakula,mātā’s first three statements [§2.1-3] are her lion-roar (*sīha,nāda*) but as regards her last three statements, she calls the Buddha to witness (AA 3:349). The first three statements are Nakula,mātā’s reference to happiness here and now or worldly happiness; the last three refer to happiness hereafter or spiritual happiness.

2.1.2 Other suttas dealing with Buddhism’s 1st couple, Nakula,mātā and Nakula,pitā, are:²¹

Nakula,mātā Sutta (A 8.48): the Buddha speaks of the 8 qualities that bring a woman rebirth amongst the devas (A 8.48/4:268 f), SD 5.3.

Nakula,pitā Sutta (S 22.1): the Buddha instructs the old and infirm Nakula,pitā on how to keep the mind well despite an ailing body (S 22.1/3:1-5), SD 5.4.

Sama,jīvi Sutta (A 4.55): the Buddha instructs the elderly couple how they can be together happily here and hereafter (A 4.55/2:61 f), SD 5.1.

2.2 HOW TO DIE WELL. The Nakula Sutta belongs to the fascinating field of death studies, or more specifically, to terminal counselling. The teaching is that in our last moment, we should have no longings (*apekhā*) at all, so that we pass on joyfully to a good rebirth, or even sainthood itself. Nakula,mātā comforts the sick and distraught Nakula,pitā with such warmth and faith that he immediately recovers.

¹⁷ SA 2:249. Nothing else is known of him.

¹⁸ AA 1:400, 3:95.

¹⁹ A 1:26, 2:61 ff; AA 1:400, 3:95; SA 2:251.

²⁰ Eg A 3:465, 4:348.

²¹ For details, see **Sama,jīvi S** (A 4.55) in SD 5 Intro.

This Sutta should also be studied with **the (Mahānāma) Roga Sutta** (S 55.54), where the Buddha instructs the lay saint Mahānāma²² on how to guide a dying person to be reborn into higher states.²³ **The Sankhār’upapatti S** (M 120), on the other hand, teaches us how, at the time of dying, to guide ourself towards higher births or even liberation itself.²⁴ In **the Dhānañjāni Sutta** (M 97), Sāriputta counsels a dying brahmin so that he is reborn in the Brahmā world.²⁵

The Dīghāvu Sutta (S 55.3) records how the Buddha counsels the dying Dīghāvu, a streamwinner, advising him not to worry about his father, Jotika the householder. Dīghāvu later passes away and arises spontaneously in the Suddhāvāsa as a non-returner (S 55.3).²⁶ In **the Mahā Sudassana Sutta** (D 17), king Mahā Sudassana instructs queen Subhaddā that he intends to pass away without any longing, as a result of which (also on account of his meditation), he is reborn in the brahma world.²⁷

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Nakula Sutta

The Nakula Discourse

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Nakula,pitā lays ill

1 [295] At one time, the Blessed One was staying in the deer park²⁸ in the Bhesakaḷā Forest,²⁹ at Suṃsumāra,giri³⁰ in the Bhaggā country.³¹ Now at that time, the householder Nakula,pitā was sick, in pain and seriously ill.

Nakula,mātā’s lion-roar: worldly happiness

Then, the housewife [housewife]³² Nakula,mātā said this to the householder Nakula,pitā:

²² See **Cūḷa Dukkha-k,khandha S** (M 14) where the layman Mahānāma,a once-returner, asks the Buddha why despite his spiritual attainment, he still has thoughts of lust, hate and delusion. The Buddha replies he has yet to progress at least a stage further to overcome the roots of sensual desires (M 14.2/1:91), SD 4.7.

²³ S 55.54/5:408-410 (SD 4.10).

²⁴ M 120/3:99-103 (SD 3.4).

²⁵ M 97/2:184-196.

²⁶ S 55.3/5:344-347 (SD 23.6).

²⁷ D 17,2.11/2:192 (SD 36.12).

²⁸ “Deer park,” *miga,dāya*, the best known of which is this one outside Benares (S 5:421), where the 1st discourse was given, as recorded in **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,1/4:420), SD 1.1; another is in Bhesakalā forest, near where Nakula,pitā and Nakula,mātā live: see **Anumāna S** (M 15,1/1:95) SD 59.3; **Māra Tajjaniya S** (M 50,1/1:332), SD 36.4; **Nakula,pitā S** (S 22.1/3:1), SD 5.4; **Sama,jīvi S** (A 4.55,1/2:61), SD 5.1; **Nakula S** (A 6.16/3:295), SD 5.2; **Nakula,mātā S** (A 8.48,1), SD 5.3; and another outside Nādikā [Ñātikā]: see **Cūḷa Gosiṅga S** (M 31,1), SD 44.11, **Mahā Gosiṅga S** (M 32,1),SD 44.12. For other refs, search CSCD using “migaḍāy*.”

²⁹ So called because it is the home of the yakshini Bhesakalā (SA 2:249). The house of Nakula,pitā and Nakula,-mātā is nearby.

³⁰ Suṃsumāra,giri: see Intro (1.1).

³¹ **Bhaggā country** is located btw Vesālī and Sāvattthī, and, in the Buddha’s times, is subject to Kosambī (rajah Udena): see DPPN sv. It is not amongst the 16 great states: see **(Tadah’) Uposatha S** (A 3.70), SD 4.18 App. See Intro (1).

2 “Now, houselord, **do not have any longing**³³ **at the time of dying**. Houselord, painful is dying when you are with longing.³⁴ The Blessed One disapproves of dying with longing.

(1) ECONOMIC REASSURANCE. Now, houselord, it might be that you think, ‘After I am gone, the house lady Nakula,mātā is incapable of supporting the boys and maintaining the household.’

Houselord, you should not see things that way. Houselord, I am skilled in spinning cotton and carding matted wool. Houselord, after your passing, I am capable of supporting the boys and maintaining the household. [296]

Therefore, houselord, do not have any longing at the time of dying. Painful is dying when you are with longing. The Blessed One disapproves of dying with longing.

2.2 (2) EMOTIONAL REASSURANCE. Now, houselord, it might be that you think, ‘After I am gone, the house lady Nakula,mātā will go to another household [will remarry].’³⁵

Houselord, you should not see things that way. Know this, houselord, throughout our 16 years of household life, I have observed celibacy.³⁶

Therefore, houselord, do not have any longing at the time of dying. Painful is dying when you are with longing. The Blessed One disapproves of dying with longing.

2.3 (3) SPIRITUAL REASSURANCE. Now, houselord, it might be that you think, ‘After I am gone, the house lady Nakula,mātā might have no wish to see the Blessed One, might have no desire to see the order of monks.’

Houselord, you should not see things that way. Houselord, after your passing, I will have all the more wish to see the Blessed One, all the more wish to see the order of monks.

Therefore, houselord, do not have any longing at the time of dying. Painful is dying when you are with longing. The Blessed One disapproves of dying with longing.

Nakula,mātā’s faith: spiritual happiness

2.4 (4) MORAL VIRTUE. Now, houselord, it might be that you think, ‘After I am gone, the house lady Nakula,mātā might not fulfill the precepts.’

Houselord, you should not see things that way. Houselord, for as long as there are the Blessed One’s white-clad female lay disciples who fulfill the precepts, I am one amongst them.

If anyone should doubt or question this, let him go and ask the Blessed One who is residing in the Deer Park in the Bhesakaḷā Forest, at Suṃsumāra,giri in the Bhaggā country.

Therefore, houselord, do not have any longing at the time [297] of dying. Painful is dying when you are with longing. The Blessed One disapproves of dying with longing.

³² “House lady” (*gahapatānī*; Skt *grhapatnī*), housewife, the mistress of the house, wife of a house lord (*gaha,-pati*): V 3:213,30, 219,5; M 1:125,4 (= *ghara,sāminī*, MA 2:98.32); A 2:61,29, 3:295,16, 4:268,6.

³³ *Ma kho tvaṃ gaha,pati sāpekho kālam akāsi*. “With longing,” *sāpekho*. Comy glosses as *sa,tanḥā*, “with craving” (SA 4:33).

³⁴ *Dukkḥā gahapati sāpekhasa kāla,kiriya*. For a similar remark, see **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 17,2.12.1/2:194), SD 36.12.

³⁵ Comy: That is, to marry again (AA 3:349).

³⁶ “I have observed celibacy,” *ahaṃ ... brahma,cariyaṃ samāciṇṇaṃ*, ie lived “the holy life” (*brahma,cariyā*). The 16 years here refer to the latter part of Nakula,mātā’s life. *Samāciṇṇa* is pastp of *samācarati*, “she had conducted herself, practised, behaved” but the context requires it to be rendered as present. It is possible that *brahma,cariya* here refers to chastity, meaning that she has been faithful to him.

2.5 (5) MEDITATION. Now, houselord, it might be that you think, ‘After I am gone, the houselady Nakula,mātā might not be an attainer of inner mental calm.’³⁷

Houselord, you should not see things that way. Houselord, for as long as there are the Blessed One’s white-clad female lay disciples who shall attain to inner mental calm, I am one amongst them.

If anyone should doubt or question this, let him go and ask the Blessed One who is residing in the Deer Park in the Bhesakaḷā Forest, at Suṃsumāra,giri in the Bhaggā country.

Therefore, houselord, do not have any longing at the time of dying. Painful is dying when you are with longing. The Blessed One disapproves of dying with longing.

2.6 (6) STREAMWINNING. Now, houselord, it might be that you think, ‘After I am gone, the houselady Nakula,mātā might not find a firm footing, a foothold, and solace in the Teaching and Discipline, might not be one who has crossed over doubt, gone beyond uncertainty, won full confidence, who, independent of others, dwells in the Teacher’s teaching.’³⁸

THE VESĀRAJJA PERICOPE

2.7 Houselord, you should not see things that way.

Houselord, for as long as there are the Blessed One’s white-clad female lay disciples who shall find a footing, a foothold, and solace in this Teaching and Discipline, crossed over doubt, gone beyond uncertainty,

won full confidence, who, independent of others, dwell in the Teacher’s teaching, I am one amongst them.³⁹

2.8 If anyone should doubt or question this, let him go and ask the Blessed One who is residing in the Deer Park in the Bhesakaḷā Forest at Suṃsumāra,giri in the Bhaggā country.

Therefore, houselord, do not have any longing at the time of dying. Painful is dying when you are with longing. The Blessed One disapproves of dying with longing.

3 Now, while, the houselord Nakula,pitā was being admonished in this manner by the houselady Nakula,mātā, **[298]** his illness subsided right there,⁴⁰ and the houselord Nakula,pitā recovered from his illness. That was how the houselord Nakula,pitā abandoned his illness.⁴¹

The Buddha’s praise

3.2 Then, not long after the houselord Nakula,pitā had recovered from his illness, he, leaning on a stick, went to see the Blessed One. Having saluted the Blessed One, he sat down at one side. Seated thus at one side, the Blessed One said this to the houselord Nakula,pitā:

³⁷ “Inner mental calm,” *ajjhataṃ ceto,samatha*, ie mental concentration for oneself.

³⁸ “Find a firm footing...in the Teacher’s teaching,” *imasmim dhamma,vinaye ogādha-p,pattā paṭigādha-p,pattā assāsa-p,pattā tiṇṇa,vicikicchā vigata,kathaṃ,kathā vesāraja-p,pattā apara-p,paccayā satthu sāsane viharantiyo*. This passage defines a streamwinner’s qualities. On *ogādha-p,pattā*, cf UA 345. On *ogādha-p,pattā paṭigādha-p,-pattā*, cf **Udakūpama S** (A 7.15(6)), where *paṭigādha-p,patta* recurs, SD 28.6. Also see SD 49.8 (7.5.3.6(4)).

³⁹ *Yāvata kho gahapati tassa bhagavato sāvikā gihī odāta,vasanā imasmim dhamma,vinaye ogādha-p,pattā paṭigādha-p,pattā assāsa-p,pattā tiṇṇa,vicikicchā vigata,kathaṃ,katā vesāraja-p,pattā apara-p,paccayā satthu,-sāsane viharanti, ahaṃ tāsam aññatarā*. On the certainty of streamwinning, see **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3(8).

⁴⁰ “Right there,” *ihānaso* (abl), also “immediately, at once, spontaneously, impromptu” (PED).

⁴¹ In **the Nakula,pitā S** (S 22.1), the Buddha instructs the old and infirm Nakula,pitā on how to keep the mind well despite an ailing body (S 22.1/3:1-5).

4 “It is your gain, your great gain, houselord, for you to have the houselady Nakula,mātā, compassionate, who desires your welfare, as your **advisor and instructor**.⁴²

4.2 Houselord, for as long as there are the white-clad female lay disciples of mine who shall fulfill **the precepts**, the houselady Nakula,mātā is one amongst them.

4.3 Houselord, for as long as there are the white-clad female lay disciples of mine who shall attain to **inner mental calm**, the houselady Nakula,mātā is one amongst them.

4.4 Houselord, for as long as there are the white-clad female lay disciples of mine who shall find a firm footing, a foothold, and solace in this Teaching and Discipline, cross over doubt, go beyond uncertainty,

win spiritual confidence, who, **independent of others**,⁴³ dwell in the Teacher’s teaching, the houselady Nakula,mātā is one amongst them.

4.5 It is your gain, your great gain, houselord, for you to have the houselady Nakula,mātā, compassionate, who desires your welfare, as your advisor and instructor.

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⁴² “Advisor and instructor,” *ovādikā anusāsanikā*.

⁴³ *Apara-p,paccayā*. Comy: “In regards to ~, one is said to be dependent on another when one’s attainment is on account of another, by faith in another; here the meaning is that one is without that dependence. One realizes the truth by applying one’s own virtue by way of these three factors,” ~ *ti para-p,paccayo vuccati para,saddhā para,-pattiyāyanā, tāya virahitā ti attho. Imehi tīhi aṅgehi attano guṇe ārabha saccakiriyaṃ akāsi* (AA 3:350; SnA 1:158). The “three factors” (*tīhi aṅgehi*) here, I suggest, refers to the breaking of the three fetters (self-identity view, attachment to rituals and vows, and spiritual doubt): see SD 19.1 (1.2). Also: “~ here means without another as support, that is, one’s wisdom is experienced directly for oneself, having attained it independent of others,” ~ *ti na para-p,paccayena, aññassa apattiyāyetvā attā,paccakkha,ñāṇam evassa ettha hoti ti* (AA 2:34). The term *apara-p,paccayā* usu refers to the attainment of streamwinning. For the attaining of arhathood, the phrase used is usu *sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā*. In either case, however, there is the clear sense of self-effort resulting in self-awakening: cf ~ *ti attanā-y’eva paññāya paccakkham katvā, apara-p,paccayam katvā ti attho* (AA 2:363). On self-realization “without faith in another” (*asaddha*), see **Pubba,koṭṭhaka S** (S 48.44/5:220-222), SD 10.7 (Sāriputta) & **Nigaṇṭha Nāta,putta S** (S 41.8/4:298-300), SD 40.7 (Citta Gaha,pati).