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Kaccāna,gotta Sutta

Kaccāyana,gotta Sutta The Discourse to Kaccā(ya)na,gotta | S 12.15

Theme: On being and non-being: what really is the middle way

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

1 Related suttas

1.1 The Kaccāna,gotta Sutta (S 12.15/2:17), **the Acela Kassapa Sutta** (S 12.17/2:20), **the Aññātara Brāhmaṇa Sutta** (S 12.46/2:75 f), **the (Sabba) Jāṇussoṇī Sutta** (S 12.47/ 2:76 f), and **the Lokāyatika Sutta** (S 12.48/2:77), all share the well known statement of the Buddha regarding the extremes of “all exists” (*sabbam atthi*) and “nothing exists” (*sabbarā n’atthi*), and of eternalism (*sassata*) and annihilationism (*uccheda*), and “not following either of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dharma by the middle” (*ete te ubho ante anupagamma majjhena tathāgato dhammā deseti*). The “middle” here refers to dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*).¹

1.2 This whole Sutta is quoted by Ānanda in **the Channa Sutta** (S 22.90/3:134 f) in his instruction of the arrogant elderly monk Channa who had become proud and domineering from his past role as the Bodhisatva’s charioteer. As a posthumous skillful means to rehabilitate Channa, the Buddha imposes the “supreme penalty” (*brahma,daṇḍa*) (D 2:154), that is, the Sangha totally boycotting him, until he decides to reform himself. This teaching, given by Ānanda to Channa (Comy says soon after the Buddha’s passing, SA 2:317), quotes the entire Kaccā(ya)na,gotta Sutta. At the end of Ānanda’s teaching, Channa declares that he has attained to the Dharma (*dhammo abhisameto*).²

1.3 THE PUPPHA SUTTA (S 22.94)

1.3.1 For a balanced approach, the Kaccā(ya)na,gotta Sutta should be studied with **the Puppha (or Vad-dha) Sutta** (S 22.94),³ which opens with this paragraph:

Monks, I do not quarrel with the world; rather, it is the world that quarrels with me. A proponent of the Dharma does not quarrel with anyone in the world. Of that which the wise in the world agree upon as not existing, I too say that it does not exist. And to that which the wise in the world agree upon as existing, I too say that it exists. (S 22.94.3/3:138)⁴

1.3.2 The Buddha goes on to explain that “what the wise in the world agree upon as not existing” is that the 5 aggregates are “permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change” (*niccā dhuvaṃ sassatā avi-*

¹ See **Dependent arising**, SD 5.12.

² **Vinaya** however says that immediately after Ānanda had announced and explained the supreme penalty to Channa at Ghosit’ārāma, near Kosambi, Channa collapsed in a faint. After his retreat he was awakened into arhat-hood and as such the penalty was automatically revoked (V 2:291). It is likely that **Channa S** (S 22.90) records the moments leading to his liberation (SD 56.5).

³ Interestingly, **Puppha S** (S 22.94/3:138-140) is located (just 3 short suttas apart) in the same book as **Channa S** (S 22.90/3:134 f), the Khandha Saṃyutta.

⁴ MA commenting on the Buddha’s similar words in reply to the haughty brahmin Daṇḍapāṇī in **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18,4/1:108) alludes to **Puppha S** (S 22.94). In **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9), the Buddha declares to the layman Citta that “these are merely names, expressions, turns of speech, designation in common use in the world, which the Tathāgata uses without misapprehending them.” (D 9,53/1:202).

pariṇāma,dhammāṃ) and that what the wise in the world agree as existing” is that the aggregates are “impermanent, suffering, subject to change” (*aniccāṃ dukkhaṃ vipariṇāma,dhammāṃ*).

1.3.3 In his translation of the Puppha Sutta, Bh Bodhi makes this helpful note:

This portion of the sutta [S 22.94,3/3:138 quoted] offers an important counterpoint to the message of the Kaccānagotta Sutta (12:15). Here the Buddha emphasizes that he does not reject all ontological propositions, but only those that transcend the bounds of possible experience. While the Kaccānagotta Sutta shows that the “middle teaching” excludes static, substantialist conceptions of existence and nonexistence, the present text shows that the same “middle teaching” can accommodate definite pronouncements about these ontological issues. The affirmation of the existence of the five aggregates, as impermanent processes, serves as a rejoinder to illusionist theories, which hold that the world lack real being. (S:B 1085 n185)

1.4 OTHER RELATED SUTTAS

1.4.1 The full standard version of dependent arising (with 12 links) given here is also found in such texts as **the (Paṭicca,samuppāda) Desanā Sutta** (S 12.1) and **the (Paṭicca,samuppāda) Vibhaṅga Sutta** (S 12.2).⁵

1.4.2 This Sutta should be studied with **the Lokāyatika Sutta** (S 12.48/2:77) where two pairs of extreme views are rejected: that all exist and that all do not exist, and that all is one and that all is plurality.⁶

1.4.3 The Buddha’s teaching on the origin and ending of the world (in terms of the 5 aggregates) is found in **the (Samuday’atṭhaṅgama) Loka Sutta** (S 12.44).⁷

2 Terminology

2.1 Two important terms in this Sutta are the abstract nouns *atthitā* (“is-ness”) and *n’atthitā* (“not-is-ness”), here rendered respectively as “existence” and “non-existence.” They are derived from the verbs *atthi* (it is, it exists) and *n’atthi* (it is not, it does not exist) respectively. However, *bhava* is also rendered as “existence.” However, both *atthi* and *bhava*, although they are verbs-to-be, come from different roots: the former from √AS, “to be”, the latter from √BHŪ, “to be.”

However, *atthitā* is the abstract notion of existence while *bhava* is the concrete individual existence in any of the three realms (sense sphere, form sphere and formless sphere). In fact, Nāgārjuna uses them as synonyms in his famous statement in **the Mūla,madhyamaka Kārikā** (see MK 15,7 below). Bodhi notes that

For the sake of marking the difference, *bhava* might have been rendered by “being” (as was done in [M:ÑB, *The Middle Length Sayings of the Buddha*], but this English word, I feel, is too broad (suggestive of “Being,” the absolute object of philosophical speculation) and does not sufficiently convey the sense of concreteness intrinsic to *bhava*. (Bodhi, S:B 735 n29)

⁵ On **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2), SD 5.11. For a detailed study of dependent arising, see SD 5.12.

⁶ S 12.48/2:77 (SD 17.15).

⁷ S 12.44/2:71-73 (SD 7.5).

2.2 Moreover, “mostly,” *yebhuyyena* [§4] refers to the ordinary beings, that is, those who are not the noble saints (*ariya, puggala*), who hold on to the extreme notions of either something exists (*atthitā*) (eternalism, *sassata*) or does not exist (*natthitā*) (annihilationism, *uccheda*) (SA 2:32). Bodhi suggests:

In view of these explanations it would be misleading to translate these two terms, *atthitā* and *natthitā*, simply as “existence” and “non-existence” and then to maintain (as is sometimes done) that the Buddha rejects all ontological notions as inherently invalid. The Buddha’s utterances at **S 22.94 [Puppha Sutta]**, see (1)], for example, show that he did not hesitate to make pronouncements with a clear ontological import when they were called for. In the present passage *atthitā* and *natthitā* are abstract nouns formed from the verbs *atthi* and *natthi*. It is thus the metaphysical assumptions implicit in such abstractions that are at fault, not the ascriptions of existence and nonexistence themselves. (S:B 734 n29; normalized)

Here I have followed Bodhi in rendering *atthitā* as “the notion of existence” and *n’atthitā* as “the notion of non-existence.”

3 On *nirodha*

The terms *samudaya* [5] and *nirodha* [5, 8] are commonly translated respectively as “origin” and “ending, cessation.” However, from the teachings of this Sutta, which underlies the Buddha’s Teaching as a whole, they are better rendered as “arising” and “non-arising.” **Payutto** makes an important note:

Generally speaking, the word ‘cease’ [or ‘end’] means to do away with something which has already arisen, or the stopping of something which has already begun. However, *nirodha* in the teaching of Dependent Origination (as also in *dukkhanirodha*, the third of the Noble Truths) means non-arising, or non-existence, of something because the cause of its arising is done away with. For example, the phrase ‘when *avijjā* is *nirodha*, *saṅkhārā* are also *nirodha*,’ which is usually taken to mean, “with the cessation of ignorance, volitional impulse cease,” in fact means that ‘when there is no ignorance, or no arising of ignorance, or when there is no longer any problem with ignorance, there is no volitional impulses, volitional impulses do not arise, or there is no longer any problem from volitional impulses.’ It does not mean that ignorance already arisen must be done away with before the volitional impulses which have already arisen will also be done away.

Where *nirodha* should be rendered as cessation is when it is used in reference to the natural way of things, or the nature of compounded things. In this sense it is a synonym for the words *bhaṅga* (breaking up), *anicca* (transient), *khaya* (cessation) or *vaya* (decay). For example, in the Pali it is given: *imaṃ kho bhikkhave tisso vedanā aniccā saṅkhatā paṭicasamuppannā khaya-dhammā vayadhammā virāgadhammā nirodhadhammā*—“Monks, these three kinds of feelings are naturally impermanent, compounded, dependently arisen, transient, subject to decay, dissolution, fading and cessation” [S 4:214]. (All factors occurring in the Dependent Origination cycle have the same nature.) In this instance, the meaning is “all conditioned things (*saṅkhāra*), having arisen, must inevitably decay and fade according to supporting factors.” There is no need [here] to try to stop them, they cease of themselves.

As for *nirodha* in the third Noble Truth (or the Dependent Origination cycle in cessation mode), although it also describes a natural process, its emphasis is on practical considerations. It is translated in two ways in the Visuddhimagga [Vism 16.18/495]. One way traces the etymology to *ni* (without) + *rodha* (prison, confine[s], obstacle, wall, impediment), thus rendering the meaning as “without impediment,” “free from confinement.” This is explained as “free of

impediments, that is, the confinement of *saṃsāra*.” Another definition traces the origin to *anuppāda*, meaning “not arising,” [and goes on to say “*nirodha* here does not mean *bhaṅga*, breaking up and dissolution.”]⁸

Therefore, translating *nirodha* as “cessation,” although not entirely wrong, is nevertheless entirely accurate. On the other hand, there is no other word which comes so close to the essential meaning as “cessation.” However, we should understand what is meant by the term.

(Payutto 1994:106-108; slightly edited. See also §8b n below)

4 Nāgārjuna

4.1 In chapter 15 of **the Mūla,madhyamaka Kārikā**, Nāgārjuna (late 2nd century CE) alludes to the early canon (here quoted in the Sanskrit with translation):

*kātyāyanāvavāde c’āstī ti nāstī ti cōbhyaṃ |
pratisiddham bhagavatā bhāvābhāva,vibhāvinā ||*

In the Admonition to Kātyāyana, the Blessed One,
Free from existence and non-existence, refuted both “it is” and “it is not.” (MK 15,7)

4.2 A K Warder points out that the use of the expression “**middle way**” is best exemplified in Nāgārjuna’s Mūla,madhyamaka Kārikā, where dependent arising appears to represent the “middle way” par excellence.⁹ In fact, the most frequently quoted and important canonical text for Nāgārjuna is apparently **the Nidāna Saṃyutta** (book 12 of the Saṃyutta Nikāya), especially the Kaccā(ya)na,gotta Sutta (S 12.15 quoted in **the (Dvi,lakkhaṇa) Channa Sutta**, S 22.90).¹⁰

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⁸ I have been unable to trace this bracketed reading in Visuddhi,magga.

⁹ A K Warder, “Is Nāgārjuna a Mahāyānist?” in *The Problem of Two Truths in Buddhism and Vedānta*, ed M Sprung, Dordrecht, 1973:79, 81. See also Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 2001:201 & Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness*, 1989:37.

¹⁰ See S 12.15/2:17 (SD 6.13) quoted at S 22.90/3:134 f (SD 56.5). For a discussion, see **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11) @ SD 1.1 (5).

Kaccā(ya)na,gotta Sutta

The Discourse to Kaccā(ya)na,gotta

S 12.15

1 [The Buddha was] residing near Sāvattḥī. [17]

2 Then the venerable Kaccā(ya)na,gotta approached the Blessed One, saluted him, sat down at one side.

Duality

3 Seated thus at one side, he said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, it is said, ‘Right view, right view.’ In what way, bhante, is there right view?”

4 ¹¹“This world, Kaccāna, mostly¹² depends upon a duality: upon (the notion of) **existence** and (the notion of) **non-existence**.¹³

5 But for one who sees **the arising¹⁴ of the world¹⁵** as it really is with right wisdom, there is no notion of non-existence regarding the world.

And for one who sees **the ending of the world** as it really is with right wisdom, there is no notion of existence regarding the world.¹⁶

6 This world, Kaccāna, is mostly bound by fixation [attachment], clinging and inclination.¹⁷

6.2 But this person (with right view) does not engage in, cling to, incline towards that fixation and clinging, the latent tendency that is mindset and inclination—he does not take a stand (that anything is) ‘my self’.¹⁸

¹¹ For a comy on these key passages (§§4-7) (similar to the fnn here), see SD 57.16 (1.2.1).

¹² “Mostly,” *yebhuyyena*, here refers to the ordinary beings or worldlings, except for the noble saints (*ariya, pug-gala*) who hold on to the extreme notions of either something exists (*atthitā*) (eternalism, *sassata*) or does not exist (*natthitā*) (annihilationism, *uccheda*) (SA 2:32). See (2.2).

¹³ Here, in rendering *atthitā* as “the notion of existence” and *n’atthitā* as “the notion of non-existence,” I have followed Bodhi, but they can also function as abstract nouns. See (2.1).

¹⁴ On the meaning of “world” (*loka*), see **Rohitassa S** (S 2.26) @ SD 7.2 (1).

¹⁵ On the tr of the terms *samudaya* and *nirodha* see Intro (3).

¹⁶ The 2 sentences of this verse are the two extremes rejected by the Buddha in **Lok’āyatika S** (S 12.48/2:77), SD 17.15, incl 2 more: that all is unity and that all is plurality. Comy: In terms of dependent arising, “the arising (or ‘origin’ of the world” is the direct conditionality (*anuloma paccayākāra*), “the ending of the world” is the reverse conditionality” (*paṭiloma paccayākāra*). Here the world refers to formations (*saṅkhāra*). In reflecting on the direct-order dependent arising, (seeing the rise of phenomena) one does not fall into the notion of annihilationism; reflecting on the reverse dependent origination, (seeing the ending of phenomena) one does not fall into the notion of eternalism. (SA 2:33). The Buddha’s teaching on the origin and ending of the world (in terms of the 5 aggregates) is found in **Loka S** (S 12.44/2:73 f), SD 7.5.

¹⁷ “Bound ... adherence,” PTS *upāy’upādānābhinivesa, vinibandha*, but preferred reading is Be Ce *upāy’upādānābhinivesa, vinibaddha* = *upāya* (attachment, fixation) + *upādāna* (clinging) + *abhinivesa* (inclination, mindset, adherence) + *vinibaddha* (bound, shackled) [alt reading *vinibandha*, bondage]. Comy: Each of the three—fixation, clinging, inclination [mindset]—arises by way of craving (*taṇhā*) and views (*diṭṭhi*), for it is through these that one fixates to, clings to, inclines to the phenomena of the 3 spheres as “I” and “mine.” (SA 2:33). These 3 words appear to be syns or near-syns of latent tendencies, but I have rendered them in order of their subtlety (fixation, clinging, inclination [mindset]). See S:B 736 n31.

¹⁸ “But this ... ‘My self’,” *tañ cāyaṃ upāy’upādānaṃ cetaso adhiṭṭhānaṃ abhinivesānusayaṃ na upeti na upādīyati nādhiṭṭhati* “attā me” ti. Comy: Craving and views are called “mental standpoint” (*cetaso adhiṭṭhana*) because

6.3 He has neither uncertainty nor doubt that what arises is only suffering arising, what ceases is only suffering ceasing.¹⁹ His knowledge about this is independent of others.²⁰

Even to that extent, Kaccāna, there is right view.

7 ‘Everything is [all exists] (*sabbam atthi*),’²¹ Kaccāna, this is one extreme.²² ‘Everything is not [all does not exist] (*sabbam n’atthi*),’ this is the other (second) extreme.²³

The middle way: dependent arising

7.2 Without resorting to either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches **the teaching by the middle**.²⁴

8	<i>Avijjā, paccayā</i>	<i>saṅkhārā</i>	With ignorance as condition, there are volitional formations; ²⁵
	<i>saṅkhāra, paccayā</i>	<i>viññāṇaṃ</i>	with volitional formations as condition, there is consciousness;
	<i>viññāṇa, paccayā</i>	<i>nāma, rūpaṃ</i>	with consciousness as condition, there is name-and-form;
	<i>nāma, rūpa, paccayā</i>	<i>sa’āyatanaṃ</i>	with name-and-form as condition, there are the 6 sense-bases;
	<i>sa’āyatana, paccayā</i>	<i>phassa</i>	with the sixfold sense-base as condition, there is contact;
	<i>phassa, paccayā</i>	<i>vedanā</i>	with contact as condition, there is feeling;
	<i>vedanā, paccayā</i>	<i>taṇhā</i>	with feeling as condition, there is craving;
	<i>taṇhā, paccayā</i>	<i>upādānaṃ</i>	with craving as condition, there is clinging;
	<i>upādāna, paccayā</i>	<i>bhava</i>	with clinging as condition, there is existence;
	<i>bhava, paccayā</i>	<i>jāti</i>	with existence as condition, there is birth;
	<i>jāti, paccayā</i>	<i>jarā, maraṇaṃ</i>	with birth as condition there arise decay and death,
	<i>soka, parideva, dukkha, domanass’-</i>		sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair.
	<i>upāyasā sambhavanti</i>		
	<i>evam-etassa kevalassa dukkha-k,-</i>		—Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.
	<i>khandhassa samudayo hoti</i>		

they are the foundation for the (unwholesome) mind, and “the latent tendency of mindset (and inclination),” or perhaps “the latent tendency that is mindset and inclination” (*abhinivesānusaya*) because they stay in the mind and lie latent there (SA 2:33). This is a difficult sentence, and I am guided by the sutta spirit than the letter. See S:B 736 n32. Cf **Hālidakāni S 1** (S 22.3,9/3:10), SD 10.12.

¹⁹ Comy: Suffering (*dukkha*) here refers to the 5 aggregates of clinging. What the noble disciple sees, when he reflects on his own existence, is not a self or a substantially existent person but only the arising and passing away of causal conditions (*paccay’uppanna, nirodha*) (of dependent arising) (SA 2:33). Cf **Selā’s** verses (S 548-551*/1:134), SD 102.12, & **Vajirā’s** verses (S 553-555*/1:135), SD 102.13.

²⁰ “Independent of others,” *apara-p, paccayā*. From streamwinning on, the noble disciple sees the truth of the Dharma by himself, and as such is not dependent on anyone else, not even the Buddha, for his insight into the Dharma. However, he may still approach the Buddha or an awakened teacher for instructions and guidance in meditation until he attains liberation himself.

²¹ On the 2 “notions” in this sentence, see (2).

²² *Sabbam atthīti kho kaccāyana ayam eko anto*.

²³ *Sabbam natthīti ayam dutiyo anto*.

²⁴ “The teaching by the middle,” *majjhena dhamma*.

²⁵ Comy: When it is said, “With ignorance as condition, there are volitional formations,” the meaning should be understood thus: “It is ignorance and it is a condition; hence ‘ignorance-as-condition’ (*avijjā ca sā pacayā cā ti avijjā, paccayā*). Through that ignorance-as-condition, volitional formations come to be (*tasmā avijjā, paccayā saṅkhārā sambhavanti*)” (SA 2:9 f). Bodhi: “This explanation suggests that the verb **sambhavanti**, which in the text occurs only at the end of the whole formula, should be connected to each proposition, thus establishing that each conditioned state arises through its condition. The twelve terms of the formula are treated analytically in [**Vibhaṅga S**].” (S:B 725 n1)

8.2

*Avijjāya tv-eva asesa, virāga, nirodhā
saṅkhāra, nirodho
saṅkhāra, nirodhā viññāṇa, nirodho
viññāṇa, nirodhā nāma, rūpa, nirodho
nāma, rūpa, nirodhā saḷāyatana, nirodho
saḷāyatana, nirodhā phassa, nirodho
phassa, nirodhā vedanā, nirodho
vedanā, nirodhā taṇhā, nirodho
taṇhā, nirodhā upādāna, nirodho
upādāna, nirodhā bhava, nirodho
bhava, nirodhā jāti, nirodho
jāti, nirodhā jarā, maraṇam
soka parideva, dukkha, -
domanass' upāyasā nirujjhanti
evam-etassa kevalassa dukkha-k, -
khandhassa nirodho hoti*

But with the remainderless fading away and ending of ignorance, volitional formations end,²⁶ with the ending of volitional formations, consciousness ends, with the ending of consciousness, name-and-form ends, with the ending of name-and-form, the 6 sense-bases end, with the ending of the 6 sense-bases, contact ends, with the ending of contact, feeling ends, with the ending of feeling, craving ends, with the ending of craving, clinging ends, with the ending of clinging, existence ends, with the ending of existence, birth ends, with the ending of birth, there end decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair.

—Such is the ending of this whole mass of suffering.²⁷ [18]

— evaṃ —

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²⁶ Payutto, in the context of the quote in Intro (3) above, suggests that the reverse (cessation) cycle of dependent arising might be better rendered as: “being free of ignorance, there is freedom from volitional impulses ... ,” or “when ignorance is gone, volitional impulses are gone ... ,” or “when ignorance is no longer a problem, volitional impulses are no longer a problem.” (1994:107). See (3).

²⁷ Comy: By “ending” (*nirodha*) in all these phrases nirvana is meant. For all those phenomena end in dependence on nirvana, and therefore the latter is spoken of as their ending. Thus, in this sutta, the Blessed One teaches the round of existence (*vaṭṭa*) and the ending of the round (*vivaṭṭa*) by 12 phrases and brought the discourse to a climax in arhathood (SA 2:18). [3]