10

(Aṭṭhaka) Mūlaka Sutta
The (Eights) Discourse on the Rooted | A 8.83
Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta The Discourse on “What is the Root?”
Theme: The nature of all things (in brief)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2010

1 Key teaching and related suttas

1.1 KEY TEACHING

1.1.1 The Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta (A 8.83) is a short teaching on the essence of early Indian ontology, the philosophy of being (existence and reality), especially as envisaged by non-Buddhist wanderers, and the Buddha’s response to it. The Sutta opens with the Buddha asking the monks whether they know how to answer 8 questions that sectarian wanderers like to ask [§1]. The monks reply no [§2]. The Buddha begins teaching by restating the 8 questions [§3], and then answering them [§4], thus:

THE SECTARIANS’ 10 QUESTIONS:¹
(1) In what are all things [states] rooted? kiṁ mūlakā, āvuso, sabbe dhammā
(2) In what are all things born? kiṁ sambhavā sabbe dhammā
(3) In what do all things arise? kiṁ samudayā sabbe dhammā
(4) In what do all things converge? kiṁ samosaranā sabbe dhammā
(5) What is the leader of all things? kiṁ pamukkā sabbe dhammā
(6) What is the lord of all things? kiṁ adhipateyyā sabbe dhammā
(7) What is superior in all things? kiṁ uttarā sabbe dhammā
(8) What is the essence of all things? kiṁ sārā sabbe dhamma.

THE BUDDHA’S 10 ANSWERS TO THEM:
(1) All things [states] are rooted in desire. chanda, mūlakā, āvuso, sabbe dhammā
(2) All things are born in attention. manasikāra, sambhavā sabbe dhammā
(3) All things arise through contact. phassa, samudayā sabbe dhammā
(4) All things converge in feeling. vedanā, samosaranā sabbe dhammā
(5) All things have concentration as their leader. samādhi-p, pamukkā sabbe dhammā
(6) All things have mindfulness as their lord. sat’ādhipateyyā sabbe dhammā
(7) In all things, wisdom is superior. paññ’uttarā sabbe dhammā
(8) Of all things, freedom is the essence. vimutti, sārā sabbe dhammā

Alternatively, we can translate these 8 sentences as follows:
(1) Rooted in desire are all things [states].
(2) Born in attention are all things.
(3) Arisen through contact are all things.
(4) Converging in feeling are all things.
(5) Concentration is the leader of all things.
(6) Mindfulness is the lord of all things.
(7) Wisdom is superior in all things.
(8) Freedom is its essence of all things.

¹ Kiṁ Mūlaka S (A 8.83) has only the first 8 questions; the full list of 10 questions appears in Bhagavā Mūlaka S (A 10.58/5:106 f), SD 67.4.
1.1.2 Characteristically, the answers here are unelaborated, but explanations or instructive contexts are found elsewhere, such as in the Majjhima and the Saṁyutta Nikāyas. We shall examine a few key suttas related to the Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta below. A fuller commentary of these questions and answers have been given in the translation of the Bhagavā Mūlaka Sutta (A 10.58) in SD 57.20b.

1.2 Significance of the Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta teaching

1.2.1 The well known Sinhala monk teacher, Katukurunde ṇāṇananda, in the 2nd volume of his Nibbāna — The mind stilled, insightfully discusses the significance of this Sutta (2004:76-92). His insights have been summarized here and inspired further thought. Firstly, ṇāṇananda states that the Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta preserves a list of questions that relate to common views of the non-Buddhists, especially the brahmins. Such sectarian ideas relate to philosophical and religious theory, such as ontology (the eternal soul view and “thinghood” or the essence of things, thingness), and cosmology (that everything came from Brahmā, and self is the essence of everything). As such questions are highly speculative, it is difficult for the monks, especially the unawakened ones, to answer them. The Sutta teaches these monks on how to answer such questions.

1.2.2 ṇāṇananda adds that the early commentators have missed out on such deep dimensions and vital developments, and have merely “narrowed down the meaning of the set of answers recommended by the Buddha by limiting its application to wholesome mental states,” such as in Dīgha Porāṇa ṭīkā (ancient sub-commentary) (2004:77). [2.3]

Więodana’s discussion highlights another interesting and important aspect of early Buddhism, that is, its use of non-technical language, which we shall examine below [2].

1.3 Related Suttas

1.3.0 While A 8.83—the wanderers’ 8 questions—centre on a general philosophy of “all things,” A 9.14 lists 9 questions and answers, centering on a psychology of “intentions and thoughts” (saṅkappa, vitakka), while A 10.58 has 10 questions centering on an ontology of “all things” (sabbe dhammā), which is also a comprehensive catechism on early Buddhist teleology (spiritual purpose and goal) and soteriology (salvation, that is, awakening), summarized by the Buddha himself.³

1.3.1 The wanderers’ questions (A 8.83), SD 32.10

1.3.1.1 The 8 questions of the sectarian wanderers reflect a broad interest in the nature of existence and being. Interestingly, we can see that these wanderers have asked some key questions—ranging from the “roots” of all things to their essence—and seem to agree on some common answers. While in A 8.83’s 1st wanderer’s question asks, “In what are all things rooted?” with the Buddha’s answer as “desire,” in A 9.14 Sāriputta’s first asks about the basis (ārammaṇa), that is, the mental roots, for “intentions and thoughts,” and Samiddhi rightly answers that it is “name-and-form.”

However, there seems to be as many diversified interpretations to these answers as there are wandering teachers. Even then, their answers do not go beyond “freedom” (vimutti), a broad undefined term. The wanderer’s question seems very broad, referring to thought in general, while Sāriputta’s question—as clarified by the Commentary [§2(1) n]—about thought as intention.

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² ṇāṇananda quotes only DAṬ 1:138; but see also AA 4:158 (which glosses sabbe dhammā as the 5 aggregates), AA 5:41 (which says that the Sutta relates to the final attaining of remainderless nirvana).

³ For details, see SD 57.20b (1.3.1) Comparative table of the 3 sets of questions; (1.3.2) A comparative analysis.
1.3.1.2 The 2nd wanderer’s question (A 8.83), clearly followings from the 1st question, is about what happens when we think: “In what are all things born?” Answer: “Attention.” Again, this is a general answer. Sāriputta’s 2nd question (A 9.14) specifically asks about “Where they (thoughts and intentions) become diversified?” Samiddhi answers: In the elements.

Our thoughts and intentions take different forms and directions in terms of what we are, that is, the 4 elements, earth, water, fire and wind. This is the same as saying that our mental faculties (nāma) explodes into “mental proliferation” (papañca)—all kinds of thoughts and emotions—in their reactions to the 4 elements as form (rūpa). This is simply another way of talking about “name-and-form,” as in Sāriputta’s 1st question.\(^5\)

1.3.1.3 Questions 3-8 are identical with identical answers in both the wanderers’ questions (A 8.83) and Sāriputta’s questions (A 9.14). The wanderers’ questions stop at no, which again broadly refers to “the essence of all things” as freedom. From Sāriputta’s 9th and last question, we know that this “freedom” refers specifically to nirvana.\(^6\)

Another point is clear: it shows that the list of questions is not merely about wholesome and unwholesome states (as construed by the Commentaries), but covers a much wider perspective. [2.3]

1.3.2 The (Navaka) Samiddhi Sutta (A 9.14), SD 57.20a

1.3.2.1 As we have already noted, the (Aṭṭhaka) Mūlaka Sutta (A 8.83) lists only 8 questions of the sectarian wanderers [1]. The (Navaka) Samiddhi Sutta (A 9.14) records Sāriputta’s 9 questions that he asks the monk Samiddhi regarding “intentions and thoughts” (saṅkappa vitakka), who answers them correctly, winning Sāriputta’s endorsement, praise, and advice (SD 57.20a).

1.3.2.2 Here is a comparative table of the 2 sets of questions, that is, the wanderers’ 8 questions from the Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta (A 8.83) and Sāriputta’s 9 questions from the (Navaka) Samiddhi Sutta (A 9.14):\(^7\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) in what are all things rooted (mūlaka)? desire (chanda)</td>
<td>(1) the basis (ārammaṇa) for intentions + thoughts: name-and-form (nāma, rūpa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) in what are all things born (sambhava)? attention (manasikāra)</td>
<td>(2) where they become diversified (nānatta) the elements (dhōtu)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) in what do all thing arise (samudaya)? contact (phassa)</td>
<td>(3) from what they arise (samudaya) contact (phassa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) in what do all thing converge (samosaraṇa)? feeling (vedanā)</td>
<td>(4) in what they converge (samosaraṇa) feeling (vedanā)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) the leader of all things (pamukha) concentration (samādhi)</td>
<td>(5) what is their leader (pamukha) concentration (samādhi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) the lord (ādhipateyya) of all things mindfulness (satī)</td>
<td>(6) what lords (ādhipateyya) over them mindfulness (satī)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) the superior (uttara) to all things wisdom (paññā)</td>
<td>(7) the superior (uttara) wisdom (paññā)</td>
</tr>
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\(^4\) See Madhu,piṇḍika S (M 18), SD 6.14 (2); SD 57.1 (2.4.2.3).
\(^5\) On this answer, cf SD 57.20a (1.2.2.1).
\(^6\) For further discussion on this, and Sāriputta’s 9th and last question, see SD 57.20b (1.3), on a comparative analysis of the questions and answers in A 8.83, A 9.14 and A 10.58.
\(^7\) For a comparison of these with the Buddha’s 10 questions, see Bhagavā Mūlaka S (A 10.58), SD 57.20b (1.3).
1.3.3 Bhagavā Mūlaka Sutta (A 10.58), SD 57.20b

Another sutta that is closely related to the 2 suttas mentioned—A 8.83 and A 9.14—is the Bhagavā Mūlaka Sutta (A 10.58) which has 10 questions [1.1], with the Buddha’s own answers to them, giving the full and final resolution of them (SD 57.20b). [1.2.1]

A 8.83 (8 questions) is, in fact, expanded into A 10.58 (10 questions). The last 2 questions found only in the latter are as follows:

(9) What is the firm footing for all things?
(10) What is the complete ending for all things?

and their answers:

(9) All things find a firm footing in the deathfree,
(10) All things find complete ending in nirvāna,

2 A grammar of spirituality

2.1 Simplicity of early Buddhist texts

The language and ideas of the early Buddhist texts, like all true teachings of the heart, are remarkably simple. Only rarely do we find technical terms, like those that appear in the Commentaries and later writings. This is not to say that the teachings are simplistic; on the contrary, underlying the surface simplicity of the early teachings lie profound yet practical wisdom vital for our personal and spiritual growth.

Although the sutta structure is often that of a ring composition, and where it is repetitive, it is very much like a computer programme, the sutta content itself—the story, the teaching, or both—is rich in its own way. It is always that a word has a fixed sense in the early texts. Often there are metaphors, wordplays, humour and other images, whose sense we need to tease out. Sometimes, a word is used in one sense at the beginning of the sutta, but takes on a different one at the end of it.

In short, we need to comprehend the sutta’s context: how the words, expressions, images or teachings are used, or their import. And when we comprehend how these various contexts are linked, we have a better taste of the essence of the Buddha Dharma.

2.2 Words in context

Andrew Olendzki, an insightful Buddhist scholar and practitioner of our times, reminds us with these sobering words:

As words become more widely used, and especially as they become fashionable, they may often become more difficult to understand. One might think it would be the other way around, but this obfuscation of meaning has generally been the rule with the popularization of Buddhist

8 A 10.58/5:106 f, SD 67.4. For a comparative table of the teachings of A 8.83, A 9.14 and A 10.58, see SD 57.20b (Table 1.3).
vocabulary. While each had a precise technical meaning in its original context, terms like zen, yoga, karma, and nirvana can mean almost anything the modern writer wants them to mean. A similar trend may well be underway with mindfulness, and perhaps even with the more general word meditation. Understanding the sense in which these words are used in their original setting should prove to be a worthwhile undertaking as we see them applied in the current creative encounter between psychology and Buddhist thought. (Andrew Olendzki 2009:37)

Olendzki’s remark that, in early Buddhism, words have each “a precise technical meaning in its original context” reflects a similar awareness that Ñāṇarama admonishes us to cultivate. Let us take a step back, and find out what is it that prompted Ñāṇarama’s remark in the first place.

As already stated, the Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta records the Buddha’s statement against the views of an abiding soul and essence of things prevalent in his times, especially amongst the brahmins. But, sadly, Ñāṇananda notes of the Sutta, its traditional commentators seem to have ignored the deeper philosophical dimensions of the above questions. They have narrowed down the meaning of the set of answers recommended by the Buddha by limiting its application to wholesome states.10 The occurrence of such terms as chanda, sati, samādhi, and paññā, had probably led them to believe that the entire questionnaire is on the subject of wholesome mental states. But this is a serious underestimation of the import of the entire discourse. It actually does far deeper in laying bare a basic principle governing both skillful and unskillful mental states. (Ñāṇananda 2004:77)

Even the very first two verses of the Dhammapada reminds us that there are two sides to a situation or idea, that is to say, unwholesome and wholesome can be said of it. For, the mind precedes mental states; the mind is their chief, mind-made are they ( mano, pubbaṅgāmā dhammā, mano, sethā mano, mayā ) (Dh 1+2). If we act with an evil mind, evil will follow; if we act with a good heart, good will follow.

If we examine the 8 answers given by the Buddha [§4], we will see them in the same light—that is, they refer to both the unwholesome and the wholesome aspects; or at least they do not refer only to one aspect, as the commentarial tradition would have it.

2.3 COMMENTARIAL NARROWNESS

2.3.1 The later works, such as the Attha,sālinī (the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī commentary), for example, always takes chanda in an exclusively wholesome sense, that is, as kusala chanda, “wholesome desire” or “desire in the wholesome,” or kattu,kamyatā chanda, “desire to act.”11 Sati (mindfulness), wherever it occurs, is taken as sammā, sati (right mindfulness).12 But, as we shall see, this is only half the story at best.

The Buddha’s answer to the 1st question, “In what are all things rooted?” is that they are “rooted in desire” ( chanda,mūlaka ). The tone of chanda here is clearly neutral or multivalent, that is, it can refer to either wholesome desire or unwholesome lust, depending on its context. Chanda is clearly negative when it is connected with craving and suffering, such as follows:13

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10 Ñāṇananda quotes only DAṬ 1:138; but see also AA 4:158 (which glosses sabbe dhammā as the 5 aggregates); AA 5:41 (which says that the Sutta relates to the final attaining of remainderless nirvana).

11 Dhs 269/56, 529/108; DhsA 250. Dhs 1097/195, however, mentioned kāma-c, chanda (desire for sense-pleasure), which is unwholesome. See Dhs:R 4 n2.

12 VbhA 289. VbhA:Ñ 1991:1 even translates chanda as “zeal.”

13 On chanda, see Kāma-c, chanda, SD 32.2 (1.1).

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• **kāma-c, chanda** “desire for sense-pleasures” (a mental hindrance) (M 10.36/1:60),

• **chanda, rāga** “lustful desire” (DA 3:988; MA 3:146) or “lust and desire” (S 35.232/4:163),

• **chanda, ja agha** “misery born of desire” (S 1.34/1:22).

2.3.2 Furthermore, chanda arises as a negative mental state with regards to what we see as desirable and cling to, for example,

- the body,  
  kāyasmiṁ chando  
  S 47.37/5:181

- sense-objects,  
  rūpesu chando ...  
  S 35.246/4:195

- sexuality,  
  methunasmiṁ chando  
  Sn 835

- the world we live in,  
  lokasmiṁ chando  
  Sn 866

- our continued existence.  
  bhave chandaṁ  
  Thi 14

However, when chanda is rooted in any of the 3 wholesome roots (non-greed, non-hate, non-delusion), it said to be motivated by a wholesome mind (kusala, citta). Once moved by such a wholesome state, we have the desire (chanda) to arouse and direct our efforts to letting go of the bad we have been doing, to keep on avoiding it, to cultivate good, and maintain it.15 Here, chanda is clearly a word for right effort (sammā vāyāma). The Commentaries regard this as a wholesome desire (kusala-c, chanda),16 a spiritual desire (or Dharma-moved desire, dhamma-c, chanda),17 the desire (or will) to create wholesome states.18

2.3.3 On a more intense level, chanda (as enthusiasm or the desire to act), together with energy (viriya), mind (citta), that is, mental concentration, and investigation (vīmāna), are the predominant support (ādhipateyya paccaya)19 in the cultivation of good (kusala) in the mundane sphere, culminating in the bases of spiritual power (iddhi, pāda)20 in the supramundane sphere.

2.4 The (Kosambī) Unnābha Sutta (S 51.15) is an important study in the right understanding of the term chanda (desire).21 The discourse opens with the brahmin Unnābha asking Ānanda, “What, master Ānanda, is the purpose of holy life lived under the recluse Gotama?” Ānanda answers that “It is for the sake of abandoning desire (chanda-p, pahān’attham).”

Then the brahmin asks again on how to abandon this desire. Ānanda replies that desire is abandoned by cultivating the “basis of success that possesses concentration due to desire (chanda) and volitional formations of striving.”22 Ānanda is, of course, referring to the first of the four paths of spiritual power or bases for true success (iddhi, pāda), which he goes on to list.

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14 See Kāma-c, chanda, SD 32.10 (1.2.3).

15 These are the 4 right efforts: see Mahā Sakul’udāyi S (M 77.16/2:11; A 9.82/4:462).

16 We find kusale dhamme chanda (Be We) or kusala, dhamma-c, chanda (Ce Ee Se) in Pātubhāva S (A 6.96/3:441), SD 63.9. See PmA 1:168; VvA 116; DhsA 289, 370.

17 Dhamma-c, chanda is a canonical term: see Saññā Nānattā S (S 14.7) where it means “desire for mental state(s)” (S 14.7/2:143), SD 17.5. See also PmA 1:168; VvA 116; DhsA 289, 370.

18 Kusala dhammesu kattu, kamyatā dhamma, dhamma-c, chanda, NmA 1:17. Such a process is the 12-step learning process described in Ćaṅkī S (M 95), where the 9th step is where “desire for mindfulness arises” (sati chanda jāyati) (M 95.20/2:173 f) & SD 21.15 (5). See also MA 3:14.

19 Vbh 288; DhsA 359.

20 Ćakka, vatti Siha, nāda S (D 26,28/3:77), SD 36.10; Mahā Sakul’udāyi S (M 77,17/2:11), SD 49.5; Iddhi, pāda Vi-bhāṅga S (S 51.20/5:276-281), SD 28.14.

21 S 51.15/5:271-273, SD 10.10.

22 “Volitional formations of strivings” (padhūna, saṅkhūra), according to Comy, is a name for energy that accomplishes the fourfold function of right striving (SA 3:255; PmA 4:343 f; VbhA 306 f).
This, however, only puzzles the brahmin, who thinks that “the situation without an end,” that desire can end desire. Uṇṇābha thinks that this is a circular argument (we are assuming what we are trying to prove) where one desire overcomes another, but a desire would still remain. Of course, this would be the problem, if both occurrences of chanda have the same sense, that is, connote the same idea. However, a close study of Ānanda’s reply shows that the sense of chanda depends on the context. To clarify this vital point—that chanda (desire) must be understood in its right context—Ānanda uses a simple analogy: “What do you think, brahmin, did you earlier have a desire, ‘I will go to the park,’ and after you have gone to the park, did the said desire subside?” The brahmin answers yes. It is then that Uṇṇābha sees that chanda he has in mind refers to “unwholesome desire,” while the chanda of the iddhi, pāda, which Ānanda speaks of, is a type of chanda whose purpose is for the abandoning craving. In other words, when we say, “I desire to remove desire,” the former is positive insofar as its purpose is to remove the latter, which is negative desire.

2.5 WHEN DELIGHT IS GOOD

2.5.1 Desiring the good

A similar theme occurs in the (Tahā) Bhikkhuṇī Sutta (A 4.159), where Ānanda admonishes a love-struck nun (she had fallen in lust for Ānanda) on how “craving should be abandoned by craving” (taṇhaṁ nissāya taṇhā pahātabbā). That is to say, by our craving for nirvana, we overcome the craving for sense-pleasure. Ānanda explains that on hearing that someone has attained arhathood, we would also be inspired to do so. Such a desire is of course wholesome.

Indeed, even nirvana itself is sometimes referred to as “desirable” (rata), the adjective of ratī, “delight.” The Dhammapada declares that “the disciple of the fully self-awakened | delights in the destruction of craving” (taṇha-k, khaya, rato hoti | sammā, sambuddha, sāvako) (Dh 187cd). Although ratī usually has a negative sense, here it is used in a positive way.

2.5.2 When killing is good

The Chetva Sutta (S 11.21) records a similar case where a negative word is taken in a positive way. It is said that Shakra, the leader of the 33 Devas, asks the Buddha this question, followed by the answer:

939    Kiṁsu chetvā sukhaṁ seti
kiṁsu chetvā na socati
kissassu eka, dhammassa
vadhaṁ rocesi gotamā tī.

[The Blessed One:]

940    Kodhaṁ chetvā sukhaṁ seti
kodhaṁ chetvā na socati
kodhassa visa, mūlassa,
madhur’aggassa vāsava
vadhaṁ ariyā posaṁsanti

Having killed what does one sleep well?
Having killed what does one not sorrow?
Of which one thing,
Gotama, that you approve of killing?


23 For the detailed argument, see (Kosambi) Uṇṇābha S (S 51.15,7-10/5:272 f), SD 10.10.
24 A 4.159/2:144-146 (SD 10.14).
Here, the word chetvā (having killed, slain) is the absolutive of chinḍati (he kills, slays).25 The figu-
Rative sense here is clear enough. Evil should be removed, and in doing so, it is a wholesome act, as it brings
about happiness and liberation.

2.5.3 Spiritual restlessness

Another negative term which is sometimes used in a positive sense is uddhacca, “restlessness,” one
of the five mental hindrances.26 More specifically, it appears as dhamm’uddhacca, “Dharma-moved rest-
lessness” or “spiritual restlessness.” It makes a significant appearance in the (Yuganaddha) Paṭipadā
Sutta (A 4.170), where it refers to restlessness in its description of one of the ways to attain final libera-
tion.27 According to this discourse, we can reach the path that leads to final liberation when the mind is
under the influence of dhamm’uddhacca, that is, restlessness related to the Dharma. Once the mind
settles down and becomes focussed, the path is attained.

The commentary on this passage and the Paṭisambhidhā, magga explains that this description refers
to the arising of radiance (obhāsa), one of the 10 imperfections of insight.28 Not understanding this to
be an imperfection and failing to notice its impermanent nature then leads to the arising of restlessness.
An alternative interpretation is to take dhamm’uddhacca as referring to “mental distress brought on by
eagerness to realize the Dhamma, a state of spiritual anxiety that sometimes can precipitate an instant-
aneous enlightenment experience.”29 An example of this is the case of Bāhiya Dāru, ciriya’s awakening (U
1.10).30

Interestingly, we can see dhamm’uddhacca in terms referring to spiritual evolution, such as nekham-
masita domanassa, “pain [sorrow] of renunciation.” In the Saḷāyatana Vibhaṅga Sutta (M 13), this kind
of pain, a mental discomfort, allows the renunciant to overcome the “pain of household life,” that is, the
vicissitudes of lay life.31 This pain of renunciation, in turn, is the restlessness arising from the desire to
attain nirvana. In a sense, negative as it may be, it is a sign of something good. With its subsidence, we
go on to realize a higher spiritual level.

2.6 Good words with bad sense

Just as some words usually taken in a bad sense can be used to convey a positive way, the reverse,
too, is true: a good word or expression can have a bad connotation, depending on the context. We are
familiar with words like sati (mindfulness) and samādhi (concentration) being used in their good senses.
Yet we do have many cases of micchā sati (wrong mindfulness) and micchā samādhi (wrong concentra-
tion).32 Hence, we need to examine the context carefully to ensure we rightly understand its intention.

25 Cf Dh 46c. More commonly, chinḍati has the sense of “he cuts off” (Dh 283c, 346c, 347c, 369c, 397a, 398a).
26 See Uddhacca,kukkucca, SD 32.7 (2.1.4).
27 A 4.170.5/2:157 = SD 41.5.
28 Vipassanāpakkilesa, viz (1) (radiance obhāsa), knowledge (ñāṇa), zest (pītī), tranquility (passaddhi), joy (sukha),
resolution (adhimokkha), exertion (paggaha), assurance (upatthāna), equanimity (upekkhā), and attachment (ni-
kantī). These imperfections arise only in a beginner to meditation, or one inexperienced, not a saint who has attain-
ed the truth. For explanations, see Vism 20.105-130/633-638; also AA 3:143; Pm 2:100.
30 U 1.10/8, SD 33.7. See also Uddhacca,kukkucca, SD 32.7 (2.2.2).
31 See Saḷāyatana Vibhaṅga S (M 137,12+13/3:218 f @ SD 29.5).
32 Pāyāsi S (D 23,31/2:353), Saṅgīti S (D 33,3.1(1)/3:254), Das’uttara S (D 34,2.1(4)/3:286, 34,2.3(4)/3:290,34,-
2.9(3)/3:291), Dvedha Vitakka S (M 19,26/1:118), Vammika S (M 23,4/1:144), Mahā Cattārīsaka S (M 117,35/3:77),
Bhūmija S (M 126,9/3:140); Āṭṭh’āṅgika S (S 14,28/2:168), Das’arīga S (S 14,29/2:168), (Thina,middhā) Tissa S (S
22,84/3:109), Avijjā S (S 45,1.5/1), (Pubb’āngamā) Avijjā S (S 45,11/5:12), Vihāra S 2 (S 45,12/5:13), Kuṅkūṭ’ārāma S
1 (S 45,18/5:16 f), Micchatta S (S 45,21/5:17 f), Akusala Dhamma S (S 45,22/5:18), Paṭipadā S 1 (S 45,23/5:18), Paṭipadā
S 2 (S 45,24/5:18 f), Asappurisa S 1 (S 45,25/5:19 f), Asappurisa S 2 (S 45,26/5:20), Paṭipatti S 1 (S 45,31/5:23),
All these interesting discussions show how words in the early texts serve as the tools of spiritual change. Although early Buddhism has a huge scripture, it is not a religion of the book. Seekers are often warned of not being trapped by words, of seeing the forest despite the tree, and yet to cut down the forest, but not the tree. For our present purposes, we should understand the meaning of chanda in this spirit, and this spirit should similarly prevail in our understanding of the other key terms of the Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta, which we shall now turn to.

3 The way of all things

3.1 Now that we have a better picture of the nature of language, text and context in early Buddhism, we are ready to examine the message of the Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta more closely and thoroughly. The Buddha begins his answer by stating “Rooted in desire, avuso, are all thing” [§4]. Ñāṇananda makes us of an instructive figure—the parable of the gem in the rubbish heap (but I have given it a slightly different interpretation).

A man approaches a rubbish heap (a unitary notion) to dispose of it. Suddenly, he sees a gem: it becomes his object of desire and interest. The gem has emerged from what is earlier taken to be a rubbish heap, but his focus is now the gem, which becomes everything, “all things,” to him at that moment. Rooted in desire are all things.

3.2 The man’s desire forces him to direct his attention totally to the gem. Now what is “attention” (manasikāra) here? The texts often define attention as the directing of the mind to “a sign and its details” (nimitta anuvyañjana). The Commentaries say that “sign” (nimitta) here refers to a grasping arising through one’s sensual lust (chanda, rāga, vasena) or on account of merely one’s view (diṭṭhi, matta, vasaṇa); “detail” (anuvyañjana) here refers to finding delight by grasping at another’s limb or body part (eyes, arms, legs, etc).

In this case, the man examines the gem carefully and notices its shape, hardness, lustre, etc, and thinks about its value, and the wealth and pleasures it would bring. And so the gem is born. Thus, the Buddha says: “Born in attention are all things.” An ignorant child or an animal would not know that it is a gem. The man has some concept of “gem” beforehand, a foreknowledge with which perceives the gem. However, whether the gem is genuine or not is another matter.

3.3 A mind filled with desire (chanda) is always looking for a sense-object to cling to—like a monkey rapidly swinging from tree to tree, clinging to one branch after another. Then, it might be added, when the monkey notice a bright object, it is at once captivated to examine it more closely, and to consume it if it is a sweet ripe fruit. This is how attention works: it draws us to a sense-object. Here the gem-finder is consumed by the gem, as it were.

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33 The Pali Canon itself is estimated to be over 11 times the Christian Bible in size.
34 See the parable of the raft in Alagaddûpama S (M 22.13-14/1:134 f) & SD 3.13 (2).
35 “Cut down the forest, but the tree. | From the forest arises fear. | Having cut down the forest and growths, | O bhikshus, you are-forest-free! (Dh 283).
36 For a similar but more elaborate idea, see the parable of the heap of coins: Vism 14.4-5/437.
37 For a more detailed discussion, see Nimitta & Anuvyañjana, SD 19.14.
38 Nm 2:390; Nc 141, 141; DhsA 400, 402; cf MA 1:75, 4:195; SA 3:4, 394; Nc 1:55; DhA 1:74). On other meanings of nimitta, see SD 13 §3.1a.
39 Assutava S 1 (S 12.61,6-8/2:94 f), SD 20.2.
How does the gem really come to the man’s attention? His eyes see a bright object: it catches his eye. If he had ignored it, and were to go on clearing the rubbish, he would not have bothered about the gem. Hence, it is said, “Arisen through contact are all things.” The “contact” (phassa) here is of course “eye contact,” or the visual impact of the gem on the man.

3.4 Contact (phassa) is the sense-stimulus associated with the element-related thoughts already mentioned. The convergence on feeling (vedanā), the affective response to the contact or experience, with the tones of pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, which holds together the various aspects of the conscious moment.

When the man sees the gem, he feels excited and bright-eyed: this is a pleasurable feeling. All his attention now focusses on the gem. Hence, it is said, “converging in feeling are all things.” In fact, the man has all but forgotten about the rubbish at that moment. He is fully concentrated on the gem. Hence, “concentration is the leader of all things,” in the sense of playing the key role in building the mind up to its peak. Here, of course, it is clearly wrong concentration [2.6].

3.5 Further, it is said, “Mindfulness is the lord of all things,” to stress its dominant role in controlling the mind. But this is clearly wrong mindfulness [2.6], because it is rooted in desire (chanda). And it is a very powerful thought; it overwhelms him totally.

The Buddha then says, “Wisdom is the highest in all things.” How does wisdom fit into our parable here? Having got over his initial excitement, the man (assuming he has some wisdom), would, for example, consider carefully how to protect his newly found treasure, or how to make use of it. If he is careful and wise in making use of the gem, then he would be rich and live comfortably with his family. His wisdom has brought him wealth and happiness, the highest things in life for an erstwhile rubbish disposer. But this is a worldly consideration.

The purpose of the parable is to point to higher things. The gem is the wisdom that the 3 jewels can give us. It is a wealth which, as it were, we could redeem ourselves from our samsaric debts, our karmic debits. This spiritual wealth is our best tool for rising above craving and ignorance, and leads to the attainment of the supramundane path, that is, true liberation.

4 The essence of all things

4.1 “Liberation is the essence of all things”

Finally, the Buddha declares, “Liberation is its essence of all things,” that is, the goal of the path (which the Commentary identifies as “the fruit of liberation,” phala, vimutti, AA 4:176). Finally, our consciousness, as it were, find a “firm footing” (agadha) only in nirvana, the death-free (amata), taking it as its object (in the path and fruition) and because they are “established” in nirvana. Outside of nirvana, as it were, we keep on roaming and wandering on, hindered by ignorance, fettered by craving.”

In nirvana, all “things” as we know it come to a complete end, transcending both being and non-being. It is opposite of what we do and what happens in the “real” world. The name-and-form model is useful in show us how we habitually reify our experiences, we “thingify” what are really events and processes. What does this mean?

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40 As regards most of the remaining terms, we may be able to find some clarification from the brief Aṅguttara commentary on the (Kim Ārammaṇa) Samiddhi Sutta (AA 4:176).
41 (S 22.9.3/3:149, SD 28.7a) = (S 22.100,3/3:151, SD 28.7b).
42 Κίμ Μᾶλκα S (A 8.83) has only the first 8 questions; the full list of 10 questions appears in Βχαγα βά Μᾶλκα S (A 10.58/5:106 f), SD 67.4. [1.1]
This has to do with how we make sense of things. When we see a form, say, something yellow, edible and tasty, our minds at once give it a name: “banana!” The mind, of course, works in a more complicated way than this. Immediately upon experiencing a banana, we will detect a sense of pleasure at the eye-door, since we like bananas. (This immediate reaction has been conditioned by our previous banana experiences, so that we perceive yellow bananas as being delicious.) Each time, we respond in this manner, we reinforce our liking for bananas. This is how we accumulate and strengthen our latent tendencies.

4.2 CONCEPTS ARE NOT THE ESSENCE OF ALL THINGS

4.2.1 In the course of our religious history, we have come with interesting, even persuasive, notions to explain how the universe and life began, on the meaning and purpose of our lives, and so on. Out of our habitual fear of death, we introduced the notion of some kind of abiding entity, an enduring soul. Out of our persistent need for security and to explain how “things” began or happened, we resort to a God idea. Religious history regularly records how the God idea lies at the root of colonialism, cultural domination and mental pathology. Such an idea or being can hardly be “essence of all existence.”

But what does “all things” (sabbe dhammā) here mean? The Commentaries seem to take this as referring to “wholesome states” (kusala dhamma).44 I think the Sabba Sutta (S 35.23) gives a better explanation: all that we have to know with (the instruments or methods of knowing) are our 6 sense-faculties (the 5 physical senses and the mind), and all that we can know are the sense-objects.45 This is the all that we can ever truthfully and usefully claim.46

4.2.2 Yet, this is enough. When we closely examine how our sense-faculties work, and the nature of the sense-objects, we know, or at least sense, that our life and world is completely a sense-based and sense-made world. In such a world, we sooner or later realize that how imperfect our senses may be, we are still capable of learning from such imperfections or suffering. The more we learn, the more we adapt, the more we evolve. In an important, we are working to liberate ourselves from the shortcomings of our senses.

As such, it makes better sense (indeed the best sense), to work with the notion that “liberation is the essence of all things” than any theistic speculation or dogma. Speculations keep us in a circular rut. Dogma stops us from thinking for ourselves. The notion of liberation, on the other hand, entails that we evolve into better beings. Just as survival of a species is the essence of biological evolution, the liberation of the individual is at the heart of spiritual evolution.

4.2.3 Indeed, liberation is at the very heart of such discourses as the Mahā Sārōpama Sutta (M 29). The essence of all things is not the heaping up of concepts and dogmas, much less of proving them wrong or right, much less of attracting power, wealth, gain, honour or fame. Hence, the Mahā Sārōpama Sutta closes with these words:

So this holy life, bhikshus, does not have gain, honour, and renown as its benefit, or for the attainment of virtue as its benefit, or the attainment of concentration as its benefit, or knowledge and vision as its benefit.

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43 See Anusaya (SD 31.3).
44 ItA 1:155; DhsA 69.
45 S 35.23/4:15 (SD 7.1).
46 For a fuller explanation on sabba and the “rooted” (mūlaka), see SD 57.20b (1.2).

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But it is the unshakable liberation of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood, and its end. (M 29,7/1:197), SD 53.8

Kiṁ Mūlaka Sutta
The Discourse on “What is the Root?”
A 8.83

1 “If, bhikshus, the wanderers of other sects were to ask you thus:

(1) ‘In what are all things [states] rooted?’
(2) In what are all things born?
(3) In what do all things arise?
(4) In what do all things converge?
(5) What is the leader of all things?
(6) What is the (supreme) lord of all things?
(7) What is superior in all things?
(8) What is the essence [the heart] of all things?’

When you asked thus, bhikshus, by the wanderers of other sects, how should you answer?”

2 “Bhante, our teachings are rooted in the Blessed One, guided by the Blessed One, have the Blessed One as refuge. It would be good indeed if the Blessed One were to explain its meaning. Having heard the Blessed One, the monks would remember it.”

“In that case, bhikshus, listen, pay careful attention, I will speak.

“Yes, bhante,” the monks answered the Blessed One in assent.

3 The Blessed One said this:

“If, bhikshus, the wanderers of other sects were to ask you thus:

In what are all things rooted?
In what are all things born?
In what do all things arise?
In what do all things converge?
What is the leader of all things?
What is the lord of all things?
What is superior in all things?

47 Bhagavam, mūlakā no bhante dhammā, bhagavaṁ nettikā, bhagavaṁ paññasañā. Sādhu vata bhante bhagavato-ṇeva paññabhātu etassa bhāsitassā attho. Bhagavato sutvā bhikkhū bhikkhū dhammaṁ dharati. This is stock: Mahā Dhamma, saṁmādāna S (M 46,2/1:309 f), SD 59.11; Viṁsaka S (M 47,3/1:317), SD 35.6; Naḷakāṇa S (M 68,8/1:465), SD 37.4; Mahā Suññata S (M 122,19/3:115), SD 11.4; Baḷena Pañḍita S (S 2:24), SD 21.1; Paṇīmaṁsa S (S 12.51/2:81), SD 11.5; Candūpama S (S 16.3/2:199), SD 38.2; Saṁmā, saṁbuddha S (S 22.58/3:66), SD 49.10; Saḷāṭhena S (S 36.6/4:208), SD 5.5; Ānanda S 2 (S 36.16/4:221); (Tika) Aṇiṇa Tīṭhiyā S (A 3.68/1:199), SD 16.4; Loka, dhamma S (A 8.6/4:158), SD 48.3; Kiṁ Mūlaka S (A 8.83/4:338), SD 32.10; Saṁbodhi Paṇika Dhamma S (A 9.1/4:351), SD 82.1; Bhagavā Mūlaka S (A 10.58/5:106), SD 57.20; (Ekāśaka) Saṁaghī S 2 (A 11.20/5:355).
What is the essence of all things?

When you are asked thus, bhikshus, by the wanderers of other sects, you should answer them thus:\(^{48}\)

1. All things are rooted in desire.
   \(\text{chanda,mūlakā, āvuso, } \text{sabbe dhammā}\)

2. All things are born in attention.
   \(\text{manasikāra,sambhavā } \text{sabbe dhammā}\)

3. All things arise through contact.
   \(\text{phassa,samudayā } \text{sabbe dhammā}\)

4. All things converge in feeling.
   \(\text{vedanā,samosaranā } \text{sabbe dhammā}\)

5. All things have concentration as their leader.
   \(\text{samādhi-p,pamukhā } \text{sabbe dhammā}\)

6. All things have mindfulness as their lord.
   \(\text{sat’adhipateyyā } \text{sabbe dhammā}\)

7. In all things, wisdom is superior.
   \(\text{paññ’uttarā } \text{sabbe dhammā}\)

8. Of all things, freedom is the essence.
   \(\text{vimutti,sārā } \text{sabbe dhammā}\)

When you are asked thus, bhikshus, by the wanderers of other sects, this is how you should answer them.

— evam —

\(^{48}\) For an explanation of these teachings, see (4).