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Sabba,lahusa Sutta¹The Discourse on the Lightest (Results) | **A 8.40****Duccarita Vipāka Sutta** The Discourse on the Fruits of Bad Deeds (Se)

A 8.1.4.10 = Aṅguttara Nikāya 8, Aṭṭhaka Nipāta 1, Paṭhama Paṇṇāsaka 4, Dāna Vagga 10

Theme: The fruits of breaking the precepts

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“Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but – I hope – into a better shape.”

Estella to Pip at the end of Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1861)

1 The significance of past karma

1.1 The Sabba,lahusa Sutta (A 8.40) is a short teaching on the potential and potency of karma, that all karma in an unawakened person has the chance of bringing on its fruits, both good and bad. In this Sutta, the focus is on the minimum fruits that bad karma brings in a human. Such a teaching is, in a way, telling us that our negative traits and conditions arise on account of some past bad karma we have done.

1.2 Although our negative traits and conditions are due to our past karma, this does not mean that they are unchangeable states, which would be a fatalistic view, rejected in early Buddhism. It means that, firstly, there is really no one to blame for this—not even ourself—since their karmic roots are in the past.

Blaming anyone for our disadvantages or difficulties is not really helpful. Of course, if the intentional actions of others have brought upon us those problems, then, those perpetrators have created bad karma for themselves on account of their negative intentions.

Instead of blaming anyone or anything for our disadvantages or difficulties, it is better to work at correcting these problems or working around them. In **the Alabbhaniya Thāna Sutta** (A 5.48), the Buddha teaches us that when we seem to have exhausted all avenues to solve a problem, we should then mindfully pause and ask, “**What shall I best do now with resolve?**”²

1.3 The Sabba,lahusa Sutta (A 8.40) gives us a short but broad vision into the painful realities of karma and its fruits, that of the “lightest” (*sabba,lahusa*) or minimal of negative fruits for the karma that we do. It is important to understand here that karma acts on us simply like “action and reaction” of deeds, or keeping accounts of good and bad—although to some extent we may be “reactive” to such unwholesome karmic fruits.

Our karma is like some electrically conductive materials that we wear or have on us while we are caught in an electrical storm. As such, we are likely to be struck and harmed by lightning. We could either avoid the open ground in an electrical storm, or not have anything that conducts electricity on us. On the other hand, we can install some kind of safe lightning conductor so that the powerful electrical surges will go through the conductor safely into the ground.

Lightning is like past karma. The electrically conductive materials we wear or have are like our present karma. So our present karma becomes the condition for, or “attracts,” past karma, and can do so in a terribly “electrical” way.³ Having a safe lightning conductor above us (like one on top of a building) is our

¹ VRI CD (Be) calls this **Duccarita Vipāka S**, the Discourse on the Results of Bad Conduct.

² A 5.48/3:54-56 (SD 42.1). See also SD 30.8 (3.3).

³ On new and old karma, see (**Nava Purāṇa**) **Kamma S** (S 35.146), SD 4.12.

lovingkindness. It harmlessly guides the bad karmic fruits into the ground, which is our “store” of good karma.⁴

2 The 4 noble truths as meaning and purpose of life

2.0 In spiritual terms, our personal disadvantages and sufferings should not be taken merely as “bad karma” [1.2]. We should wisely apply **the 4 noble truths** to our situation. This may be said to be “situational spirituality,” that is, learning from a situation and acting on it.

2.1 IDENTIFYING THE SUFFERING

First of all, we ask what is **the meaning** of all this that I am going through or have to go through? It means that the **suffering** is real. Notice how we say that only “the suffering is real”: we do not say “my” suffering, or use “I” or “me”—we only *identify* the suffering, but we do not identify *with* it, that is, we do not own the suffering. This approach becomes clearer when we further reflect that “pain is natural, suffering is optional.”⁵ In other words, we reflect, “There is **suffering**”—this is the first noble truth.⁶

2.2 WHY WE SUFFER

2.2.1 Secondly, we ask again, “What is the meaning of this suffering?” Another way of asking this question—a more practical one—is, “**How did this suffering arise?**” When we carefully reflect on this question, we should begin to understand the difference between “pain” (*dukkha, dukkha*) and “suffering” (*saṅkhāra, dukkha*).⁷ As we have said, “Pain is natural,” mainly because we have a body, and the body feels when stimulated by something unpleasant—so pain arises.

2.2.2 Such pain can, however, be useful to us: it tells us that our body’s cells are being destroyed, or that a bodily situation needs adjustment or correction. So, we act to heal or improve our bodily condition. On the other hand, often enough, we are *not* happy with the pain: now this is suffering. It is the mental aspect of this pain. We have *internalized* an “external” condition by thinking about it.

2.2.3 Often, thinking about it makes it worse, or even, thinking about it makes it so. We feel our pain, and we *hate* it; we *long* for a situation when this pain is gone, or when we can feel something pleasant, and so on.⁸ We desire to get rid of the pain; we desire some kind of pleasure. In short, this is called **craving** (*taṇhā*), the second noble truth.⁹

⁴ On how lovingkindness limits our bad karma and prevents its negative fruition, see SD 2.10 (2). See also **Saṅkha(dhama) S** (S 42.8/4:322), SD 57.9..

⁵ See SD 48.9 (6.2.4.5).

⁶ On the nature of values, see SD 43.1 (3.5.1.3).

⁷ (**Sāriputta**) **Dukkha S** (S 38.14) speaks of 3 kinds: “physical suffering” (*dukkha, dukkhatā*), “suffering due to change” (*vipariṇāma, dukkhatā*), and “suffering due to formations” (*saṅkhāra, dukkhatā*): S 38.14/4:259 (SD 1.1-(4.1)); also S 45.165/5:56; D 3:216.

⁸ On the 2 kinds of pain, see **Sall’atthena S** (S 36.6/4:207-210), SD 5.5; see also **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,20), SD 1.12.

⁹ On craving (*taṇhā*), see **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,6 n), SD 1.1. On craving for sensual pleasures, see **Kāma-c, chanda**, SD 32.2.

2.3 ENDING SUFFERING

2.3.1 When we accept suffering to be what it is, nothing more, nothing less (as far as possible), we have grasped the venomous snake by its neck.¹⁰ When we understand the difference between pain and suffering—that pain is natural, suffering optional—we understand that suffering is mind-made. Whatever is mind-made can be “unmade” by the mind, with the proper training.

2.3.2 We now come to the **purpose** behind suffering—or, better, the purpose of life. Properly speaking, there is *no* purpose in suffering or life in itself. Purpose here refers to how we view life and its imperfections, and what we *can* do about it.

Actually, “how we view life” is the same as the meaning of suffering [2.2]. In other words, life has *no* purpose, but we put purpose into life. Each of us needs to understand and accept the first 2 noble truths [2.1+2.2] before we can effectively come to this stage. We will return to this point in our discussion on the 4th noble truth [2.4].

2.3.3 Unconditional happiness

2.3.3.1 Let us return to the question: What is the purpose of life? Some people think that the purpose of life is to be *happy*. This may be true in a very short term—because happiness can never last. When the conditions that bring us happiness are gone, then we feel sorrow—happiness and sorrow are inseparable twins: we cannot know one without the other.¹¹

2.3.3.2 Surely, there must be some kind of **unconditional happiness**, one that does not depend on any conditions at all. If our happiness comes from having a lot of money, or pleasure, or power, then, when that condition is missing, we are unhappy. Even something as simple as being happy with our car, or our handphone, can bring us great suffering when something undesirable happens to that source of our happiness. So, it makes sense to think of the possibility of “unconditional happiness.”

2.3.3.3 In fact, there is such a happiness: it is called **nirvana** (*nibbāna*).¹² We cannot really say much that is meaningful about nirvana: we must personally experience it for ourself. So we will leave it at that for the moment, and discuss what is more practical.

2.4 THE WAY TO END SUFFERING

2.4.1 Earlier on [2.3.3], we asked, “**What is the purpose of life?**” and we discussed the problem of happiness. Perhaps, there is a better answer to this question, that is: the true purpose of life is to grow. We see growth in humans, animals, and plants. Science calls this “evolution.” We have all evolved *biologically*, that is, as a species, or humans as races and tribes. But, that is as far as biological evolution goes. After that, we are on our own.

¹⁰ This parable of the water-snake, on the right approach to learning the truth, is from **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22,-23-29) + SD 3.13 (3.1.3).

¹¹ See the 8 worldly conditions: **Loka,dhamma S 1** (A 8.5), SD 42.2 & **Loka,dhamma S 2** (A 8.6), SD 42.3.

¹² On terms related to nirvana, see SD 1.1 (4.2.2).

2.4.2 The 3 trainings

2.4.2.0 “On our own” refers to the evolution of **the true individual** (*sappurisa*). To be a true individual, according to early Buddhism, we need to go through **the 3 trainings** in moral virtue (*sīla, sikkhā*), mental development (*samādhi, sikkhā*) and insight wisdom (*paññā, sikkhā*). Those who diligently train themselves in this way are said to be walking the eightfold path¹³ to end up as members of the noble sangha, the spiritual community of the awakening and the awakened.

2.4.2.1 The 1st training—that of moral virtue—is the understanding of the nature of our 5 physical senses and the mind. We train our senses not to be caught up and misled by their respective objects, and the mind by its own thoughts, especially on account of the unwholesome karmic roots of greed, hate and delusion.

Since our senses are what we really are, **our self-created world**, we need to refine them as sense-faculties, so that they are able to feel beauty and see truth.¹⁴ In other words, our sense-faculties are capable of being trained not to be caught up with likes and dislikes, but to rise above such dichotomies, and prepare the mind to be unified, so that it is the basis for mental joy.

2.4.2.2 The 2nd training is that of mental cultivation, which is the beginning of the true path of spiritual evolution. We begin by learning to restrain the 5 physical senses so that they are *calm*, that is, not running after any sense-objects, so that the mind can focus on itself. As the mind stays focused on itself, it *clears* itself up like a peaceful lake high in the mountain wilds.

The mind calms itself with the stilling of the breath, and beautifies itself with lovingkindness. In fact, the mind can be calm and beautified with either breath or lovingkindness. But lovingkindness—a joyful and unconditional acceptance of self and others—is a divine emotion that also makes it easier for us to keep the precepts—that is, the 1st training [2.4.2.1]. So, moral virtue and mental cultivation help one another to *pari passu* spiral up the path of spiritual evolution.

2.4.2.3 A well-cultivated body (*bhāvita, kāya*) and a well-cultivated mind (*bhāvita, citta*) are the foundations for **the 3rd training**, that of insight wisdom. This is the calm and clear mind happily at work, looking deep into our own being and the true nature of life. Looking deep, the mind sees a universal pattern of things, that is, all things in this universe go through the same cycle of impermanence, change and becoming other.

When we truly see the reality of this **impermanence**, we understand why there is no way that we can ever grasp at any thing, that even pain, pleasure, and neutral feeling, are all impermanent.¹⁵ If we do try to grasp at any of these things, suffering arises. It is like a snake biting its own tail: it feels the pain, and thinks that someone else is biting its tail, so it bites harder, and suffers even more. Only when it stops biting, to let go of itself, it is relieved of its suffering. When we stop clinging to the world (after understanding what this means by way of the first 3 truths), then we begin to awaken to full liberation.

¹³ On the eightfold path (*aṭṭh’āṅgika magga*) refers the proper practice of the 3 trainings. When the practitioner attains the 1st stage of awakening—as a streamwinner (*sotāpanna*)—then, he walks up the noble eightfold path (*ariya aṭṭh’āṅgika magga*) as a noble saint, heading for full awakening: see **Sacca Vibhaṅga S** (M 141,23-31), SD 11.11; **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22,21), SD 13.2; **Mahā Cattārīsaka S** (M 117), SD 6.10.

¹⁴ On beauty and truth, see SD 40a.1 (8.1.2); as aesthetics, see SD 46.5 (2.4.2); right livelihood SD 37.8 (2.3); see also (Reflection) No views frees, R255.

¹⁵ On the recollection of impermanence and its benefits, see **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

3 Related teachings

The 3 doors and types of karma

The seed-like nature of karma	(Kamma) Nidāna Sutta	A 3.33	SD 4.13
Causes of karmic disparity	Cūḷa Kamma Vibhaṅga Sutta	M 135	SD 4.15 (2)
Karmic types and their fruits	(Vitthāra) Kamma Sutta	A 4.232	SD 4.13 (2)
Why sometimes the good suffer	Mahā Kamma Vibhaṅga Sutta	M 136	SD 4.16
Karma is relative to the doer	Loṇa,phala Sutta	A 3.99	SD 3.5
The generous but immoral	(Saddha) Jaṇussoṇi Sutta	A 10.177,10-35	SD 12.6a

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Sabba,lahusa Sutta

The Discourse on the Lightest (Results)

A 8.40

Bad actions through the body

- 1 Bhikshus, **the killing of living beings**, resorted to, cultivated, often done,¹⁶ brings about hell, the animal womb, the preta realm.¹⁷
The lightest¹⁸ fruit of *the killing of living beings* is
a human state that conduces to a short life.
- 2 Bhikshus, **the taking of the not-given**, resorted to, cultivated, often done, brings about hell, the animal womb, the preta realm.
The lightest fruit of *the taking of the not-given* is
a human that conduces to loss of property.
- 3 Bhikshus, **sexual misconduct**, resorted to, cultivated, often done, brings one to hell, the animal womb, the preta realm.
The lightest fruit of *sexual misconduct* is
a human state that conduces to rivalry and hate.

Bad actions through speech

- 4 Bhikshus, **false speech**, resorted to, cultivated, often done, brings about hell, the animal womb, the preta realm.
The lightest fruit of *false speech* is
a human state that conduces to false accusations.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Pāṇātipāto bhikkhave āsevito bhāvito bahulī,kato.*

¹⁷ *Niraya,samvattaniko tiracchāna,yoni,samvattaniko, pitti,visaya,samvattaniko.* On the development of the preta (*petā*) teaching, see SD 57.10 (3.2.5).

¹⁸ "Lightest," *sabba,lahusa*. Comy glosses as *parittaka*, "small."

¹⁹ *Manussa,bhūtassa abhūta-b,bhakkhāna,samvattaniko hoti.*

- 5 Bhikshus, **divisive speech**, resorted to, cultivated, often done, brings about hell, the animal womb, the preta realm.
The lightest fruit of *divisive speech* is
a human state that conduces to break-ups amongst friends. [248]
- 6 Bhikshus, **harsh speech**, resorted to, cultivated, often done, brings about hell, the animal womb, the preta realm.
The lightest fruit of *harsh speech* is
a human state that conduces to unpleasant sounds.²⁰
- 7 Bhikshus, **frivolous speech**, resorted to, cultivated, often done, brings about hell, the animal womb, the preta realm.
The lightest fruit of *frivolous speech* is that
a human state that conduces to others not heeding our words²¹

Bad action affecting the mind

- 8 Bhikshus, **the taking of strong drinks and distilled drinks**, resorted to, cultivated, often done,²² conduces to hell, the animal womb, the preta realm.
The lightest fruit of *the taking of strong drinks and distilled drinks* is
a human state that conduces to madness.

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²⁰ *Amanāpa, sadda, sarṃvattaniko hoti*. This can mean either we ourselves produce unpleasant sounds, or we are subject to (we hear) them.

²¹ "Others take no notice of one's speech," *anādeyya, vācā, sarṃvattanika*.

²² *Surā, meraya, pānaṃ bhikkhave āsevitāṃ bhāvitāṃ bahulī, kataṃ*. This is a shorter statement of the precept; the full precept is: "the taking of strong drinks, distilled drinks, fermented drinks and that which causes heedlessness."