

## 60.3

## Pilinda Sutta

The Discourse on Pilinda | U 3.6/28-30

Be **Pilinda,vaccha Sutta** The Discourse on Pilinda,vaccha

Theme: Dealing with habitual tendencies

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### 1 Summary and commentary

#### 1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY & RELATED STORIES

##### 1.1.1 Summary

**The Pilinda Sutta** (U 3.6)—also called the Pilinda,vaccha Sutta—is about an arhat named Pilinda,-vaccha. Pilinda or Pilindi is his personal name, and his nickname is Vaccha (literally, “one-year-old calf”), which is also his family or clan name (*gotra*) [§2]. The Sutta is about his peculiar “residual impressions” (*vāsanā*) or functional habits (the effect of past karma) [1.1.2] of addressing other monks as “outcaste” (*vasala*). The Buddha explains that this habit of his was the result of being a brahman in many past lives, and that he is without any bad intention. He is, after all, an arhat. [2.1.1.2]

##### 1.1.2 Other possible cases of vāsanā

**1.1.2.1** A number of stories in the suttas and Commentaries may be taken to be cases of *vāsanā*, each with its special characteristics. **The Anabhirati Sutta** or Arati Sutta (S 8.2), for example, records the elder Vaṅgīsa’s self-admonitions against his dissatisfaction (*anabhirati*) with his teacher **Nigrodha,kappa**, a resident solitarian (*vihāra,garuka*)—one who places importance (*garuka*) on keeping to his cell—as soon as he returns from his alms-round, he enters his cell and not emerge until evening or the next day.

Nigrodha,kappa’s habit disaffects Vaṅgīsa, who quells it through self-admonition (S 1:186; SA 1:169 f). He also has doubts about Nigrodha,kappa’s awakening, as he has seen him sleeping with his arms moving about involuntarily (*hattha,kukkucca*). As a rule, this is unbecoming of an arhat, but in Nigrodha,kappa’s case it is an old habit (ThaA 3:198).

This is a case of reflexive action, explained as rooted in Nigrodha,kappa’s *vāsanā*.<sup>1</sup> Psychologically, this would not be difficult to understand, since such reflexive movements of the body,<sup>2</sup> work without any involvement of the cognitive areas of the brain. They are non-karmic processes that are categorised as part of “natural process of conditionality” (*dhmma,niyāma*), that is, reflex or motor action.<sup>3</sup>

**1.1.2.2** The next case of *vāsanā* is not an arhat, but a young goldsmith, who became a monk, a pupil of Sāriputta, and is found in **the Suvanna,kāra-t,thera Vatthu** (DhA 20.9). Thinking that because the young student has been dealing with things of beauty and would thus have strong lust, Sāriputta teaches him to meditate on the bodily impurities. Even after a month in the forest doing this meditation, the young student does not progress in his meditation at all.

<sup>1</sup> S 8.2/1:186 f (SD 53.7 (1.2)). His elder’s verses are at Tha 1212-1218 (its prose intro is missing from S 8.2).

<sup>2</sup> The uppermost part of the brainstem (the midbrain) controls motor movements, particularly movements of the eye, and in auditory and visual processing, the heart rhythm, breathing, blood flow, and oxygen and carbon dioxide levels. It also controls swallowing, coughing, sneezing, and vomiting. [TO BE CONFIRMED]

<sup>3</sup> The 5 natural orders (or laws) (*pañca,niyāma*) are those of: (1) heat (*utu,niyāma*, “laws of physics”), (2) seeds (*bīja,niyāma*, “law of genetics”), (3) karma (*kamma,niyāma*, “law of moral intentions”), (4) thought (*citta,niyāma*, “laws of mental processes”), and (5) nature (*dhmma,niyāma*), “laws of conditionality”: SD 5.6 (2).

Sāriputta consults the Buddha on the matter. Surveying the young man's past lives, the Buddha learns that he was reborn in 500 lives in the family of goldsmiths. Each time, he would work on making ornamental flowers of red gold. Hence, the Buddha advises that he should do **the red kasiṇa**<sup>4</sup> to begin with. The method works and, in due course, he is able to progress into vipassanā and see the true reality of impermanence, suffering and nonself.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 SUTTA COMMENTARY (UA 1:192-195): A PRECIS

### 1.2.1 An arhat's "fault"

§2 "(An arhat) habitually addressed [monks] with the word, 'Outcaste (*vasala*)'" (*vasala, vādena samudācarati*). Pilinda would refer to and would address the monks with the word, "outcaste" (*vasala*), such as "Come, *vasala!* Go, *vasala!*" and so on. In other words, it is not some bowdlerized way of "treating others in a condescending manner." To the unawakened, he seems to be speaking harshly to the them. The awakened, of course, know him better.

§3 "Many monks" (*sambahulā bhikkhu*), seeing the elder treating them that way, [UA 1:193] thought that the elder must be bearing hatred to treat them in this manner. They did not know that he behaved that way on account of karmic impressions not abandoned, but his intentions were kind. Hence, the monks complained to the Buddha about his conduct.

Some say that the monks recognized that the elder was an arhat, yet he treated the monks with "harsh speech." Again, they did not understand the nature of lingering karmic impressions (*vāsanā*). Some thus doubted his noble superhuman state because of such a fault. In other words, Pilinda's curious name-calling was not intentional; technically, it is said to be merely functional action (*kiriya*).

### 1.2.2 The Buddha's explanation

§4 In response to the complaint against Pilinda, the Buddha summoned him for an interview. When the Buddha asks Pilinda whether he had spoken to the monks in the alleged manner, Pilinda at once admitted it.

§5 The Buddha then directed his mind to looking into Pilinda's past lives (*pubbe, nivāsaṃ manasi-karivā*), and saw that Pilinda had been reborn a brahmin for 500 successive lives. He had become habituated to using the "outcaste" (*vasala*) word that it had become second nature to him.

Hence, the Buddha declared:

"Vaccha, bhikkhus, does not bear hatred when he used the word *vasala* to address monks."

The meaning of this statement is that Pilinda, during his 500 past lives, had lived and behaved as a brahmin, arrogantly used to calling non-brahmins "outcaste." But he was now an arhat, one without hatred or ill will when he spoke thus. He had uprooted all his defilements. His habit of speaking that way was thus due to past births (*purima, jāti, siddham*, UA 1:194, 2 f).

<sup>4</sup> The red kasiṇa is a meditation done with a colour device (*kasiṇa*): see **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.29-32), SD 9; SD 15.1 (9.2).

<sup>5</sup> DhA 20.9/3:425-429.

### 1.2.3 The verse of uplift (*udāna*) [§7]<sup>6</sup>

#### §7a “In whom dwells neither deceit nor conceit”

Pilinda, as a noble disciple, has neither deceit—the concealing of any present hatred—nor conceit—the arrogance based on the idea “I am superior” (as a brahmin), and so on. All this has been rooted out by means of the path. In other words, he is free from all biases (*agati*) rooted in greed, hate, delusion or fear.<sup>7</sup>

#### §7b “greed-free, not thinking of “mine,” without any expectation”

As an arhat, Pilinda is free from any kind of greed (such as lust, passion, delight, lustful desire, etc).<sup>8</sup> He has no thought of owning things (“this is mine”) whether material (such as wealth, houses) or immaterial (such as praises, titles). He expects no benefits or rewards for himself in this life, or even any rebirth in the next life.

#### §7c “with anger pushed away, with self fully quenched”

Anger (*kodha*) arises from dislike for someone or something, which is rooted in ill will. Ill will is, in turn, the twin defilement with lustful desire. Both lust and ill will (repulsion) are uprooted with **non-returning**. Pilinda is himself an arhat, one who has overcome all the mental fetters.<sup>9</sup>

An arhat is free from all notions of **self** and self-centredness; he is not narcissistic at all. All the fires of defilement—greed, hate and delusion—are “fully quenched”: while he lives, these do not bring him any more suffering; upon dying, all the 5 aggregates are fully quenched: there is no more rebirth, no more samsara for the arhat.

#### §7d “he is brahmin, he is recluse, he is monk”

The Pali of this line is *so brāhmaṇo so samaṇo sa bhikkhu* as translated above. The inherent verb *hoti* is rendered as “is” in the translation. Either of the English articles “a” and “the” should be applied before each of the nouns, but in saying: “he is a brahmin ... ” and so on makes Pilinda a mere label, title or statistic (*saṅkha*), an imagined status, which an arhat is not, as stated in **the Muni Sutta** (Sn 209d).

An arhat (like Pilinda) is called “**brahmin**” (*brāhmaṇa*) in the sense that he has pushed out all evil (*bāhita, pāpattā*).

He is called “**recluse**” (*samaṇa*) in the sense that he has stilled all evil (*samita, pāpattā*) and by virtue of his own “level” or harmonious conduct (*sama, cariyāya*), he is in harmony with everyone and everything around him.

He is called “**monk**” (*bhikkhu*) on account of being one who has broken up all defilements (*bhinna, -kilesattā*).

In the case of the Buddha, some past karma may be activated under the right present (usually physical conditions) conditions, but these present karmic fruitings have nothing to do with any defilements (they have all been destroyed by the Buddha. Similarly, too, in the case of arhats, some past karma may fruit under the right present conditions, but it has nothing to do with defilements (like the Buddha,

<sup>6</sup> This is mostly modern commentary based on traditional exegesis.

<sup>7</sup> Also called the “4 motives” (*thāna*): **Siḅal’ovāda S** (D 31,5), SD 4.1; **Āgati S 1** (A 4.17), SD 89.7; **Saṅgha Bala S** (A 9.5,6.4) n, SD 2.21; SD 31.12 (6.4.1.3); SD 53.5 (2.2.1.1).

<sup>8</sup> Possibly an allusion to the register of over 100 synonyms and metaphors for greed (*lobha*) in the Abhidhamma (Dhs §1059.189).

<sup>9</sup> **The 10 fetters** (*dasa saṃyojana*) are (1) self-identity view, (2) doubt, (3) attachment to ritual and vows, (4) sensual lust, (5) aversion, (6) lust for form existence, (7) lust for formless existence, (8) conceit, (9) restlessness and (10) ignorance: SD 10.16 (1.6.6-8); SD 11.1 (5.1.4); SD 3.3 (2); SD 56.1 (4.4).

arhats, too, have destroyed their defilements). Such present karmic fruitions are termed “functional karma” (*kiriya*). [3.1.3]

## 2 Pilinda,vaccha

### 2.1 ORIGINS

#### 2.1.1 The lesser Gandhāra charm

**2.1.1.1** Pilinda,vaccha (also Pilindi,vaccha) was a brahmin of Sāvatti, born before the Buddha’s awakening. Pilinda was his personal name, Vaccha his family name.<sup>10</sup> He became a recluse and learned the lesser Gandhāra charm (*cūla,gandhā vijjā*),<sup>11</sup> but when the Buddha arose in the world, the charm stopped working.<sup>12</sup>

Having heard that the great Gandhāra charm (*mahā,gandha vijjā*) prevented the working of the lesser Gandhāra charm, and having concluded that the Buddha knew the former, he joined the sangha at the Buddha’s suggestion in order to acquire the great charm. The Buddha taught him meditation and in due course, he became an arhat.

**The Apadāna** says that Pilinda is well respected by devas, asuras and gandharvas (ApTha 388.84/-1:307).

**2.1.1.2** Certain devas had been reborn in the deva world as a result of Pilinda’s guidance in a former birth. Out of gratitude, they waited on him morning and evening. He thus became famous as being dear to the devas, and was declared by the Buddha to be the foremost of such monks (A 1:24). Pilinda was also one of the 80 great disciples (*mahā,sāvaka*) of the Buddha (ThaA 3:205 f).

#### 2.1.2 Pilinda,vaccha’s past lives

**2.1.2.1** In the time of **Padumuttara Buddha**,<sup>13</sup> Pilinda was a rich householder of Hamsavatī and wished to become a monk beloved of the devas. In the time of **Sumedhā Buddha**,<sup>14</sup> he was born in the human world and paid great honour to the Buddha’s stupa (tumulus shrine). In a later birth, he became a world monarch (*cakka,vatti*) named Varuṇa, who established his subjects in righteousness so that after death they were reborn in heaven.<sup>15</sup>

**The Pilinda Sutta** (U 3.6) recounts how Pilinda habitually addresses others as “outcaste” (*vasala*). When this is reported to the Buddha, he explains that this is because Pilinda had, for 500 lives, been born among “outcaste-caller” (*vasala,vādī*) brahmins. His habit is reflexive, that is, due to an old “karmic trace” (*vāsanā*), free of unwholesome intentions, that is, without greed, hate or delusion (since he is an arhat).<sup>16</sup>

One day, on entering Rājagaha, Pilinda met a man carrying a bowl of long pepper (*pippalī*).

<sup>10</sup> Mv 1.13-17 (V 1:204-209), Pār 2.7.47 (V 3:67), Nis 23.1 (3:248-252); also called *pilindi* (U:Ce). ThaA 1:53 f; UA 192.

<sup>11</sup> The charm is said to confer the power of going through the air and of thought-reading.

<sup>12</sup> The charm is mentioned in **Kevalāḍḍha S** (D 11,5/1:215), SD 1.7. Also called *gandhāri vijjā* (eg DA 1:322, 2:389; PmA 3:686; J 4:499).

<sup>13</sup> Padumuttara was 15<sup>th</sup> buddha before our Gotama (SD 36.2 (3.4.3)). DA 2:410.

<sup>14</sup> Sumedha was the 14<sup>th</sup> buddha before our Gotama (SD 36.2 (3.4.3)). DA 2:410.

<sup>15</sup> ThaA 1:53; AA 1:276.

<sup>16</sup> U 3.6; DhA 26.25/4:181 f; AA 1:277.

“What’s in your bowl, outcaste?” he asked, and the man, in anger, said, “Rat-dung!”

“So be it,” said Pilinda, and the pepper turned into dung.

Horrified, the man pleaded with the elder to set things back to normal. The elder instructs the man to tell the truth when asked again. This time the man replied: “Peppers, bhante.”

And so they reverted to being peppers.

(AA 1:277 f)

## 2.2 STORIES CONNECTED WITH PILINDA

### 2.2.1 Vinaya rule about medicines

The **Vinaya** mentions that on several different occasions, Pilinda suffered from various ailments, and the Buddha permitted him to have suitable remedies.<sup>17</sup> Once Bimbisāra found Pilinda clearing a cave in order to provide a cell for himself. The king promised to build a monastery for him if he could obtain the Buddha’s permission.

The permission was obtained, which was then reported to the king, but he forgot the matter until one hundred days later. On remembering, he made ample amends, gave Pilinda 500 attendants to look after the monastery, and granted for their maintenance a village which came to be called Arāmika,gāma (Monastery Village) or Pilinda,gāma (Pilinda’s Village).

### 2.2.2 Miraculous stories

**2.2.2.1** One day, while in the village for alms, Pilinda went into a house where a girl was weeping because the day was a feast-day and she had no ornaments to wear, her parents being too poor to afford any. Pilinda gave her a roll of grass to put round her head, and it turned instantly into solid gold. The king’s officers, hearing of this wreath, suspected the family of theft and cast them into prison.

The next day, Pilinda, learning what had happened, visited the king and convinced him of his psychic powers by turning the whole palace into gold. The family was released, and the king and his courtiers gave to Pilinda large quantities of the 5 medicaments, all of which Pilinda distributed among those who wished for them.<sup>18</sup>

**2.2.2.2** Another story is related to Pilinda’s psychic powers (V 3:67). Once a family of Benares, which habitually ministered to Pilinda, was attacked by robbers, and two girls were kidnapped. Pilinda, by his psychic power caused them to be brought back, and the monks complained of this to the Buddha, but the Buddha held that no wrong had been done.

### 2.2.3 Two elders named Pilinda,vaccha?

**2.2.3.1** The **Apadāna** has 2 verse accounts ascribed to Pilinda: the first, in Vagga 2, a short one of only 13 verses (Ap 1.15/1:59 f), and the second, in Vagga 40 (the last *vagga*), a very much longer one of 206 verses (ApTha 388/1:302-316). The presence of 2 Apadānas ascribed to the same name supports the probability that there were 2 elders named Pilinda,vaccha. On the other hand, there might possibly have been a confusion of legends, and it is no longer possible to separate them.

<sup>17</sup> V 1:204 f. Some (eg, Tha:RD 14, n4) hold that the elder of Rājagaha of these stories was different from the elder of Sāvattī. See below.

<sup>18</sup> V 1:206 ff; 3:248 ff. This was the occasion for the forming of the rule that all medicaments required by a monk should be used within 7 days. It was in reference to this occasion that **Gandhāra J** (J 406/3:363-369) was told. The story of the palace being turned into gold is mentioned at Kvu 608.

**2.2.3.2** In the second Apadāna, we are told that in the time of **Padumuttara Buddha**, Pilinda was a very wealthy gatekeeper (*dovārika*). He gave many precious gifts to King Ānanda, Padumuttara’s father, and won from him a boon. He asked, as his boon, that he should be allowed to entertain the Buddha.

The king refused to grant this boon, but the gatekeeper appealed to the judges, and they ruled in his favour. Thereupon, he held a great almsgiving of unparalleled splendour for 7 days and gave away all manner of gifts. As a result, he was born 1,000 times as king of the devas and 1,000 times as king of humans.

In his last birth, he suffered from neither heat nor cold, dust did not stick to his body, and the rain did not wet him. This means that he did not suffer any discomfort from the weather or the environment.

### 3 Vāsanā and its significance

#### 3.1 THE EARLY TEXTUAL ROOTS OF VĀSANĀ

##### 3.1.1 Vāsanā in the suttas

**3.1.1.1** The Pali-English Dictionary defines *vāsanā* as “that which remains in the mind, tendencies of the past, impressions, usually as *pubba,vāsanā*, “former impressions” (Sn 1009; Miln 10, 263).<sup>19</sup> In the Sutta Nipāta, the term appears as a compound, *pubba,vāsana,vāsita*, “by a former impression,” used in a positive sense in **the Vatthu,gāthā** (introduction to the Pārāyana Vagga, Sn ch 5), describing the 16 youths, “all with their own groups, famed throughout the world, meditators, delighting in meditation, wise, impregnated with their former [good] impressions” (Sn 1009).<sup>20</sup>

**3.1.1.2** The phrase *pubba,vāsana,vāsitā* (Sn 1009d) “habituated by the resultant force of the past” too sheds light on the date of the Vatthu Gāthā. The doctrine of *vāsanā* is apparently alien to early Buddhism, though the same ideas may be found in *germinal* form in phrases like *pubbe kataṃ kammaṃ* (actions done in the past).<sup>21</sup>

The developed idea as such, however, is found in **the Milinda,pañha**:

*pubbe vāsanāya coditā hadayo*, “his heart rebukes the past habits” (Miln 10); and  
*pubbe,vāsita,vāsanā*, “habits impressed by the past” (Miln 263, cp Sn 1009d);

and in **the Visuddhi,magga**:

*kata,samaṇa,dhammo, vāsita,vāsano, bhāvita,bhāvano*, “he who has discharged the tasks of a recluse has his former deeds impressed on him and has developed his meditation” (Vism 185).

**3.1.1.3** It has already been noted that this term does not occur in earlier Pali works. It is probable that the concept of *pubba,vāsanā* was further developed into a fuller theory by the time of the Commentaries.

The frequent occurrence of this idea in **the Culla Niddesa** is very significant. The concluding passages in the comments on each of the 16 questions (*pucchā*) contain one standard phrase in which the word *vāsanā* occurs—(Nc:Be 40), *ye tena brāhmaṇena saddhīm eka-c,chandā<sup>22</sup> eka-p,payogā, ekādhīpāyyā*,

<sup>19</sup> PED: Cp Nett 4, 21, 48, 128, 133 sqq, 153, 158 sqq, 189 sq. Cp BHSD *vāsanā*, eg Mvst 1:345.

<sup>20</sup> *Pacceka,gaṇino sabbe | sabba,lokassa vissut || jhāyī jhana,rātā dhīrā | pubba,vāsana,vāsitā* (Sn 1009).

<sup>21</sup> V 2:189; cf Miln 100.

<sup>22</sup> Nc:Ee xiii f *ekajjhā*.

*eka, vāsanā, vāsītā*, “they who were together with the brahmin, of a common desire, of a common intention and with the same former impressions.”<sup>23</sup>

### **3.1.2 Vāsanā in other paracanonical texts**

**3.1.2.1** *Vāsanā* is often mentioned in **the Netti-p, pakaraṇa**, where it occurs no less than 12 times each with a slightly different sense but all sharing the fundamental idea of “karmic trace.” Some suttas called it *vāsanā, bhāgiya* (pertaining to *vāsanā*). All the works in which this term is employed, reflected an accepted theory of *vāsanā*, and are comparatively late. The date of the Visuddhi, magga is to some extent certain, that is, 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Hardy limits the date of the Netti-p, pakaraṇa between 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE and 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, though he is more inclined to favour a date in the neighbourhood of the latter limit.<sup>24</sup>

**3.1.2.2** Mrs C A F Rhys Davids, in her *Milinda-Questions* (1930), suggests a date towards the beginning of the Common Era for **the Milinda, pañha**; and in her *Outlines of Buddhism* (1934:103), she assigns the date 80 BCE. These instances show that all the other references to *vāsanā* do not go back earlier than the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. This fact may, to some extent, help in determining the date of the Vatthu Gāthā. All these references to *vāsanā* presuppose the existence of at least a contemporary belief in “former impressions.”

**3.1.2.3** The term *vāsanā* appears twice in **the Milinda, pañha**, the first in a negative sense. In the first occurrence, *vāsanā* describes the young boy Nāgasena who, having completed his Vedic studies with a teacher, and reflecting in solitude, found “his heart rebuking him for his former impressions ...” (*pubba, vāsanāya codita, hadayo*, Miln 10, 21 f). Seeing that the Vedas lacked any essence, he turned to look for a Buddhist teacher.

The second occasion for the usage of *vāsanā* (in a positive sense) is found in a description of those monks training for the path and delighting in “non-proliferation of thoughts” (*nippapañca*). King Milinda asks Nāgasena about *nippapañca*. In reply, Nāgasena says that “those who are fully purified in their self-nature on account of their past impressions are without mental proliferation from the moment their minds are unified” (*ye te sabhāva, parisuddhā pubbe vāsita, vāsanā te eka, citta-k, khaṇena nippapañ cā honti*, Miln 263, 18 f).

### **3.1.3 Vāsanā in the Commentaries**

**3.1.3.1** It has already been noted that this term does not occur in earlier Pali works, and that it is probable that the concept of *pubba, vāsanā* was developed into a fuller theory by the time of the Commentaries [3.1.1.3]. The Commentary uses the non-canonical term *vāsanā* to explain the peculiar habit of Pilinda, vaccha of addressing other monks with the word “outcaste,” which, according to the Buddha, was an old habit resulting from Pilinda’s 500 successive past lives as a brahmin.

When the offended monks complain to the Buddha about Pilinda’s habit, the Buddha, we are told, (after surveying Pilinda’s past lives) explains that this is due to Pilinda’s numerous past lives as a brahmin. Considering the uncertainties and oddities that seem to turn the canonical teaching on the arhat’s nature on its head, we can only safely regard this account as being **apocryphal**, that is, lacking authenticity so that it is included in neither the canon nor commentaries, and is of doubtful authorship).

<sup>23</sup> See Jayawickrama, “The Vaggas of the Sutta Nipāta,” *Univ of Ceylon Review* 6, 4 1948:247; repr *Pali Buddhist Review* 1, 3 1976:154 f. Also E Lamotte, “Passions and impregnations of the passions in Buddhism,” in *Buddhist Studies in honour of I B Horner*, Dordrecht, 1974:91-104.

<sup>24</sup> *Netti-p, pakaraṇa* (ed E Hardy, PTS, 1902:xx).

**3.1.3.2** Since Pilinda is an arhat, clearly he has *no* unwholesome roots—greed, hate or delusion—his odd name-calling; it is just reflex or functional karma. The Sutta closes with the Buddha affirming Pilinda’s arhathood. It is true that although no *new* karma will arise for the arhat, an old karma may fruit again under the right *external* conditions (like the weather). Accounts relating to the Buddha having a severe headache from prolonged standing in the hot sun beside the river Rohinī, for example, brought on a painful headache was attributed to some distant past karma in **the Pubba,kamma,piloti(kā)** (“rag-pieces of past karma”), a late Apadāna text.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, certain *external* conditions may cause some past karma to fruit again in an arhat, but not any negative mental state, since an arhat has overcome all defilements. Thus, we can only regard any account of arhats behaving oddly on account of present karma, especially acting against right speech, right action or right view (for example) would clearly be apocryphal [3.1.3.1].

### **3.1.4 Vāsanā in the Mahāyāna imagination**

**3.1.4.1** *Vāsanā* is a Sanskrit term accepted into Pali (hence called *tatsama*). It literally means “perfuming” or “scent,” such as “a sesame seed perfumed by a flower retains the flower’s scent when the latter is no more.”<sup>26</sup> Hence, *vāsanā* means “predispositions,” “habituations,” “residual tendencies.” The Chinese translated *vāsanā* literally as 習氣 *xíqì*, “habit energies.”<sup>27</sup> These are individual tendencies arising as a result of repeated wholesome or unwholesome acts or states.<sup>28</sup>

*The Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism* defines it as follows:

“Habitual tendencies or dispositions, a term, often used synonymously with *bīja* (‘seed’). It is found in Pali and early Sanskrit sources but comes to prominence with the Yogācāra, for whom it denotes the latent energy resulting from actions which are thought to become “imprinted” in the subject’s store-house-consciousness (*ālaya, vijñāna*). The accumulation of these habitual tendencies is believed to predispose one to particular patterns of behaviour in the future.” (2003:323)<sup>29</sup>

**3.1.4.2** For the unawakened, *vāsanā* are usually forms of defilements (*kleśa*; P *kilesa*) that hinder them from progressing spiritually. For the awakened, they seem to remain as peculiar habits that appear at odds with the arhat’s natural nature. One Mahāyāna text has taken liberties to dramatically attribute *vāsanā* to a few great arhats.

According to the 大智度論 *dàzhìdù lùn* (\*Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra), arhats remain subject to the influence of *vāsanā*. The Mahāyāna masters alleged that Śāriputra still had “traces of anger” (*dveṣa-vāsanā*) and Nanda had “traces of lust” (*rāgā-vāsanā*)<sup>30</sup>—just as the scent of incense remains behind in a censer even after all the incense has burned away [3.1.5.2]. Thus, it seems that arhats still have karmic flaws, and that only the buddhas have fully removed such habitual tendencies! We do not any such sug-

<sup>25</sup> See SD 49.12 (2.3.1.10).

<sup>26</sup> Lamotte, op cit 1974:91.

<sup>27</sup> Digital Dict of Buddhism. Cf *Princeton Dict of Buddhism* 2014:960 which says that “‘perfumings,’ hence ‘predisposition,’ ‘habituations,’ ‘latent tendencies,’ or ‘residual impressions,’” 薰習/習氣 *xūn xí/xíqì* is sometimes “overliterally” tr from Chin as “habit energies.”

<sup>28</sup> See S Zacchetti, *The Da zhidu lun ... and the History of the Larger Prajñāpāramitā*, Hamburg, 2021:57 f (n118).

<sup>29</sup> For a Mahāyāna def of *vāsanā*, see Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, sv 2014:960 f.

<sup>30</sup> Comy on Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtra (T1509) [MPPŚ], attr Nāgārjuna (100 fasc), tr Kumārajīva, T1509.25.57a4-756c19. [DDB] 11 Oct 2023. Chs 1-15, French tr Lamotte, *Le Traité de la Grand Vertu de Sagesse de Nāgārjuna* (5 vols 1944-1980), Eng tr, *The Treatise on the Great Virtue of Wisdom of Nāgārjuna*, by G K M Chodron 2001. MPPŚ: Chodron 2001:110-116.



gestion in the Pali sources, where it is unequivocally states that an arhat is one “whose defilements are destroyed (*khīṇ’āsava*) ... one completely freed through final knowledge (*samma-d-aññā vimuttā*).”<sup>31</sup>

The Mahāyāna went on to attribute *vāsanā* to all unawakened conditionings in terms of phenomenology. Xuanzang, in his 成唯識論 *Cheng Weishi Lun* (\*Vijñaptimatratāsiddhi),<sup>32</sup> mentions these 3 types of *vāsanā* (amongst other types):<sup>33</sup>

- (1) ***vāsanā* of language** (\**nāma, vāsanā*, 名言習氣 *míngyán xíqì*), that is, (a) terms and words as referents, ie, meanings; and (b) terms and words revealing perceptual fields, ie, as thoughts and mental factors;
- (2) ***vāsanā* of self-grasping** (*ātma, grāha, vāsanā*, 我執習氣 *wǒzhí xíqì*), or inherent attachment to a self-view, that is, (a) the attachment to “me” and “mine” (destroyed by the “cultivation path,” *bhavanā, mārga*);<sup>34</sup> and (b) self-grasping to “me” and “mine” from discrimination (destroyed by the “vision-path,” *darśana, mārga*);
- (3) **rebirth-linking *vāsanā*** (*bhavaṅga vāsanā*, 有支習氣 *yǒuzhī xíqì*), means fruition of karmic seeds carried over from life to life in the 3 worlds (the sense, form and formless worlds); ie, (a) wholesome but defiled (*sāśrava kuśala*) karma producing desirable fruits, and (b) unwholesome (*akuśala*) karma producing undesirable fruits.

**3.1.4.3** We can see here (especially in the 3<sup>rd</sup> concept) the early developments of the Mahāyāna polemics that arhats are still not fully awakened like the Buddha himself. We will leave such views where they lie as Mahāyāna errors or polemics. Further, we must reaffirm the following teachings:

- (1) in terms of awakening, the Buddha is simply the pathfinder, the first amongst equals: **Pavāraṇā Sutta** (S 8.7). SD 49.11; **Sambuddha Sutta** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.
- (2) that there is no need for the laity to attain buddhahood to awaken; streamwinning will lead to arhat-hood in time: **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), SD 16.7, also S 25.2-10; arhat-hood is the same for both ordained and lay: **(Mahānāma) Gilayāna S** (S 55.54,19) SD 4.10.
- (3) that, in terms of liberation, Buddhahood and arhat-hood are the same: **(Mahānāma) Gilayāna Sutta** (S 55.54,19), SD 4.10.
- (4) there nothing more beyond arhat-hood: **(Mahānāma) Gilayāna Sutta** (S 55.54,19), SD 4.10;
- (5) that after arhat-hood, nothing more to be done: **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9,56.2/1:203) n, SD 7.14; **(Ānanda) Subha S** (D 10,2.39), SD 40a.13; SD 15.10a (1.1.1).
- (6) that even the Buddha respects the Dharma: **Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2), SD 12.3.

### **3.1.5 Mahāyāna degradation of arhats**

**3.1.5.1** The Mahāyāna theologians and writers, it seemed, had a field day in using the *vāsanā* idea (though it is non-canonical) to misrepresent many of the great arhats. This was probably to better these early elders (out of sectarian rivalry and other unenlightened reasons) and boost their innovative dogmas

<sup>31</sup> On the pericope: *khīṇ’āsavā* *visitavā kata, karaṇīya ... sammad-aññā, vimutta*: **(Indriya) Arahanta S 1** (S 48.27,-3), SD 56.16a. See also SD 51.19 (2.2); SD 55.9 (1.3.2.5); SD 70.18 (1.4.1 n).

<sup>32</sup> *Chéng wéishí lùn* (\*Vijñaptimatratāsiddhi-śāstra; \**nam par rig pa tsam du grub pa’i bstan bcos kyi ’grel pa*) 10 rolls. T1585.31.1a-59a. Completed in 659 in 玉華宮寺 *Yù huá gōng sì*. Mainly tr 玄奘 *Xuánzàng* of Dharmapāla’s 護法 *hù fǎ* commentary on Thirty Verses on Consciousness-only 唯識三十頌 *wéishí sānshí sòng*, by Vasubandhu 世親 *shì qīn*, but it also includes ed trs of other masters’ works on the same verses. [DDB] 11 Oct 2023.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion, see D Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology*, RoutledgeCurzon, 2002:472-474.

<sup>34</sup> These are Mahāyāna terms. These *mārgas* are outlined in *Cheng Weishi Lun*, part 4. See Lusthaus 2002:481 n6.

of the Bodhisattva ideal. Unlike the arhats, the Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas were paragons of immaculate virtue and power (but none of whom really existed)!

Mahāyāna texts were written slandering the arhats by attributing odd habits as what may be called “**chronic atavistic relapses**” or simple old bad habits, that is, on account of *vāsanā*. Worldly details of the great arhats before their awakening were incorporated into the descriptions of the arhats, even though neither the suttas nor the Commentaries give any such details.<sup>35</sup>

**3.1.5.2** These slanderous accounts are found in Mahāyāna works such as the \*Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa (Upadeśa in short) 大智度論 *Dàzhìdù lùn* (T1509), “the treatise of the great perfection of wisdom”;<sup>36</sup> the **Mahāyānasaṅgrahopaniḥandana** 攝大乘論釋 *Shè dàchéng lùn shì* (T1598);<sup>37</sup> 大方便佛報恩經 *Dà fāng biàn fó bào ēn jīng* or briefly *Fó bào ēn jīng* (T156);<sup>38</sup> and other Chinese texts. It should be noted that none of these texts belong to early Buddhism nor are they found in Pali. They are all post-Buddha works, mostly with revised or new ideas about Buddhism. They are interesting readings on Mahāyāna or East Asian Buddhism, but generally do not reflect early Buddhism, and in some places even reject it.

Here are some Mahāyāna depictions of the early arhats in terms of the *vāsanā* doctrine as imagined by the Mahāyāna writers. These examples (abridged) have been extracted with quotes from the Belgian Catholic priest scholar of Mahāyāna, Étienne Lamotte’s article, “Passions and impregnations of the passions in Buddhism” (op cit 1974:92-94).<sup>39</sup> We are left to wonder why such stories are told at all, and why they are published in a learned journal.

(1) **Śāriputra** was (according to the Mahāyāna), in a previous life, a serpent who refused to re-swallow the poison he had injected, and instead threw himself into a fire. In his last life, he was once offered a special dish by a householder. When the Buddha reproached him for having eaten impure food, Śāriputra, “deeply upset, vomited his meal and swore never again to accept an invitation to someone’s home.”<sup>40</sup> This seems to be a slanderous plagiarism and corruption of a well known Pali story preserved in the Jātaka Commentary attesting to Sāriputta’s discipline and dignity as an arhat.<sup>41</sup> (Lamotte 1974:92)

(2) **Mahāmaudgalyāyana**, Śāriputra’s childhood friend who had great psychic powers, had been a monkey in his past lives, “and holy though he may have been, he would gambol whenever he heard

<sup>35</sup> Except, of course, in the cases of Pilinda and Nigrodho, kappa.

<sup>36</sup> We only have the Chinese *Dàzhìdù lùn*, prob tr from a lost Skt work (hence the reconstructed title), attr either to Nāgārjuna (c150-c250 CE) or to Kumārajīva, who tr it between 402 and 406. It is a polemical work promoting the Bodhisattva ideal. Between 1944 and 1980, Lamotte published an annotated French tr of the 1<sup>st</sup> section and ch 20 of the 2<sup>nd</sup> section as *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu der Sagesse*, in 5 vols [3.1.4.2]. See Princeton Dict of Buddhism: Dazhidu lun.

<sup>37</sup> Written by Aśvabhāva (10 fasc), comy on Asaṅga’s Mahāyānasaṅgraha; tr Xuanzang between 647 and 649. Partially tr Lamotte, *La Somme du Grande Véhicule d’Asaṅga*, 2 vols, Louvain, 1973. Gives a detailed theory on “store-consciousness” (*ālaya, vijñāna*).

<sup>38</sup> Composer & tr unknown. Prob written in China during Later Han 後漢 *hòu hàn* (25-220 CE). Tib tr *Thabs mkhas pa chen po sañs-rgyas drin-lan bsab paḥi mdo* (Peking ed, *Mdo-sna-tshogs (ke)* 89a-204b).

<sup>39</sup> Care should be taken with his Taishō refs: they are mostly inexact or wrong.

<sup>40</sup> Lamotte’s refs are mostly inaccurate or erroneous, and have been corrected here against the Taishō. Mahiśāsaka Vin, T1421.22.173c13-25, 22.179c8-11; Sarvāstivāda Vin, T1435.23.463a14-16; Mahāvibhāṣā, T1545.27.77b1-2; Upadeśa, T1509.25.70c9-18, 71a1-16, 25.247c17-18, 25.260c12-16. Other refs in Traité 1:118-121, 2:1632.

<sup>41</sup> Sāriputta, the story goes, was fond of meal cakes (*piṭṭha, khajjaka*), but when his young student remarks: “Who does not love sweetmeat?” (*madhuraṃ nāma bhante kassa appiyan ti*), Sāriputta vows never to eat them again. (Intro to **Visavanta J**, J 69/1:310)

music.”<sup>42</sup> (Lamotte 1974:92). Again, this Mahāyāna caricature of an early arhat is not found in the Pali texts.

(3) **Mahākāśyapa** is not only represented as showing unarhatly ill will towards Ānanda,<sup>43</sup> but also as having succumbed to “simian atavism.” “One day, on hearing the music of some great Bodhisattvas, he leapt up from his seat and traced some dance steps. Even if the five objects of the divine and human bliss left him completely, he was unable to resist a tune.”<sup>44</sup> (Lamotte 1974:92 f). It’s probably not surprising that a Catholic priest would show interest in such unedifying stories of a great early arhat.

(4) **Nanda**, the Buddha’s handsome half-brother, joined the sangha, but still had feelings for his bride-to-be, Janapada, kalyāṇī. Having seen even more beautiful heavenly nymphs, he forgot about her and was able to meditate so that in due course he became an arhat.<sup>45</sup> “His beauty and eloquence made him a highly successful teacher, but—for there is a but—before starting to speak, he would survey his audience closely and hold his gaze at length on the women.”<sup>46</sup> (Lamotte 1974:93). Again here we see a Mahāyāna lampoon of a great arhat without any sutta basis.

(5) Lamotte mentions **Pilindavatsa**, too. The text says that everyday he crosses the Ganges to collect alms. At the river, he says, “You outcaste, stop flowing so that I can cross.”<sup>47</sup> In spite of these seemingly insulting words, there was no contempt in his heart. Even for the greatest of holy ones, it is difficult to correct himself of inveterate habits.” (1974:93). Are such remarks actually spoken by an arhat, or is it the work of a Mahāyāna polemicist?

(6) The arhat **Gavampati** “had a detestable habit of spitting out his food and then re-swallowing it: in short, he ruminated.”<sup>48</sup> Not surprising really, since he had been an ox for five hundred existences,” (Lamotte 1974:93). By now, we probably have a good idea how the Māhāyāna talespinners viewed the early Buddhist arhats.

(7) In Vaiśālī, there was the arhat **Madhuvasiṣṭha**, “Excellent Honey,” who was once a monkey who “met his death after having filled the Buddha’s bowl with honey.”<sup>49</sup> On account of this, he was reborn into a brahmin family and had as much honey as he needed; hence his name. “Nevertheless he retained his monkey habits and was often seen perched on walls and climbing trees.”<sup>50</sup> Oddly, we can hard find any such story in the Pali suttas or the Commentaries.

<sup>42</sup> Mahāyānasaṅgrahopanibandhana 攝大乘論釋 *shè dà chéng lùn shì*, T1598.31.442a26-28.

<sup>43</sup> Regarding Mahākāśyapa’s “ill will” during the 1<sup>st</sup> council, see J Przulski, *Le Concile de Rājagṛha*, Paris, 1926. Mahākāśyapa heaps up reproaches against Ānanda (pp 12-15, 47-51, 62, 64, 97, 120, 182-186); he humiliates him (pp 275-276); he expels him (pp 12, 16, 62,97).

<sup>44</sup> Upadeśa, T1509.25.367c29-368a3.

<sup>45</sup> The Pali account of Nanda’s arhathood is found in (**Arahatta**) **Nanda S** (U 3.2), SD 43.7.

<sup>46</sup> Upadeśa, T 1509.25.260c10-12.

<sup>47</sup> Mahāsaṅghika Vin, T1425.22.467c20-22; Mahāvibhāṣā T1545.27.77a29-b1; Upadeśa T1509.25.71a17-19, 25.251b4-5, 25.649c14-16.

<sup>48</sup> *Fó bào ēn jīng*, T156.3.155c14-15; Sarvāstivāda Vinayavibhāṣā, T1440.23.504c4-5; Mahāvibhāṣā, T1545.27.77-b2-3; Upadeśa T1509.25.251b1-2, 25.337a4-5.

<sup>49</sup> This is reminiscent of the monkey (along with an elephant) who attends to the Buddha during his solitary rains retreat (10<sup>th</sup> year) in Pārileyya forest: **Pārileyya V** (DhA 1.5b/1:59 f); SD 6.1 (3).

<sup>50</sup> *Fó bào ēn jīng*, T156.3.155c16-17; Sarvāstivāda Vinayavibhāṣā, T1440.23.504c6-7; Upadeśa, T1509.25.251b3-4, 25.260c20-22, 25.337a6-8, 25.649c10-12.

### 3.1.6 Mahāyāna as religious fiction

**3.1.6.1** When, as a young Buddhist (the 1980s), I was learning Mahāyāna Buddhism from western teachers, I was often told to “suspend our belief (or disbelief)” and lose ourselves in the “Mahāyāna drama.” Taken that way, I did find studying the Lotus Sutra, the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa, the Amitabha Sutras, and so on, very engaging and interesting. In other words, it was enjoyable to read or listen to Mahāyāna teaching without having to believe them. It is just like enjoying great secular literature, or watching Star Wars and similar movies.

In fact, Mahāyāna, we now know, was not a monolithic movement, but disparate currents of local teachers and elites who reacted to Buddhism with their own imagination and agenda. Mahāyāna flourished as a written and book-based Buddhism (unlike early Buddhism, which was an oral tradition to begin with). It is not difficult to imagine Mahāyāna writers and their readers freely fictionalizing the Buddha and the great arhats as literary figures, parodizing, even ridiculing them, and promoting more socially engaging, even worldly, yet magical figures of Eternal Buddhas and Cosmic Bodhisattvas. We may even see this as the beginnings of Virtual-Reality RPG, with the Mahāyāna devotees role-playing as Bodhisattvas. One can thus imagine how Mahāyāna became popular.<sup>51</sup>

**3.1.6.2** In 2014, during a Lotus Sutra Seminar in a Singapore temple, I was the lone representative for early Buddhism. Trying to share how I see Mahāyāna, I spoke of how it is full of colourful uses of words, symbols, metaphors, parables and stories. However, when I mentioned that I enjoyed Mahāyāna stories and teachings like Star Wars fans enjoy the series, there was a woman heckler in the audience who loudly protested, “How dare you compare Mahāyāna to the movies!” No one came to my defence; clearly, there were no Star Wars fans in the audience. I realized that the metaphor did not work for the local Mahāyāna audience.

A young local Mahāyāna zealot who openly championed Pure Land Buddhism even believed that the discovery of the Gandhara texts “proved” that “Mahāyāna was earlier than Theravāda.” I tried to put across to him that I’m more interested in “early Buddhism,” but he was adamant in promoting not just Mahāyāna, but “Chinese Mahāyāna.” To claim that Mahāyāna is right and true, he often proclaimed this Chinese saw:

|                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 不可 思议者 <i>bùkě sīyìzhě</i>       | “The unbelievable is not always the improbable.”  |
| 不一定 不可能 <i>bùyídìng bùkěnéng</i> | “The inconceivable is not always the impossible.” |

I simply could not resist putting across to him that a Western philosopher had already warned us of such summary and dangerous claims:

“Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities.”  
(Voltaire, translation of passage from “Questions sur les miracles,” 1765)<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> A Skilton, *A Concise History of Buddhism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed Windhorse, 1997, 2013:101-112. G Schopen, “Mahāyāna,” (ed) R E Buswell, *Macmillan Ency of Buddhism* 2004:492-499. J Walser, *Genealogies of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Routledge, 2018.

<sup>52</sup> On a light, no less insightful, note: “Alice laughed. ‘There’s no use trying,’ she said: ‘one *ca’n’t* believe impossible things.’ ‘I daresay you haven’t had much practice,’ said the Queen. ‘When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.’” (Lewis Carroll, *Alice through the Looking Glass*, London: Macmillan, 1871, dated 1872). Thanks again, Matt Jenkins, for this lovely literary recall. Also, a misquote attr theologian Tertullian of Carthage (c160-225), who, in defence of the paradoxical character of certain Christian doctrines (as in Mahāyāna), wrote: *prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est* (“it is immediately credible—because it is silly” [*Flesh*, Tertullian Project] or “it is by all means to be believed, because it is

**3.1.6.3** In the name of intrafaith tolerance and compassion, we must accept that the Mahāyāna have created their own Arhats and vested them with their own hagiographic and narrative details, as with their Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Since none of these creations, as described and devised by the Mahāyāna masters exist in early Buddhism, these karmic formations remain with their creators and with those who game these creations as professional Buddhists.

Although almost none of these Mahāyāna cultures have survived history, their virtual worlds still exist today, resurrected as religious and academic realities by professional priests and scholars. In a profoundly sober way, we are reminded how fortunate we are to still have access to **early Buddhism**, indeed, be its custodians. We should not take this difficult but liberating task for granted because, like the Mahāyāna, we too may be plagiarized and plundered again, this time by our own karmic history.

## 3.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

### 3.2.1 Arhats with quirks?

**3.2.1.1 The Pilinda Sutta** (U 3.6) records the Buddha as stating that Pilinda’s habit of addressing other monks as “outcastes” was the reflexive habit of having been such a brahmin for 500 successive lives [§5]. The question now is whether we take such a teaching as “conventional” truth or as “ultimate” reality—as stated in **the Neyy’attha Nīt’attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5 f), SD 2.6b. After all, an arhat—like Pilinda, -vaccha and Nigrodha,kappa—being fully awakened (that is, having destroyed all the roots of sensuality, existence and ignorance), should be able to deal with an old “habit.”

Or, should we understand the arhat’s *vāsanā*-based habits like we do a physical handicap (which is, in fact, the case with Nigrodha,kappa). In the case of Pilinda, if his is a speech “handicap”—both body and speech are regarded as “precept-based”—then, if it is non-intentional, there is no moral breach.

Now there is another interesting case of “speech handicap,” that is, **the namo tassa “latah”** (like pibloktoq of the Inuit) of the brahminee Dhanañjānī. This is however regarded as an “utterance of uplift” (*udāna*)<sup>53</sup> since it is triggered by her faith. However, this would still be *vāsanā*-rooted, if she had been doing this in her past lives.

**3.2.1.2** If it is difficult for us, as informed Buddhists, to accept the fact or story that an arhat (like Pilinda) could *still* have a peculiar handicap that seems like “harsh speech,” then, we may (conveniently) invoke **the Neyy’attha Nīt’attha Sutta** and proclaim the licence to take the Pilinda Sutta as an instructive “skilful means.” On that reading, the point of the story is that we perceive words as “harsh speech”—that is, they annoy us or make us angry. Then, we should reflect on the fact that only when the act is intentional (rooted in greed, hatred or delusion) that it is an unwholesome act!

Indeed, we would often accept the harsh speech of someone dear (a spouse, relative, friend or significant other) with a positive mind (without anger or hatred). If we are able to tolerate, even show loving-kindness, to such an unawakened source of *intended* harsh speech, could we not then at least accept the possibility that Pilinda’s “harsh speech” is actually unintentional and non-karmic (*kiriya*)?

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absurd” [*Flesh, New Advent*]), commonly paraphrased as *credo quia absurdum*, “I believe it because it is absurd.” (Put simply: “... the more improbable an event, the less likely is anyone to believe, without compelling evidence, that it has occurred; therefore, the very improbability of an alleged event, such as Christ’s resurrection, is evidence in its favour. Thus far from seeking the abolition of reason, Tertullian must be seen as appropriating Aristotelian rational techniques and putting them to apologetic us” (D C Lindberg, “Science and the Early Church,” edd Lindberg & Numbers, *God & Nature: historical essays on the encounter between Christianity and Science*, Berkeley & LA: Univ of California Press, 1986:26).

<sup>53</sup> **Dhanañjānī S** (S 7.1/1:160 f), SD 45.5.

But the problem remains that an arhat would be able to notice and arrest the negative thought (if any) before it becomes an act! Logically then, either Pilinda is merely acting harshly to keep a social distance with others, or he is not an arhat but thought to be one (assuming that he does not claim to be one).

**3.2.1.3** Now we come to a more serious point: should we ever tolerate **the unwholesome conduct** of others, especially that of monastics who habitually commit breaches of the Vinaya? In their lifetime, these teachers, for example, who wear monastic robes or hold high religious positions, are respected by their students, scholars and others, despite their blatantly immoral or dubious habits.

When we are involved in religion, including Buddhism (both monastic and lay), we are likely to meet, even follow, Gurus (cultish teachers or leaders) who are powerful and charismatic. Such persons, on account of their special status, are likely to be looked up to so highly and appear so huge to us, that we are blinded by their dark sides (especially their flouting the Vinaya), or worse, we actually do not mind that they have so many faults since they “are beyond good and evil”!<sup>54</sup>

In fact, it is such knowledge of their followers’ gullibility and obsequiousness that emboldens the Gurus to cavalierly live immoral lives. This situation is painfully common in ethnic Buddhism, especially in Asia. Sadly, we (the blind believers), too, will bear the karma of allowing such abuse of the Dhamma and Buddhists. This dark karma is due to what is called the “**abdication syndrome**.”<sup>55</sup>

**3.2.1.4** The unwholesome habits of such negative people are rooted in their *vāsanās*. The point is that *vāsanās* are not excuses for unwholesome habits. In modern Buddhism, we have numerous cases of monks, priests and teachers who act and live immorally, even committing criminal acts. Clearly, these are worldly people who are still overwhelmed by their past karma, and they will face their karmic consequences.

It’s wise to remind ourselves here that simply putting on robes does not mean that one has attained the path or know the Dharma or that one should be “respected” for what one says! Respect is not given, but should be earned by wisdom and compassion. A mere change of garments does not mean that one is still not naked underneath it all.

Naturally, we would be troubled by such reports on account of our understanding of the Dharma. Sadly, the less Dharma we know the more likely we are to play down, even accept, such bad or wrong behaviour of the worldly unawakened. We may even feel troubled by the Pilinda story of his *vāsanā*., but for the wrong reason. This is where we are dealing with our own negative reactions—our acceptance of such conduct or rejection of it. We need to understand such reactions with **lovingkindness**, that is, clear our minds of negative thoughts.<sup>56</sup> When we understand these *vāsanā* accounts for what they really are, then we have cultivated some wisdom, which is the purpose of **the Pilinda Sutta**.

## **3.2.2 Psychological significance**

**3.2.2.1** The karmic “perfuming” (*vāsanā*) of the stream of consciousness conditions our lives. Our experiences in turn produce more *vāsanās* that are “planted” as our latent tendencies (*anusaya*), latently conditioning subsequent experiences until the planted *vāsanās* come to fruition. Then, depending on the type of fruit produced (wholesome, unwholesome or neutral), new *vāsanās* are produced. In this way, claims the Mahāyāna, the karmic conditioning continues until broken upon reaching the path.

<sup>54</sup> See **Beyond good and evil**, SD 18.7.

<sup>55</sup> These are symptoms of “**abdication syndrome**” on the followers’ part: see SD 60.1f (2.6).

<sup>56</sup> To cultivate lovingkindness towards our own bad habits and weakness, see SD 60.2 (2.2.5).

According to scholastic Buddhism, 3 types of *vāsanās* are very common and important, that is, as: (1) language, (2) self-attachment, and (3) rebirth continuum [3.1.4.2]. Let us begin conveniently with the 3<sup>rd</sup> type of *vāsanā*. **Continuum *vāsanās*** account for karmic continuity between lives and between mind moments. Since *vāsanās* are karmic conditioning, they are “with influxes” (*sāsava*) (the influxes of sensual desires, of existence, and of ignorance),<sup>57</sup> bringing better rebirths or worse rebirths ceaselessly, and conditioning us to react with liking, disliking or nonchalance (including boredom), thus planting more karmic seeds of lust, repulsion and ignorance.

**3.2.2.2** The 2<sup>nd</sup> kind of *vāsanā*, **self-view *vāsanās***, are of 2 kinds: the inherent and the projected. The inherent self-view *vāsanās* come with our birth (as our past karma)—our “karmic inheritance”—while the projected *vāsanās* are those arising as present conditions by which we differentiate ourself from others, giving us a sense of “I” versus “you” and “them,” and “mine” against “yours” or “theirs.”

It’s not difficult to deal with the latter, the *projected vāsanās*: through proper socialization, that is, as learning good behaviour (through keeping the precepts) and social realities (having good manners). It is more difficult to deal with the former, the inherent *vāsanās*, since they often form a congenital sense of selfhood. We must thus prevent the *vāsanās* from being activated with a strong counter-habit developed through proper meditative interventions and mindful habits.

**3.2.2.3** The 1<sup>st</sup> kind of *vāsanā*, **the linguistic**, is language-based; hence, it is also a vital social dimension when we communicate with others. We use words (*vyañjana*) and sounds (*sadda*), but what we convey are referents (*attha*), that is, ideas and meanings. With some language skill, we may manage to convince and move others, but people will often still react to what we say or communicate according to their own *vāsanās*, that is, habitual traces due to their past karma and present conditions.

Since the meanings of words are often directly apparent in our daily communications, that is, made clear or projected by our “self-referencing” (basic senses, if you like), as when we are chatting with people close to us or when buying things, there is usually a linguistic cycle of closure. We somehow “get by” with the **conventional** language (along with the body language) we use in daily life.

**3.2.2.4** The other kind of *vāsanā*—**the psychological**—is more far-reaching. It is our habit of conceptualizing that creates linguistically conditioned intentions and their quality (technically, “mental factors” or *cetasika*). Due to this type of *vāsanā*, we actually experience the world in certain ways and in words we are familiar with. We thus *become* a certain type of person, holding certain views that immediately shape and colour our experiences.

A psychiatrist, trained in certain psychological theories, sees his patients or, indeed, any other person, as enactments of those theories. The psychiatrist may notice things about his patients that the patients themselves or others are unaware of. The insightful psychiatrist is in a unique position—privileged with insight into his client’s mind—to understand it better, and thus to better his own, to work with the client in healing the latter’s mind so that the client is able to heal relying on self-effort.

Often we are conditioned to react to others (we “judge” them) not only based on our own understanding or misunderstanding of knowledge and Buddhism but also on the kind of language we like to hear, or simply whether we like the speaker or not! Our *vāsanās* shape how we understand what we

<sup>57</sup> D 33,1.11(32)/3:230, 34,1.5(4)/276; A 4.10/2:10; Tha 47 [Tha:N 133 n47]. There are also similar terms like *mānusaka yoga*, “the bonds of being human” (Sn 641; Dh 417), which Comys gloss as “the body” (*kāya*) (DhA 4:425; SnA 2:469), and opp *dibba,yoga*, “the divine bond” (S 1:35 = 60) [PED: yoga]. See also Thī 2: “be free from ties” (*mutte muccassu yogehi*); Thī 4 where *yoga* has 2 senses: as “human body” + “right conditions”; Thī 76 “all ties, divine and human, have been cut” (*sabbe yoga samucchīnā, ye dibbā ye ca mānusā*); See Thī:N for ad loc for helpful nn.

learn, what we know and what happens to us—they condition how we experience things and the ways by which we approach experience. We are thus limited and lied to by what we know.

As Buddhists, even when we think we are “open-minded,” we habitually, often privately, measure others. When another’s view differs from ours, we are likely to regard the other one as “a wrong view,” even unhinged. Or when we deeply respect a well-known teacher, we are likely to accept whatever they say as being “right views.” In time, we realize we are wrong—that’s when we are turning to the right path of self-discovery.

**3.2.2.5** What we take as “**form**” (*rūpa*)—sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches—are embodiments of the past (this life or previous ones, or both) expressed through language activity. **Language**, then, is merely an uncertain string of sounds and ideas that shape and shift with experience. That mind behind each sense-field and thinking itself, is itself the creator of **names** (words and sounds), embodied as “things.”

Our ideas of things—categories and terms—are themselves linguistic projections. They arise and “exist” in our experience cognized as sensations and recognized as concepts: they are not always deliberate, often not even conscious, but fruits of the unconscious (latent tendencies). We are driven by our past to project our world; our present virtual world, in turn, projects what we are. Hence, we are the world, but are we really?

Birth and death chase one another in a spiral of intentionality (karma). This swirling current of becoming and being drags us ceaselessly on in cycles, turning and returning, but going nowhere. The ignorant seem to enjoy the ride; the deluded wants more. Both the ignorant and the deluded are harvesting the suffering whose seeds they had sown in the past, fruiting and harvested now, and sowed again and again.

**3.2.2.6** There is a **social significance** to a proper understanding of the nature of *vāsanā*, such as when applied to local ethnic Buddhists (in Malaysia and Singapore). Some may view that our ancestors were peasant migrants, and we ourselves may have been reborn as peasants for 500 lives (more or less). This may explain why we seem to enjoy slaving for foreign monks and priests, exclusively supporting and sponsoring foreign teachers. “That’s the way we *were*; that explains the way we *are*!” some may justify.

Thinking in this way is not only a fatalist or deterministic wrong view, but also goes against the teaching of **the Pilinda Sutta**, which shows that even a habitually arrogant brahmin can become an arhat, although it is not the rule that their past habits (*vāsanā*) will *always* haunt them. The suttas and commentaries rarely have such *vāsanā* stories about other great arhats—except in the Mahāyāna tales, whose purpose diverts from promoting the early suttas. The point is that the Buddha’s teaching is about each and every one of us becoming “noble” (*ariya*) by walking the path of awakening.

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## Pilinda Sutta

The Discourse on Pilinda  
U 3.6

1 Thus have I heard.

1.2 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in the squirrels' feeding ground in the Bamboo Grove outside Rājagaha.

### Pilinda addresses others as "outcaste"

2 At that time, the venerable **Pilinda,vaccha**<sup>58</sup> habitually addressed<sup>59</sup> monks with the word, "outcaste" (*vasala*).

3 Then many monks approached the Blessed One, saluted him, and sat down at one side. Sitting at one side, the monks said this to the Blessed One:

"Bhante, the venerable Pilinda,vaccha habitually addresses monks with the word, 'Outcaste'."

4 Then the Blessed One addressed a certain monk:

"Come now, monk, go and summon the monk Pilinda,vaccha with my word, thus:

'Avuso Pilinda,vaccha, the teacher summons you.'"

4.2 "Yes, bhante," replied the monk in assent to the Blessed One, and approached the venerable Pilinda,vaccha.

Having approached the venerable Pilinda,vaccha, he said this to the venerable Pilinda,vaccha:

"Avuso Pilinda,vaccha, the teacher summons you."

4.3 "Yes, avuso," the venerable Pilinda,vaccha replied in assent to the monk.

He approached the Blessed One, saluted him, and sat down at one side.

4.4 To the venerable Pilinda,vaccha sitting at one side, the Blessed One said this:

"Is it true, Vaccha, that you habitually address monks with the word 'outcaste'?"

"Yes, bhante."

### The Buddha explains

5 Then the Blessed One, having directed his mind into examining the past lives of the venerable Pilinda,vaccha, addressed the monks:

"Bhikshus, do not be offended<sup>60</sup> with the monk Vaccha. Bhikshus, Vaccha does not bear hatred habitually addressing the monks with the word, 'outcaste'."<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> *Pilinda* is his better known name; also known as *pilindi* (U:Ce). See (2).

<sup>59</sup> "Addressed," *samudācarati* (*saṃ + ud + ācarati*), pres 3 "he addresses," "to behave towards, to converse with, to address" (V 1:9; D 2:154, 192; A 3:124, 131, 4:415, 440, 5:105; J 1:192). It also connotes habitually (esp in Comys): *samudācāra* (J 4:22; SnA 6; DhsA 392; PvA 279); past part *samudāciṇṇa* (J 2:33; Tikap 320). For its other meanings, see PED.

<sup>60</sup> "Be offended," *ujjhāyittha* (*u(t) + jhā + ya + tha*) imperative 2 of *ujjhāyati*, "to become indignant or irritated, grumble, murmur, complain, protest": S 1:232,11 ≠ 2:278,9 ≠ U 28,29.

<sup>61</sup> *Mā kho tumhe bhikkhave Vacchassa bhikkhuno ujjhāyittha, na bhikkhave Vaccho dosantaro bhikkhū vasala,-vādena samudācarati.*

5.2 For 500 successive births, bhikshus, the monk Vaccha was reborn in a brahmin family. This “outcaste speech” of his has been his [29] habitual mode of speech for a long time. It is because of this, bhikshus, that Vaccha is in the habit of using the word ‘outcaste’.”<sup>62</sup>

### Pilinda’s verse of uplift (*udāna*)

6 Then the Blessed One, understanding the significance of this, at that time uttered this udāna [inspired verse]:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>7 <i>yamhī na māyā vasatī na māno</i><br/><i>yo vīta,lobho amamo nirāso</i><sup>63</sup></p> <p><i>paṇunna,kodho abhinibbut’atto</i><br/><i>so brāhmaṇo so samaṇo sa bhikkhū tī</i><sup>65</sup></p> | <p>In whom dwells neither deceit nor conceit,<br/>greed-free, not thinking of “mine,” without any<br/>expectation,<br/>with anger pushed away, with self<sup>64</sup> fully quenched—<br/>he is brahmin, he is recluse, he is monk.<sup>66</sup></p> |
|---|--|

— evaṃ —

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<sup>62</sup> *Vacchassa bhikkhave bhikkhuno pañca jāti,satāni abbokiṇṇāni brāhmaṇa,kule paccā,jātāni, so tassa vasala,-vādo dīgha,rattam samudāciṇṇo* [Be Ce DhA; Ee Se V 2:80 UA 194,12 *ajjhāciṇṇo*], *tenāyaṃ vaccho bhikkhū vasala,-vādena samudācaratī ti. Ajjhāciṇṇa* (past part of *ajjhācaratī*), “practised, accustomed, committed (V 2:80,34; M 2:248,15, 250,3 f).

<sup>63</sup> As at Sn 469b ≈ Sn 494b. *nirāso* = *ni* (without) + *āsā* (hope, yearning, expectation).

<sup>64</sup> Here “self” (*attā*) refers to the mind.

<sup>65</sup> This line recurs at Dh 142d (relating layperson on the path). DhA 26.25 relates virtually the same story of Pilinda, but with a different closing verse: “Free from harshness, instructive, | uttering the truthful and instructive || that offends none: | such a one I call a brahmin” (*akakkasam viññāpanim, giram saccam udīraye || yāya nābhisaje kañci, tam aham brūmi brāhmanan ti*, DhA 4:182).

<sup>66</sup> There is poetic licence here without the use of the “statistical” article, pointing to spiritual states, not social status.