

SD 61.13**(Māra) Piṇḍa Sutta****The (Māra) Discourse on Alms****S 4.18**

Theme: Māra deprives the Buddha of food but he lives on joy

Translated by Piya Tan ©2017, 2024

1 The Sutta summary and significance**1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY**

The Buddha goes to a brahmin village where there is “sweethearts’ gift-festival” going on, with plenty of food available [2.1]. Māra possesses the minds (“bodies,” says the Commentary) [3.2] so that none of the villagers so that none of them are inclined to give any alms to the Buddha. The Buddha returns with an empty bowl. He meets Māra who invites him to go into the village again, but the Buddha refuses. Learning that it is Māra who is behind this mischief, the Buddha reminds him of the bad karma, and that arhats (like the Buddha) live quite happily on joy, even when they are without a meal.

1.2 DHAMMAPADA CONNECTION

The Sutta verse, **S 482 and 483** appear together in the Dhammapada; Dh 482 (without Dh 483) also recurs at **Dh 200**, attended by a full story (DhA 3:257 f). The Commentary story tells us that 500 village girls hear the Buddha’s verse and are established in the fruit of streamwinning. [3]

2 The Sutta commentary

2.1 The (Māra) Piṇḍa Sutta (S 4.18) opens in the brahmin village of Pañca,sālā (“5 sal trees” = Five Sals) on the occasion of the “sweethearts’ gift-festival” (*kumāraka pāhunaka*,” gifts of the young”), when youths sent gifts to their sweethearts, and maidens to theirs—at least the gift of a garland, if they are unable to give anything else.¹

2.2 The Commentary relates that 500 maidens were about to offer festival cakes (*chaṇa pūva*)² to the Buddha, after which the Buddha would have given them a discourse at the end of which they would have attained the fruit of streamwinning. But, Māra, bent on preventing this, distracted the girls, so that the Buddha’s bowl was “as well-washed as when he had entered” the village.

2.3 Māra then taunted the Buddha by asking him if he had received any alms. When the Buddha asked if he was behind the mischief, Māra promised that if the Buddha entered the village again, he would receive alms this time. Māra’s aim was this time to let the youths ridicule the Buddha for returning for a second almsround after failing to get any the first time. (SA 1:178 f)

¹ S 4.18/1:114 (SD 61.13). C A F Rhys Davids says that it “was a kind of St Valentine’s Day” (S:RD 1:143 n1).

² *Chaṇa* means “festival, holiday” (V 3:187,23).

3 The Dhammapada Commentary story

3.1 MĀRA VATTHU 1 (DhA 15.2)

The Māra Vatthu 1 (DhA 15.2) is a Dhammapada Commentary that relates the background story of the **(Māra) Piṇḍa Sutta** (S 4.18) more fully, basing it on **Dh 200** = S 483.³

Susukharṃ vatā ti. This Dharma teaching was given by the Teacher while staying outside the brahmin village of Pañca,sālā with reference to Māra. [257] For one day the Teacher saw the readiness (*upanissaya*) of 500 maidens for attaining the fruit of streamwinning. He therefore went and stayed near this village.

Now, on a certain festival day those maidens went down to the river and bathed, and having so done, adorned themselves with rich clothing and jewels, and set out for the village. Accordingly, the Teacher, too, entered that village and went about seeking alms. But Mara took possession of the bodies of all the inhabitants of that village, [258] with the result that the Teacher received not even a spoonful of boiled rice.

3.2 As the Teacher departed from that village with bowl as clean as when it had been washed, Mara took his stand at the village gate and said to him,

“Recluse, you received no alms?”

“Evil one, why have you so done that I should receive no alms?”

“Very well, bhante, enter the village again.”

It is said that Māra thought,

“If he enters the village again, I will take possession of the bodies of all the villagers and will cause them to clap their hands before his face, and laugh right in his face!”

At that moment, those maidens reached the village gate of the village, and seeing the Teacher, saluted him and stood respectfully at one side. Then said Mara to the Teacher,

“Bhante, seeing that you received not a morsel of food, you must be afflicted with hunger pangs.”

3.3 The Teacher replied,

“Evil one, though today we received nothing, yet we shall spend the day joyfully, like Great Brahma in the Ābhassara (heaven of the gods of streaming radiance).”

So saying, he pronounced the following stanza:

*susukharṃ vata jīvāma
yesaṃ no n’atthi kiñcanaṃ
pīti,bhakkhā bhavissāma
devā ābhassarā yathā ti*

Dh 200

Truly happily indeed we live.
For whomever have nothing whatsoever,
we will be partakers of joy [zest]
like the Ābhassara devas (of streaming radiance)!

3.4 COMMENTARY

“**For whomever**” (*yesaṃ*). For us in whom there is not any “something” (*kiñcana*) amongst the various “things” that serve as obstructions, such as sensual lust and so on. [4.2]

“**Partakers of joy**” (*pīti,bhakkhā*). The meaning is this: just as the Ābhassara gods feed on joy and live out their days only in joy, so too shall we become. [4.3]

³ What follows is a full tr of DhA 3:257-259 (based partly on that of E W Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends*,1921 3:72 f). Cf E Windisch, *Māra und Buddha*, Leipzig, 1895:102-104.

3.5 At the end of the teaching, the 500 maidens were established in the fruit of streamwinning.

(DhA 15.2/3:257-259)

4 The “nothing” verses

4.1 THE KARMA OF “SOMETHING” (S 482)

4.1.1 Making something out of nothing

4.1.1.1 In very simple terms, it can be said that early Buddhism differs from later Buddhism, other religions and secular systems, with Buddhism rejecting even the notion of “**something**” (*kiñcana*), that is, view of some external reality or agency in ultimate reality. Theistic religions, for example, begin by wondering, “Why is there *something* rather than nothing?” and jumps into the conclusion that that something must have been placed there or created by a “God.”

For anything to exist and make sense, it must change; to exist is to be impermanent. Therefore, there can be no “eternal” agencies or entities. Hence, the Buddha unequivocally rejects **eternalism**, the claim that any agency or entity can exist eternally, since it is a meaningless statement. It would not be wise to proclaim such claims as a “private truth” or “private reality”: this is how we define “madness”!

4.1.1.2 While it is easy to reject eternalism regarding an *external something*, it is much more difficult to detect an *internal* eternalist view, such as a self-view. How can an unchanging everlasting “self” exist since we are each an ever-changing being? Our memory of the past, experience of the present, and vision of the future allows us to imagine that there is a continuity of such ideas. We then misconstrue this series of causes and effects as existing “eternally.” These are merely our ideas or imagination about the past, the present and the future.

Even the present moment ceases to exist as we breathe in and out. We only experience the rise and fall of the breath, the beginning and ending of states of reality. We may see, hear, smell, taste or touch something, but our *ideas* of them project a false idea that they seem eternal—that “something” actually exists beyond this change.

4.1.2 There is really no “thing” but states

4.1.2.1 A house may still exist whether we have an idea of it or not; it does not cease to exist when we stop thinking about it. Yet, the house, like all things that exist are “constructed.” Firstly, it arose from our ideas and actions; secondly, it is itself made up of basic elements, that is, earth, water, fire and wind (like all physical things). In modern terms, we speak of solid, liquid, heat and motion.

Earth as **solidity** is what we can touch and feel (resistance of hardness, softness, roughness, etc). Water as **liquid or fluidity** is the cohesiveness of such things, giving it shape and structure. Fire as **heat** is basically *decay*; these elements are decaying all the time. We take advantage of this decaying process as *heat* to assemble different shapes and structures. Then, there is wind or **motion**: every physical object is made up of tiny atoms and molecules of matter that are in perpetual motion. Hence, all constructed realities are “formations” (*saṅkhārā*): they *rise, persist and then cease*.⁴ In such a dynamic state of true reality, there is neither nothing nor something that exists. All is *change*.

⁴ On the 3-phase momentary event, see SD 62.10a (3.3.6.3).

4.1.2.2 Earth, water, fire and wind are the 4 fundamental states of matter or physical reality. Then there are **space** and **consciousness**. These are the 6 fundamental elements of the physical world. These 6 elements are best understood in terms of our own personal existence; “personal” in the sense that we are nothing but body (the 4 elements) and mind (consciousness). Space is the emptiness that fills up where the 4 elements seem not to be present (such as our oral cavity, and the spaces in our nose, ears and so on), and the “me”-like volume that we display in this world.

We make sense of all this because of our consciousness. These other elements cease to exist for us when we lack the consciousness to experience them. Even then our consciousness depends on the level of wisdom we are capable of cultivating. An animal, for example, may not be aware of the elements as we would be. A fish only “knows” how to live in water or mud, perhaps only for a limited time out of water. A worm knows little more than the earth in which it exists. What about the “higher” species?

4.1.2.3 Humans have that special faculty that is **the mind**, with which we are able to learn new things and even transcend our senses by mastering the mind in meditation. We are also aware of other states of existence, and are able to attain them. We are either reborn into the animal state by way of karma; or we may attain celestial form by letting go of our body-dependent selves. Finally, by freeing ourselves from all self-views and ignorance, we are able to attain that liberation called nirvana.

What unifies us with the rest of the sentient world is that we *all* have some level of **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*). Through consciousness, we interact with others in our own species and with other species (such as animals), and with other sentient beings (such as celestial aliens). We can see qualities like memory, kindness, even love, commonly expressed in animals, too. The suttas and Buddhist stories speak of these capabilities in both animals and sense-world beings and celestials.

Since consciousness is how we are *aware* of ourselves, of others and of our environment, and plays a vital role in our *being* human, we can just as easily be dominated by an “animal” consciousness (both good and bad), and animals, too, may not only display “human” consciousness but even be reborn as humans or as divine beings. The early Buddhist texts often relate how animals are born as divine beings: even animals such as elephants, monkeys, bats and frogs can and do go to heaven.⁵

The Buddha is recorded as praising the loyalty and trustworthiness of some animals which humans should emulate!⁶ Hence, how we treat animals also influences our rebirth karma.⁷ If we understand the modern usage of “soul” as referring to our consciousness, especially as suggested by Caitrin Keiper in “Do elephants have souls?”, it is this consciousness that is the common denominator of all living beings.⁸

4.2 “FOR WHOMEVER” (S 482B = DH 200B)

4.2.1 Mental states as “something”

4.2.1.1 The Buddha then chides Māra [S 482 = Dh 200] for being so evil, warning him of the consequences of bad karma, and the Buddha declares that he is unaffected by such mischief [S 483]. From Māra’s conduct in the Sutta story, we can make out at least 2 of his negative qualities. Firstly, it seems that Māra is jealous of the Buddha and does not wish him to benefit from offerings from so many people

⁵ SD 6.1 (3); SD 26.1 (7.2). See also Piya Tan, “Animals go to heaven,” 2009: [R68a](#); “My influence on the Buddha,” 2010: [R152](#).

⁶ See the Udena cycle, **DhA 2.1(2)**/1:171-173, where the Buddha is quoted as saying that “animals are straightforward and not given to deceit. Humans, however, think one thing in their heart but say another with their lips.”

⁷ On how humans are reborn as well-cared for pets, see (**Dasaka**) **Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 10.177), SD 2.6a.

⁸ Here is a series of fascinating articles suggesting “evidence for non-human intelligence, awareness and emotion”: the first article, Caitrin Keiper, “Do elephants have souls?” 2013 [[NewAtlantis](#)]. (Thanks Matt Jenkins for this insightful link. 7 Dec 2024.)

at the festival where there is plenty of food. Secondly, this is the darker truth: Māra does not want the Buddha to receive the alms from the 500 village maidens because he will be teaching Dharma to them after that, and they will attain the path.

Māra is not omniscient, but he well knows how the Buddha teaches, and how beings get liberated, often in large numbers; and when they are liberated, Māra loses his power over them. Thus, preventing the maidens from giving alms to the Buddha is, as it were, to nip things in the bud, to prevent those 500 maidens from ever listening to the Dharma. His mission, as it were, is to prevent people from hearing the Dharma or living in Dharma, since this will bring them to the path and out of his power.

4.2.1.2 Māra, psychologically, is a “demon of habit,” with a predictable routine rooted in greed, hatred and delusion. Māra’s **greed** is such that he is never contented with the number of beings in his domain, *māra, dheyya* or *maccu, dheyya*.⁹ Māra’s **hatred** is a single-minded drive to ensure beings never hear the liberating Dharma. Māra is not only **deluded** but is himself the master of delusion.

Even while the Buddha lives, Māra is already busy at distracting and corrupting those who follow the Buddha to give up keeping to the precepts, to succumb to fear and end their meditation, to hold wrong views and create their private and limited editions of Buddhism. We see Māra’s mission wildly successful amongst modern sangha members and lay teachers who reject the Vinaya and precepts, live worldly lives, and preach their own self-centred Buddhisms.

4.2.2 Renunciation is about not seeing “something” in the world

4.2.2.1 As a rule, we turn to religion for all the wrong reasons. We are looking for “something,” and when we cannot find that something, we often end up fabricating it ourselves. So, we create God in our own image. Then, we impose such an idea upon others. So long as we are powerless, our idea remains as a private reality, rooted in our own craving and ignorance. When we have the power, we force others to accept our private views. Such a private reality means that this is the “something” that we need or must have; we do not need anything else. We just stop learning; we only need to believe. We are piously told: “Believe that you may understand!”¹⁰

The Bhaya Bherava Sutta (M 4) records the Buddha as declaring that there are those “who perceive night to be day, and perceive day to be night ... I say that they live in delusion ... I perceive night as night, and perceive day as day.” (M 4,21/1L21), SD 44.3.

4.2.2.2 As a rule, the kind of teacher we meet and follow decides the quality of Dharma for us. A good teacher does not say, “I’m the way!” but points to the way so that we may and must take the journey ourselves. For the way or path is not the journey; our self-reliance, self-effort and self-realization is the journey, and the destination is self-free liberation that is nirvana.

When the Bodhisattva had the visions of decay, disease and death, he realized that life had nothing to offer him. Then, he saw the joyful peace of the renunciant (the 4th sight). He simply wanted to feel and live that same joy and peace.

He went to the 2 best teachers of the day and learned their meditations, mastered them but made no breakthrough. Then, he turned to the “old way” of self-mortification, but when he noticed that he was nearer to death than liberation, he wisely recalled the joyful peace he had experience even as a 7-year-old. He realized that the peaceful joy of dhyana is the way to empower his mind to break through

⁹ See SD 61.12 (2.2.2).

¹⁰ See SD 49.2,13 (3.5.2); SD 56.18 (1.2.1.2).

the bodily limits and tap the full capacity of the mind. Freeing the mind totally from the body, he was able to see directly into true reality and awaken to Buddhahood and nirvana.¹¹

4.2.2.3 Since Māra is always caught up with the notion of “something” for others so that they are in his power, the Buddha replies that he is amongst those “**for whomever** (*yesam*) have nothing whatsoever” [S 483b], meaning, “For us in whom there is not any ‘**something**’ (*kiñcana*) amongst the various ‘things’ that serve as obstructions, such as sensual lust and so on.” (SA 1:179,28 f; DhA 3:259). We thus see the use of the term *kiñcana* to refer to the 3 unwholesome roots of karma, that is, *lust, hatred and delusion*, such as in **the Go,datta Sutta** (S 41.7).¹²

Further, says the Go,datta Sutta,

Lust ... is something. Hatred is something. Delusion is something.¹³

For a monk whose influxes¹⁴ have been destroyed, abandoned, cut off at the root, made like a palm-tree stump so that they are no more subject to future arising ...

(S 41.7,13/4:297), SD 60.4

The Commentaries explain *kiñcana* as if it were derived from a verb *kiñcati* glossed with *maddati palibundhati*, “crushes, impedes,” thus as meaning “obstruction or impediment.”¹⁵ *Kiñcana* is properly derived from *kiñ + cana*, meaning simply “something.”¹⁶ Here, the Pali word is used idiomatically to mean having something that becomes an impediment. *Kiñcana* is a didactic construction used as a skillful means to understand the nature of defilements.¹⁷

4.3 “PARTAKERS OF JOY” (S 483c = Dh 200c)

4.3.1 The phrase, “**partakers of joy**” (*pīti,bhakkhā*), is used in two senses here: (1) the devas, such as those of Ābhassara (streaming radiance), and (2) dhyana meditators who live joyfully. The meaning is that just as the Ābhassara devas feed on joy and live out their days only in joy, so too will the arhats. The devas of Streaming Radiance (*ābhassara*) inhabit the highest plane of the 2nd dhyana, located in the form world. They are said to subsist on rapture (*pīti,bhakkha*) because they are sustained by the nourishment of the dhyana.

4.3.2 The joy of sutta work

4.3.2.1 How do we **partake of joy** in our daily lives? We often feel joy when we are engaged in a fun activity like a sport, a past-time, playing music, socializing or even doing a simple routine. However, such joy is not lasting; often we tire from the activity or lose interest in it. Moreover, when the joy-producing act is unwholesome, we will also feel its unwholesome effects in time. Then, negative emotions will overwhelm us.

¹¹ On Gotama’s quest for awakening, see **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,1-18/1:160=167), SD 1.11.

¹² S 41.7/4:297,18 f (SD 60.4).

¹³ *Rāgo kho bhante kiñcanam doso kiñcanam moho kiñcanam.*

¹⁴ **Influxes** (*āsava*), ie, the defilements of sensual desire, existence, views and ignorance: **Cūḷa Gopālaka S** (M 34,-6) n SD 61.3.

¹⁵ MA 2:354,34-39; SA 3:99,2.

¹⁶ See SED sv (2) *ka, kas, ka, kim.*

¹⁷ See **Aneñja,sappāya S** (M 106,8/2:263,34-264,1 (SD 95.13); **Brāhmaṇa Sacca S** (A 4.185/2:177); **(Tadah’) Upo-satha S** (A 3.70,3.2/1:206), SD 4.18. See PED (*kiñcana*) for refs that help clarify its meaning.

As a rule, to feel sustained joy, we should be engaged in a wholesome act that is morally healthy and mentally engaging. Keeping up a routine of proper meditation (with a suitable object) or some kind of “sutta work” (sutta listening, reading, discussion or translating) with proper preparations can be a powerful source of sustained joy.

Our attitude towards such a **Dharma-spirited engagement** is vital for inspiring joy, which keeps that wholesome activity going. My own experience is with over 20 years of sustained sutta translation work and Dharma writing.¹⁸ Both knowing that we have the Buddhist texts and reference works, this large store of sutta translations, and the growing understanding of suttas can arouse joy.

4.3.2.2 Whenever I start work on a sutta I recall how, in my youth, it was almost impossible to read any sutta (or good Dharma work) in English, and now I rejoice that they are so easily available in text and translation. I do not see it as a chore but rather a curiosity and a blessing: “I wonder what this sutta teaches?” I do not set any time-limit or schedule; I just feel like doing it and get down to it, like chatting with a dear old friend. Then, I stop working when I begin to feel tired, and make careful note of where I had stopped, making sure the work is properly saved and stored.

When I resume the sutta work, I often need to compare sutta words, teachings and events in other texts and sources. This research work may take up a lot of time as the facts and understanding are put together. This is one of those moments when we notice how we learn and understand the suttas and the Dharma. I try to take at least one turn at proof-reading the work I have completed; there are always typos to be corrected, and sections revised or extended, even new sections added.

Another way I prevent burnout—the first is not to take it as a job to be done but a Dharma practice—is to complete about 180-200 A4 pages of work and compile them into one SD (Sutta Discovery) volume every 3-4 months. This is given an ISBN and 2 copies are submitted to the National Library, and a copy will be sent to each of our subscribers (those who still prefer hard copies).¹⁹ The SD 60 for our 20th anniversary of full-time sutta work burgeoned into 6 volumes (60abcdef) plus an additional SD 60.2 (a series on practical meditation in our time). SD 61 (on Māra and related topics), too, grew into 3 volumes. Meantime, I have listed sutta titles and Dharma topics into quarterly slots enough to last till 2032. Whether I will be able to work till then remains to be seen. Meantime, I can only say that it is the joy of the Dharma that keeps me working. It gives meaning and purpose to my life, and hopefully to yours, too.

There is always time for the suttas and Dharma. It is when we have no thought for sutta or Dharma that we have no time for them. When we love someone, we always find time for that person. The Dharma is what we are and can be; we begin with loving ourself so that we know how to truly love others.

(Māra) Piṇḍa Sutta

The (Māra) Discourse on Alms

S 4.18

1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in a brahmin village of Pañca,sālā in Magadha. **[114]**

¹⁸ The Sutta Discovery (SD) work started in 2002 and has continued unbroken to date. I am amazed at this myself.

¹⁹ The whole library of the soft copies of the SD series and other works (such as reflections, books, etc) are freely available at <http://dharmafarer.org>.

2 Now at that time, the gift-festival of the young was being held at the brahmin village.²⁰

3 Then, in the morning, the Blessed One, having dressed, taking robe and bowl, entered Pañca,-sālā for alms.

4 Now at that time, Māra the evil one had taken possession of the brahmin householders of Pañca,sālā, (inciting in them this thought):

“Don’t let the recluse Gotama get any alms!”

5 Then the Blessed One left Pañca,sālā with his bowl just as cleanly washed as it was when he entered it for alms.

6 Then Māra the evil one approached the Blessed One and said to him:

“Did you get any alms, recluse?”

7 “Was it you, evil one, who saw to it that I did not get any alms?”

“Then, Bhante, let the Blessed One enter Pañca,sālā a second time for alms.

I will see to it that the Blessed One gets some alms.”²¹

[The Blessed One:]

8 *apuññam pasavi māro
āsajja naṃ tathāgataṃ
kiṃ nu maññasi pāpima
na me pāpaṃ vipaccati*

S 482

You’ve made great demerit, Māra!
You have assailed the Tathagata—
What do you think, O evil one, that
“My bad deed does not ripen”?²²

9 *susukhaṃ vata jīvāma
yesaṃ no n’atthi kiñcanaṃ
pīti,bhakkhā bhavissāma
devā ābhassarā yathā ti*

S 483

Truly happily indeed we live.
For whomever have nothing whatsoever,²³
we will be partakers of joy [zest]²⁴
like the Ābhassara devas (of streaming radiance)!²⁵

10 Then, Māra the evil one, thinking,

“The Blessed One knows me, the well gone one knows me!”

Sad and disheartened, he disappeared right there.²⁶

— evaṃ —

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²⁰ Se Ee1+2 have *kumārakānaṃ*, “of the young or boys” as against Be Se *kumārikānaṃ*, “of the maidens.” Comy explains that on this day, gifts were sent or given to one another. Boys of the same caste and clan (*jāti,gotta*), having gathered together, the well-to-do sent presents of ornaments to their sweethearts among the girls, even a garland of flowers if they can give nothing else. (SA 1:178,21-29). It was a kind of “St Valentine’s Day” (S:F 1:143 n1; DhA 3:257) [3].

²¹ For the full story, see above (3).

²² See above (4.1).

²³ See above (4.2).

²⁴ “Joy” is a free tr, reflecting the general sense of *pīti* here. This is an allusion to the “zest” (*pīti*) of the 2nd dhyana of the Ābhassara devas. See also **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (5.2). On “partakers of joy,” see above (4.3).

²⁵ Ābhassara (“streaming radiance”) is a celestial world, the highest of the 2nd-dhyana form worlds, populated by luminous beings who live on zest (*pīti*) and emanate lightning-like radiance. See SD 2.19 (2.3.3).

²⁶ *Dukkhī dummano tatth’ev’antaradhāyi*. This stock occurs 32 times in Saṃyutta in connection with Māra [SD 61.9 (3.1.2)].