

SD 61.14 (Māra) Sappa Sutta

The (Māra) Discourse on the Serpent

S 4.6

Theme: Māra appears as a fearsome serpent

Translated by Piya Tan ©2011, 2024

1 Sutta summary

While the Buddha is sitting alone in the open on a dark drizzling night, Māra tries to frighten him by appearing as a huge fearsome serpent. The Buddha replies in verse saying basically that only those who are attached to something (acquisitions) will have fear.

2 The nature of fear

2.1 HOW FEAR ARISES

2.1.1 Fear (n) is a bad feeling that *we will be hurt, we will suffer, we will lose someone or something, or we will die*, or that someone dear or significant to us will be hurt or suffer, or that *they will die*. By “**bad**” here is meant unwholesome (*akusala*), that is, our feeling of fear arises from *greed, hatred or delusion*.

2.1.2 Hence, it is said, “**From attachment arises fear**” (Dh 212-216). What is connoted by “attachment” here arises at different levels and in different ways, thus:

(1) <i>piyato jāyati bhayaṃ</i>	from <u>the pleasant</u>	<i>piya</i>	arises fear,	Dh 212b;
(2) <i>pemato jāyati bhayaṃ</i>	from <u>affection</u>	<i>pema</i>	arises fear,	Dh 213b;
(3) <i>ratiyā jāyati bhayaṃ</i>	from <u>attachment</u>	<i>rati</i>	arises fear,	Dh 214b;
(4) <i>kāmato jāyati bhayaṃ</i>	from <u>lust</u>	<i>kāma</i>	arises fear,	Dh 215b;
(5) <i>taṇhāya jāyati bhayaṃ</i>	from <u>craving</u>	<i>taṇhā</i>	arises fear,	Dh 216b.

From these 5 Dhammapada lines, we can see some kind of progressive severity of negative emotions, that is, *affection, attachment, sense-desire* and *craving*. They all are rooted in **greed** (*lobha*), the desire to have or to be, and at each level that want gets stronger. In simple terms, we can see these emotions as 5 kinds or stages of desire (*rāga*), that is, (1) of attraction, (2) of having, (3) of enjoying, (4) of lust, and (5) of being dependent on someone or something, respectively.

2.1.3 Each of the above lines are from a template verse, that is, each of the key-words—the pleasant, affection, attachment, lust and craving—appear in a verse of its own. Line (1) appears as a verse thus:

<i>piyato jāyati soko</i>	From the pleasant arises grief.
<i>piyato jāyati bhayaṃ</i>	From <u>the pleasant</u> arises fear.
<i>piyato vipparamuttassa</i>	For one well free from <u>the pleasant</u> ,
<i>n’atthi soko kuto bhayaṃ</i> Dh 212	there is no grief, much less fear.

The highlighted words are then replaced by each of the other 4 objects or emotions: *the pleasant, affection, attachment, lust* and craving, and read in the same way. Two points should be noted here:

- (1) all the 5 kinds of attachment arouse fear.
- (2) where there is **fear** there is also grief (some kind of negative emotion).

2.2 STORIES OF DESIRE-ROOTED SORROW

2.2.0 Dhammapada stories relating to desire

Here we will briefly look at 5 Dhammapada stories relating to the effects of desire. Each story starts off with a related incident; the Buddha uses this as a Dharma teaching; the teaching closes with the pronouncement of a Dhammapada verse.

2.2.1 *Aññatara Kuṭumbika Vatthu* (DhA 16.2/3:276-278; Dh 212)

2.2.1.1 The story of a certain houselord: the Buddha comforts the afflicted.¹

A certain houselord (*kuṭumbika*) lost his son, and was unable to restrain his grief: he went daily to the burning-ground and wept. The Buddha visited him and was welcomed by the layman.

“Layman, why are you sad?

“I have lost my son.”

“Grieve not, layman. That which is called death is not confined to one place or to one person but is common to all beings born into the world. Not a single formation (whatever exists) is permanent.

Therefore, one should not grieve but should rather skillfully recollect the wise of old at the deaths of their children, saying, “Subject to death, one dies; subject to breaking up, one breaks up” (*maraṇa, dhammaṃ mataṃ, bhijjana, dhammaṃ bhinnaṃ*).²

When the brahmin asked the Buddha who these wise of old were and when they lived, the Buddha related **the (Brāhmaṇa) Uruga Jātaka** (J 354) with this verse: [2.2.1.2]

Just as a snake casts off its old skin, Even so he no more enjoys the body,	so one, having discarded the body, moves on, having done one’s time and moved on.	
While the body burns, Therefore, I grieve not for him;	one hears not the lamentations of kinsfolk. he has gone to his destiny.	(J 354)

To conclude the lesson, the Buddha uttered this verse:

From the pleasant arises grief, For one well free from <u>the pleasant</u> ,	from <u>the pleasant</u> arises fear. there is no grief, much less fear.	(Dh 212)
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2.2.1.2 The (Brāhmaṇa) Uruga Jātaka (J 354/3:162-168)

The **Bodhisattva** was once born as a brahmin in Benares. He had a wife, a son, a daughter, a daughter-in-law and a female slave. They lived happily together, and on the Bodhisattva’s advice kept their thoughts constantly fixed on the inevitability of death.

One day, while burning some rubbish in the field, the son was bitten by a snake and died. The father laid his body under a tree, and having sent word to his house that all the others should come, when bringing his meal, to bring along perfumes and flowers; then, he went on with his work.

After the meal, they made a funeral pyre and burnt the body, but not one of them wept a single tear. By virtue of their piety, Sakra’s throne was heated and he appeared to them in disguise. He questioned them separately as to whether their not displaying any grief for the dead meant that they did not

¹ This story is similar to the intro to J 354/3:162-168.

² DhA 3:277 = J 3:161.

love him. Being convinced that their composure was due to their practice of the thought of death, he revealed his identity, and filled their house with the 7 kinds of treasures. [2.2.1.1]

2.2.2 Visākha Vatthu (DhA 16.3/3:278 f; Dh 213)

2.2.2.1 The story of Visākhā: how many shall we mourn for?

The female disciple, lady Visākhā of Sāvattihī, allowed her son's daughter, Dattā, to minister to the monks in her house when she was away. After a time, Dattā suddenly died. After the disposal of her body (*sarīra, nikkhepa*),³ Visākhā was unable to restrain her grief.

Grieving, she visited the Buddha who noticed her grief.

"Why is it, Visākhā, you sit here grieving, with tears in your eyes, weeping and wailing?"

Visākhā explained her loss,

"Bhante, the girl was very dear to me! She was faithful and true. I shall not see the life of her again."

"Now, Visākhā, how many inhabitants are there in Sāvattihī?"

"I've heard you say there are 7 koṭis⁴."

"Would you like to have all these people as dear to you as Dattā was?"

"Yes, of course, bhante."

"But how many people die every day in Sāvattihī?"

"A great many, Bhante."

"In that case, it is certain that you would lack time to satiate your grief; you would go about night and day, doing nothing but weep!"

"Certainly, Bhante, I quite understand."

"Very well, then, do not grieve. For whether it be grief or fear, it springs from **affection**."

So saying, the Buddha uttered this verse:

From affection arises grief,	from <u>affection</u> arises fear.	
For one well free from <u>affection</u> ,	there is no grief, much less fear.	(Dh 213)

2.2.2.2 The lesson of **the Visākha Vatthu** is not that we should not be grieving the deaths of others since there are too many of them dying. Rather, the Buddha is reminding us of the universal nature of impermanence and death. **The Tiro,kuḍḍa Sutta** (Khp 7 = Pv 1.5) records the Buddha as instructing us that when praying for the deceased or at any time we should recall with love (*mettā*) the good they have done (*pubbe kataṃ anussaraṃ*).⁵ This is a kind of lovingkindness cultivation (*mettā bhāvanā*).

Moreover, a mutually beneficial way to recall the dearly departed is for us to do so by living a morally virtuous life and cultivating a calm and clear mind for happiness here and now. If the departed are reborn in divine realms or some form in which their consciousness is still linked with ours, then they will rejoice at what we are doing in their name. In this way, we all—here and hereafter—can be happy.

³ This refers to Dattā's body being deposited in a charnel ground.

⁴ *Sata, jana, hoṭiyo* (DhA 3:279,4). A *koṭi* is 10,000,000 (10 M); hence, 70 *koṭi* is 70 M. Buddhaghosa says that in the Buddha's time, Sāvattihī had 57,000 families (*satta, paññāsāya kula, sata, sahassehi*, VA 3:614,10; SnA 1:371,18 f) and a population of "18 M" (*aṭṭhārasa, koṭi, manussā*, SnA 1:371,19 f). The latter figure is traditionally written as "18,00,00,000" Anyway, assuming each Sāvattihī family had an average number of 10 people, 10 x 57,000 families, would give us 570,000 people, which would be a more likely figure. In 2019, the population of London is 8.9 M, and NY 8.3 M. Ancient Sāvattihī was much smaller than either modern London or NY. On ancient Indian numbers, see W Kirfel, *Die Kosmographie der Inder*, Bonn & Leipzig, 1920:336.

⁵ Khp 7,9 = Pv 1.5,9 (SD 2.7).

2.2.3 Licchavī Vatthu (DhA 16.4/3:279 f; Dh 214)**2.2.3.1 The story of the Licchavīs:** the young princes fight over a courtesan (a story of attachment).

It is said that on a festival day, the Licchavī princes of Vesālī, adorned in their most varied variety, left the city to go to the pleasure garden. As the Buddha entered the city for alms, he saw them and addressed the monks,

“Bhikshus, just look at the Licchavī princes! Those of you who have never seen the Thirty-three Devas, take a look at those princes!”

So saying, the Buddha entered the city, the princes saw a certain courtesan and took her with them. Becoming jealous of one another over the courtesan, they fell to fighting with each other, resulting in some blood-letting. They had to be carried away on litters by servants. After the Buddha had taken his meal, he left the city.

When the monks saw the Licchavī princes thus borne away, they said to the Buddha:

“Bhante, early at dawn the Licchavī princes departed from the city adorned and beautified like gods. But now, all because of a single woman, they have come to this sad plight.”

Said the Buddha:

“Bhikshus, whether it be grief or fear, it springs from **attachment**.”

So saying, the Buddha uttered this verse:

From attachment arises grief,	from <u>attachment</u> arises fear.	
For one well free from <u>attachment</u> ,	there is no grief, much less fear.	(Dh 214)

2.2.3.2 The Licchavī princes were young and lascivious, fired up by their youthfulness and kshatriya pride. Their bloody fight over a single beautiful woman, a courtesan (an Indian geisha), brought those godlike youths down to the level of fierce rutting beasts, who ended up hurting one another. In evolutionary terms, such a fight reminds us of “the survival of the fittest” whose seeds would be nurtured by a naturally selected female who would procreate with similarly dominant better-evolved members of the species. This is, in fact, how nature or samsara works. In this case it is Māra, playing Father Nature, at work!

The early Buddhist teaching of love and sex is, as a rule, in the context of a partnership or a family. Lust may draw two persons together, but it is **love** that keeps them happily together. Attachment keeps bodies together but, since the body changes, it is in need of constant toilet clearing and cleaning, and decays; such a bodily pairing is unlikely to last long or be a happy one.

Love has to be boundless or unconditional; it is called **mettā** or lovingkindness, which we shall simply call “love” in this context. This is the unconditional acceptance of one another as lovers and partners, and the fruits of such love, the couple’s children. Love is the appreciation of one another in partnership much more than just the mere physical level.

2.2.3.3 Partners in true love enjoy mental aspects of one another that evoke joyful emotions which often result in great art, music, literature and things of beauty. As such, as a marriage of hearts matures, the partners begin to experience deeper dimensions of their mutual being. They begin to see their partnership as being more than the sum of two people. This may be said to be the spiritual dimension of their lives.

Such a healthy and happy partnership is said to constitute “**harmonious living**” (*sama,jīvi*). It is characterized by the 6 conditions for conciliation (*sāraṇīya,dhamma*), that is:

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|---|------------------------------|
| (1) showing lovingkindness through bodily deeds | (<i>mettā,kāya,kamma</i>), |
| (2) showing lovingkindness through speech | (<i>mettā,vacī,kamma</i>), |

(3) showing lovingkindness through thought	(<i>mettā,mano,kamma</i>),
(4) mutual sharing of what one has	(<i>sādhāraṇa,bhogī</i>),
(5) harmony [compatibility] in moral virtue	(<i>sīla,samaññatā</i>),
(6) harmony in view	(<i>diṭṭhi,sāmaññatā</i>).
	(D 33,2.2(14)/3:245; A 6.11/3:288 f)

Their lives then become models for happiness that inspire other couples. We are reminded of the beautiful spiritual partnership between the Buddha and Ānanda, and the ideal couple of early Buddhism, Nakula,pitā and Nakula,mātā.⁶ Ānanda, Nakula,pitā and Nakula,mātā were also streamwinners for most of their lives.

2.2.4 Anitthi,gandha Kumāra Vatthu (DhA 16.5/3:281-284; Dh 215)

2.2.4.1 The story of youth Anitthi,gandha⁷: the golden maiden (a story of lust).

Anitthi,gandha, we are told, passed away from the brahma world and was reborn into a family of great wealth in Sāvattḥī. From birth, he refused to go near a woman. When he came of age (around 16), his parents wanted to arrange a marriage for him. He flatly refused.

His parents insisted on marriage, warning that the family line would otherwise end. His family even had 500 goldsmiths make a golden statue of a beautiful woman. Anitthi,gandha then said: “If you can get me a woman who looks just like that, I will do your bidding.” Some brahmins were told to take the golden image with them to search for her doppelganger.

In the city of Sāgala in Madda country, a young woman’s nurse, seeing the golden image, thought that it was that maiden. The doppelganger was found. She was brought by carriage to Sāvattḥī to meet Anitthi,gandha. However, being of delicate constitution, she could not withstand the rough journey, and suddenly died.

Anitthi,gandha’s parents decided not to tell him about his loss. As the days passed, he felt more excitement in anticipation of meeting the beautiful woman. After a few days, the parents had to break the news of her death to Anitthi,gandha. He was devastated by the sudden loss, and fell into profound grief. He stayed in his room and refused to take any food.

The Buddha, noticing that Anitthi,gandha was ready for the path, went to his house to meet him. Upon being asked by the Buddha, Anitthi,gandha explained his great loss and grief, such that even his food does not agree with him.

“But, young man, do you know the cause of this profound sorrow that has afflicted you?”

“No, bhante, I do not.”

“Young man, because of lust, profound grief has come upon you. Grief and fear both spring from lust.”

So saying, the Teacher uttered this verse:

From lust arises grief,	from <u>lust</u> arises fear.	
For one well free from <u>lust</u> ,	there is no grief, much less fear.	(Dh 215)

At the conclusion of the lesson, the youth Anitthi,gandha was established in the fruit of streamwinning.

⁶ See **Sāmā,jīvi S 1** (A 4.55/2:62 f), SD 5.1; for suttas relating to Nakula, pitā and Nakula,mātā: SD 5.1 (1).

⁷ The name *an-itthi,gandha kumāra* lit means “the youth who has not a whiff for women.”

2.2.4.2 Lust (*kāma*) refers to a mental fixation on a certain object—which may be rooted in a sight, sound, smell, taste or touch—and thinking in a manner to project a more exciting image of it than in reality. Anitthi, gandha’s fixation with the beauty of the golden image of a pretty maiden, and the notion of actually being able to *have* that image, aroused great attachment in him. He was flooded with this delusion. With the sudden death of the maiden, his bubble of delusion burst. He was unable to accept this frustration, especially after he had decided that this was the right woman for himself.

Perhaps, on account of his immediate past life as a brahma, it was not difficult for him to understand and accept the Buddha’s explanation of his grief and fear (that he too could suddenly die). With the Buddha’s gentle teachings of reality at this poignant moment in the youth’s life, he could at once see the reality of his predicament, and so attained streamwinning.

2.2.5 Aññatara Brāhmaṇa Vatthu (DhA 16.6/3:284-286; Dh 216)

2.2.5.1 The story of a certain brahmin: set not your heart on worldly things (a story of craving).

A brahmin who held false views went to the river-bank to clear his field. The Buddha, noticing that he was ready for the path, went up to him, but the brahmin ignored the Buddha, who was the first to speak (*puretaraṃ ālapitvā*) [2.1.5.2].

“What are you doing, brahmin?”

“Clearing my field, master Gotama.” The Buddha said no more and went his way.

On the following day, the brahmin was ploughing his field. The Buddha again went to him:

“What are you doing, brahmin?”

“Ploughing my field, master Gotama.” The Buddha, hearing his reply, went his way.

Over the next few days, the Buddha went to the brahmin and asked the same question, and he received the answers:

“Master Gotama, I am planting my field; I am weeding my field; I am guarding my field,” and the Buddha went his way.

One day, the brahmin said to the Buddha,

“Master Gotama, you have been coming here ever since I cleared my field. If my crops turn out well, I will give you a share. I will not eat without giving you a share. Henceforth, you will be my companion.”

As time went on, he said to himself,

“My crop has prospered. Tomorrow, I will set the harvesters to work.”

But that night, a severe storm flattened all his crop; the field looked like it was cut clean.

At dawn, the brahmin said to himself,

“I will look at my field.”

But when he reached the field and saw that it had been swept clean, he thought with profound grief, how the Buddha had visited him from the start, and his promise to share the crop as a companion.

“But my heart’s desire has not been fulfilled.” He refused to eat and took to his bed.

Now, the Buddha knew from the start the brahmin’s crop would not prosper. He stopped at the brahmin’s house. When the brahmin’s servants told the Buddha of the brahmin’s condition, he asked the brahmin to see him.

“What’s the matter, brahmin?” asked the Buddha.

The brahmin related how the Buddha had visited him daily and of the brahmin’s promise to give a share of the crop to the Buddha as he was his companion.

“But my heart’s desire has not been fulfilled. Therefore, grief has overwhelmed me, and my food no longer agrees with me.”

“But, brahmin,” asked the Buddha, “do you know the cause of this profound sorrow that has afflicted you?”

“No, master Gotama, I do not, but you know.”

“Yes, brahmin, whether grief or fear arises, it arises solely from craving.”

“Brahmin, because of craving, profound grief has come upon you. Grief and fear both spring from craving.”

So saying, the Buddha uttered this verse:

From craving arises grief,	from <u>craving</u> arises fear.	
For one well free from <u>craving</u> ,	there is no grief, much less fear.	(Dh 216)

The Buddha convinced him that craving was the cause of his grief, and established him in the fruit of streamwinning.

2.2.5.2 The Aññatara Brāhmaṇa Vatthu (DhA 16.6) is a beautiful story of friendship and healing in simple language. The story opens with the Buddha meeting an unfriendly brahmin “with wrong views” (*micchā, diṭṭhika*). The Buddha was the first to greet him (*puretaraṃ ālapitvā*), a quality of the Buddha praised by another brahmin, Kūṭadanta, thus: “The recluse master Gotama is one who bids all welcome, congenial, courteous, never frowning, approachable, the first to greet others [the first to speak].”⁸

Despite the brahmin’s cold unfriendly ignoring of the Buddha, he engaged with the brahmin by simply asking him (in a polite, warm, resonant voice) what he was doing. This gentle engagement went on for many days, until the brahmin got so used to him that he accepted the Buddha as a “companion” (*sahāya*) and to have “a share” in his harvest meals.

However, as it turned out a freak storm destroyed all his crop. He was inconsolably devastated, after all his diligence and promise to share the harvest with the Buddha. He was preparing himself only for a perceived success. In this case, the bigger the perceived success, the harder the sense of failure. When he understood the Buddha’s explanation of how such craving makes failure seem bigger than it really is, he at once recovered and gained streamwinning.

This is a unique story where the brahmin became a path-finder (*maggaññū*)⁹ without actually giving the Buddha anything, except for his wholesome responses and good intentions.

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⁸ **Kūṭadanta S** (D 5): *Samaṇo khalu bho gotamo ehi, sāgata, vādī sakhilo sammodako abbhā, kuṭiko uttāna, mukho pubba, bhāsī* (D 5,7 (18)), SD 22.8 (2.2). Also at **Soṇa, daṇḍa S** (D 4,6/1:116), SD 30.5; SD 45.16 (2.5.3(2)); **DhA 23.3,9** n @ SD 50.35(3). Cf CA 287, 304.

⁹ S 8.7,5/1:191 (SD 49.11).

(Māra) Sappa Sutta

The (Māra) Discourse on the Serpent

S 4.6

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time, the Blessed One was staying in the squirrel feeding ground in the bamboo grove outside Rājagaha.

2 Now at that time the Blessed One was sitting out in the open in the dense darkness of the night while it was drizzling.

3 Then, Māra the evil one, wishing to arouse fear, terror and hair-raising in the Blessed One, transformed himself into the form of a giant serpent and approached the Blessed One.

4 Its body was like a huge boat made from a single tree-trunk;
its hood, like a large brewer's sieve;
its eyes, like a large bronze Kosala dish;
its tongue darting out from its mouth like lightning flashes in a thundering sky;
the heavy breathing, in and out, pumping like a smith's bellows.

5 Then, Māra the evil one approached the Blessed One and addressed him in verse:

<p>6 <i>yo suñña,gehāni sevati seyyā¹⁰ so muni atta,saññato. vossajja careyya tattha so¹¹ patirūpaṃ hi tathā,vidhassa taṃ.</i></p>	<p>Who resorts to empty huts for lodging: he is the sage, self-restrained. Having renounced, he should live there; that is proper for one like him.</p>
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[The Blessed One:]

<p>7 <i>carakā bahū bheravā bahū atho ḍaṃsa,siriṃsapā¹² bahū. lomam pi na tattha iñjaye suññāgāra,gato mahā,muni.</i></p>	<p>Though many fearful creatures crawl about, also insects and serpents are legion— they stir not a hair on him, a great sage gone to an empty hut.</p>
<p>8 <i>nabhaṃ phaleyya pathavī caleyya sabbe pi pāṇā uda santaseyyuṃ. sallam pi ce urasi pakappayeyyuṃ upadhīsu¹³ tāṇaṃ na karonti buddhā ti.</i></p>	<p>The sky might split open, the earth might quake, and all beings stricken with terror; though one may press a dart against the breast, the awakened make no refuge of acquisitions.</p>

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¹⁰ Comy splits *seyyā* and *so*, taking *seyyā* to be dative in sense (Comy = *seyy'atthāya*), and a pronoun in apposition to *muni* (Comy: *so buddha,muni*). Comy takes *seyyā* as meaning "lodging" (SA 1:173,1-3). S:RD 1:133 "O well is him" + n. Cf *seyyaso*, "still better" (indecl, Dh 43, J 2:403,6&): Geiger & Norman, *A Pali Grammar*, 1994: §100.3.

¹¹ Comy explains *vossajja careyya tattha so* thus: "He should live having renounced [relinquished], that is, having abandoned desire for and attachment to his individual existence (*atta,bhava*, body and life)" (SA 1:173,24 f).

¹² Ce Ee Ke Se so; only Be *sarisapā*.

¹³ Comy: *Upadhi* here is *khandh'upadhi*, "acquisitions as the aggregates" (SA 1:173,7 f): see SD 61.10 (2.2.1.7) n. In this last line, the subject switches from sg to pl. Comy: The awakened do not seek such a refuge because they have uprooted all fear (SA 1:174,8-11). On *upadhi*, see SD 61.10 (2.2.1.7) n.

9 Then, Māra the evil one, thinking,
“The Blessed One knows me, the well gone one knows me!”
sad and disheartened, he disappeared right there.¹⁴

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¹⁴ *Dukkhī dummano tath’ev’antaradhāyi*. This stock occurs 32 times in Saṃyutta in connection with Māra [SD 61.9 (3.1.2)].