

SD 61.23 (Māra) Āyu Sutta 1

The First (Māra) Discourse on Lifespan

S 4.9

Theme: Do you want to live long like a suckling baby?

Translated by Piya Tan ©2024

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

The (Māra) Āyu Sutta 1 is a short reflection by the Buddha on life's brevity, first stated in prose (or rather, prose verse) [§3], which is then disrupted by a quip by Māra stating just the opposite, that life is long and we should enjoy it obviously like an infant still dependent on its mother. The Buddha reiterates that life is brief, and that we should live mindfully, knowing death will come. Māra, realizing that the Buddha knows him, disappears there and then.

1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

The (Māra) Āyu Sutta 1 (S 4.9), as the title suggests, goes with another text related in theme, **the (Māra) Āyu Sutta 2** (A 4.10) (SD 61.24). In both texts, the Buddha's teaching is disrupted by a cross-talk from Māra, whom the Buddha identifies and routs. Significantly, the Buddha's verse [S 464 + 466] in both these Suttas are quoted by the canonical Commentary, Mahā, niddesa. [2]

2 Canonical commentary

2.1 MAHĀ, NIDDESA ON THE JARĀ SUTTA

2.1.1 The transience of human life

2.1.1.1 The Mahā Niddesa (Nm 117-119), commenting on **Sn 804** in **the Jarā Sutta** (Sn 4.6)¹ here, gives the explanations that follow:

<i>appam̐ vata jīvitam̐ idam̐</i>	Short, alas, is this life!
<i>oram̐ vassa, satam̐ pi miyyati</i>	less than a hundred years old one dies.
<i>yo ce pi aticca jīvati</i>	Even if one lives beyond that,
<i>atha kho so jarassa pi miyyati</i> Sn 775	then one dies because of old age. [DhA 3:320]

“Short, alas, is this life.”² Life is short on two grounds: life is short because of its transience or short because of its essential brevity.³

¹ Sn 4.6/*804/158.

² “This” (*idam*) refers to the human life as well as the present one.

³ “Essential brevity,” *sarasa, parittatāya*.

2.1.1.2 THE TRANSIENCE OF HUMAN LIFE (*ṭhiti, parittatāya*).⁴

How is life short because of its transience? At the past mind-moment one lived but does not live and will not live; at the future mind-moment one will live but does not live and did not live; at the present mind-moment one lives but did not live and will not live.⁵

Life and selfhood, ⁶ are joined in a single mind-moment,	all of pleasure and pain, a moment that lightly flicks by. ⁷
Even those deities who abide even they live not	for 84,000 world-cycles, remaining for two mind-moments.
Those aggregates that have ceased, are all alike, once gone, immediately,	whether of one dying or one living here, they never again return.
Those that have dissolved away, and those in between that have ceased,	and those that will dissolve in the future, are not different in any way.
One is not born from the future; with the mind dissolves the world ends:	one lives only in the present; this is a description by ultimate meaning. ⁸
They proceed as if flowing down, they occur in an unbroken stream	changing at will; conditioned by the 6 sense-bases.
Dissolved, they ⁹ go not into storage; Those that arise merely stand	they heap not up in the future. like mustard seeds on a needle's point.
For those states that have arisen, They are subject to disintegration;	lead to their dissolution. they mix not with the old.
Unseen, they [the aggregates] come; Like a lightning flash in the sky,	dissolving, they leave from sight. they arise and they vanish so.

Thus short is life on account of remaining only briefly (*evam ṭhiti, parittatāya appakam jīvitam*).

⁴ Ie, temporal brevity or brevity of persistence.

⁵ Several of these verses are qu in Vism 8.39/238.

⁶ "Life and selfhood," *jīvitam attabhāvo ca*. "Selfhood" is a lit tr, or "person" (body and mind) referring to the arising of a "being" without any abiding entity. See Vism:Ñ 256 n11 for a long n on "person."

⁷ "That lightly flicks by," *lahuso vattati-k, khaṇo*. Cf Vism:Ñ 8.39/256.

⁸ *Paññatti param'atthiyā*. The later Comys normally see "concepts" (*paññatti*) and ultimate realities (*param'attha*) are mutually opposed, but here we can apply either of 2 explanations given by Nm Comy: (1) In "The form of mortals decays; their name and clan decay not" (*rūpaṃ jīrati maccānaṃ, nāma, gotten ana jīrati*, S 236/1:43), in terms of word definition, *param'atthiyā* is based on *parama ṭhiti*, "supreme persistence," and the lines mean that there is no such "supreme persistence" of beings because it is merely their name (a concept) that persists. (2) *Paramatthiyā* is merely based on *paramattha attho*, "supreme meaning," and such as that one is said to be "dead" (a concept) with the actual occurrence of the dissolution of the life-faculty (NmA 151,18). We can apply either explanation here to see how we understand it. (NmA 151,19-26)

⁹ The 5 aggregates.

2.1.2 How is human life short because of its essential brevity [fragility]?

2.1.2.1 ESSENTIAL BREVITY (*sarasa,parittatā*)

Life is dependent on inhalation, on exhalation, on the great elements, on food, on heat, on consciousness. Their roots are weak, their past causes are weak, their conditions are weak. Their common ground is weak, their association is weak, their coexistence is weak, their conjunction is weak. These are mutually weak, mutually unstable; they mutually collapse. None is able to safeguard the others, nor can any preserve the others. There is no one who produces them.

There is none who disappears because of anyone; these must all break up entirely.
 These that are produced are due to past causes; those which produced them died in the past.
 Those of the past and those that come later never meet one another.¹⁰

Thus short is life on account of its **essential brevity** (*evam sarasa,parittatāya jīvitam.*)

2.1.2.2 Now, compared to the life of the devas of the realm of the 4 great kings, **human life** is short (*appakam*), the life is brief (*parittakam*), the life is little (*thokam*), the life is momentary (*khanikam*), the life is quick (*lahukam*),¹¹ the life is fleeting (*ittaram*), the life is not long (*anaddhaniyam*), the life does not last long (*na ciraṭṭhitikam*).

So, too, *short* ... is human life when compared to the lives of the devas of the 33 (*tāvatimsa*), of the Yama devas (*yama*), of the Tusita devas (*tusita*), of the devas who delight in creation (*nimmāna,rati*), of the devas who lord of others' creations (*para,nimmita,vasavatti*), and of the devas of the brahma hosts (*brahma,kāyika*).¹²

2.1.2.3 Hence, the Blessed One said:

Short, bhikshus, is this lifespan of humans. One should live as if with head ablaze:	The good man should disdain it there is no avoiding death's arrival.	S 464
The days and nights fly by, The lifespan of mortals runs out	life comes to an end. like the water in small streams.	S 466 (NmA 117-119)

2.2 A CONTEMPORARY EXPLANATION OF TRANSIENCE AND ESSENTIAL BREVITY

2.2.1 In contemporary terms, "**transience**" (*ṭhiti,parittatā*) or fragility of persistence means that human life, by its very nature, is transient and fragile because it is sense-based. Human life depends on the physical sensitivities of *seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching*, processed by the mind, which includes thinking. This means that human life is dependent on the physical ambience of *earth, water, fire and wind*, of which humans are composed.

¹⁰ All MSS give this in verse; only Ee in prose. Line 2: Be Se *gandhabbā*; Ce Ee *bhaṅgabyāL* line 3: Be Se *pabhāvikā*; Ce Ee *pabhāvitā*. Comy says that *-m-* in *kadaci-m-addasum* is a sandhi infix: *ma-kāro pana pada,sandhi,vasena vutti* (NmA 154,15).

¹¹ *Lahukam* (neut, adv); *lahukā* (fem, adj), light, trifling.

¹² Tr abridged of the repetitions.

Since matter (the 4 primary elements: earth, water, fire and wind) itself is transient and momentary, humans are only able to actually experience the present moment, which passes away as soon as it arises. Hence, it takes a mastery of mindfulness to be able to connect these experiences and make better sense of the bigger picture of life. This is called **consciousness**.

When this consciousness is understood, developed and freed from its material or sense-based roots, the mind is able to grow beyond human limitations, and even surpass those of the celestial beings. This mental freedom brings awakening (*bodhi*), turning humans into buddhas.

2.2.2 Human life is characterized by **essential brevity** (*sarasa, paritattā*) in the sense that it is by nature shorter and less blissful than those of the celestial beings of the higher sense-worlds, the form world and the formless worlds. Human beings with the need of solid food in the form of the primary elements have short lives. The superhuman qualities of celestial life are due to 2 important factors. The first is that celestial life is not bound to primary elements. Their bodies are not composed of the 4 elements (like humans). Hence, they are not burdened by the shape, solidity, roughness, etc, of *the earth element*, or suffer discomfort from the elements, from heat or cold.

Secondly, the bodies of celestial beings are composed of pure light (in the form world) and of pure energy (in the formless world). Hence, such celestial beings are less restricted or hampered by time and space. While humans need solid food in the form of the primary elements which entail short lives, the celestial beings are sustained by joy or by pure energy that can last for many aeons (world-cycles).

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(Māra) Āyu Sutta 1

The First (Māra) Discourse on Lifespan

S 4.9

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.

2 There the Blessed One addressed the monks thus:

“Bhikshus!”

“Bhante,” those monks replied.

3 The Blessed One said this:

appam idaṃ bhikkhave manussānaṃ āyu

gamanīyo samparāyo ^[13]

kattabbarā kusalāraṃ caritabbarā brahma, cariyāraṃ

n’atthi jātassa amaraṇaṃ

yo bhikkhave ciraṃ jīvati

so vassa, sataṃ appaṃ vā bhīyyo ti

“Short, bhikshus, is this lifespan of human beings.

One has to go on to the future life.

One should do what is wholesome, live the holy life.

For one who is born there is no avoiding death.

Bhikshus, one who lives long,

lives a hundred years or a little longer.”¹⁴

¹³ Here Nm 119 adds *Be mantāya boddhatabbarā, Ee mantāya phoṭṭhabbarā*, on which NmA and Comys are silent. Possible meaning: “to be understood with wisdom.”

¹⁴ This passage is qu in **Nm 119** (comy on Sn 804 (Jarā S, Sn 4.6) [2.1]. On the last statement, cf S 2:94.

- 4 Then Māra the evil one approached the Blessed One and addressed him in verse:

<i>dīgham āyu manussānaṃ na naṃ hīle¹⁵ suporiso careyya khīra,matto va n’atthi maccussa agamo ti</i>	S 463	Long is the lifespan of humans, the good man should not disdain it. One should live like a suckling baby: death has not made its arrival. ¹⁶
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[The Blessed One:]

5 <i>appam āyu manussānaṃ hīleyya naṃ suporiso careyyāditta,sīso va n’atthi maccussa nāgamo ti</i>	S 464	Short is the lifespan of humans. The good man should disdain ¹⁷ it. One should live as if with head ablaze: there is no avoiding death’s arrival.
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- 6 Then Mara the evil one, thinking,
“The Blessed One knows me, the well gone knows me!”
sad and disheartened, disappeared right there.¹⁸

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¹⁵ *Hīle* (abridged form of *hīleyya*, S 464b), opt of *hīleti*, “to scorn, disdain, despise, feel contempt for” (D 2:75; Sn 713).

¹⁶ Comy paraphrases: “The good man should live like a baby who, after drinking milk, would lie down on a blanket and fall asleep, unconcerned whether life is long or short.” (SA 1:175,21-25)

¹⁷ “Disdain” should be understood in the spirit of the respect for life, the value underlying the root precept, ie, the one against killing. This disdain is not toward life itself, but to its brevity. See SA 1:175,21.

¹⁸ *Dukkhī dummano tatth’ev’antaradhāyi*. Ee omits this para. This stock occurs some 32 times in Saṃyutta in connection with Māra [SD 61.9 (3.1.2)].