

## SD 61.28

## (Māra) Rādha Sutta 1

### The First (Māra) Discourse to Rādha

#### S 23.1

Theme: The 5 aggregates are Māra

Translated by Piya Tan ©2024

### 1 Sutta summary

**The First (Māra) Discourse to Rādha** (S 23.1)<sup>1</sup> records the elderly Rādha asking the Buddha about Māra. The Buddha declares that Māra is our own 5 aggregates: *form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness*. Just as Māra is death itself and the bringer of death (and rebirth), so too the aggregates bring us death, only to be born to death again and again.

### 2 Sutta significance

#### 2.1 THE ĀYATANA MODEL AND THE KHANDHA MODEL

**2.1.1 The First (Māra) Discourse to Rādha** should be studied with **the First (Saḷāyatana) Samiddhi Sutta** (S 35.65),<sup>2</sup> where the young monk Samiddhi asks the Buddha the same question, “What is Māra?” to which the Buddha answers: “the 6 sense-bases” (*saḷ-āyatana*), that is, *the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind*. More fully, these are the sense-bases (*āyatana*), with their sense-objects (*dhamma*), sense-perception (*saññā*) and sense-cognition (*viññāṇa*).<sup>3</sup>

#### 2.1.2 The 2 models of experience

**2.1.2.1 The āyatana model** serves as an “easier” vertical or synchronic (momentary) analysis of our experiences in time—explained to the young monk Samiddhi. **The khandha model**, on the other hand, is a “horizontal” or “in-depth” diachronic (process) analysis of what happens when we have an experience, such as seeing, hearing etc—explained to the elderly Rādha.<sup>4</sup> Apparently, the *āyatana* model is easier for the young and inexperienced monk Samiddhi while the *khandha* model is more complicated (and more interesting) for the elderly and wiser monk Rādha.

**2.1.2.2** Because **the āyatana model** is simpler—and that it applies the 5 physical senses and the mind—it is more helpful to begin with this model when explaining the nature of experience to a general audience. The point is that basically we need to know how our senses work with the mind. When this basic process is understood, then we are ready to look deeper into how the mind works with the aggregates—form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness—that is, *how* we experience things.

**2.1.2.3** Understanding how we experience by way of **the 5 aggregates**—that is, the *khandha* model—helps us better understand how we process our experiences: how we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think. We don’t need to be an expert in all these 6 sense-experiences (which would be ideal), but we should start with knowing at least how one of them works.

<sup>1</sup> For other suttas given to Rādha, see SD 61.21 (3.1.3.1).

<sup>2</sup> S 35.65/4:38 f (SD 61.27a).

<sup>3</sup> On the overlapping of *saññā* and *viññāṇa*—*viññāṇa* cognizes, *saññā* recognizes—see SD 20.2 (2) *Citta, mano* and *viññāṇa*; SD 61.27 (1.2.1.1).

<sup>4</sup> Rādha is the foremost amongst monks who inspire wit in others (A 1:25) [§2 n].

Choose one of the sense-experiences that we have most often: we all see things and process them; we hear things and have views about them; we smell things when cooking, when working in certain environments (like a hospital or a lab), or when with others or in a crowd; we taste food and drinks; we touch or feel the weather or the touch of others, and so on. We begin by noting what that sense-experience (a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste or a touch) is really like. Notice the conditions (people, places, circumstances) that bring it about, how it arises and how it vanishes. Then examine our reaction/s to it objectively: “Why do I *feel* this way?” and so on. See how our observations connect and give us a bigger and clearer picture of the experience, and what we learn from it.

**2.1.2.4** Examining how we “think” [2.1.2.3] is very interesting but needs more effort. Here, by “think,” I refer to how we react to any of our sense-experiences (hence, the quote marks). This is not a philosophical analysis but a spiritual exercise in self-knowing. Choose any sense-experience, such as hearing a sound or words that we feel negatively about. We are looking at our own emotions, usually a negative one. Basically, this is how we do it:

- (1) Examine it objectively: “*What* do I feel?” (Joy, love, anger, hatred, lust, confusion, fear?)
- (2) How does this emotion make me feel? (What is “good” or “bad” about it? Do I like it or dislike it?)
- (3) Why do I feel this way? We will then notice how we had an idea or a view: relate our reaction to this view. Or we may notice it is connected to some memory.
- (4) How did I connect the present experience with this memory? Is this correct or real?
- (5) How do I see causes and effects in my experience? How can I correct this conditioning?

The answers do not usually come at once: this is a spiritual exercise. This means that we examine it to look for clues to understand our emotions and reactivity. We do this calmly, with lovingkindness, and mindfully. Over time, we will see a growing interdependence of conditions and their effects. We learn to deconstruct the negative conditions with our sutta learning and Dharma wisdom.

**2.1.2.5** Here is a diagrammatic representation of the relationship and interaction between the 2 models of experience—the *khandha* model and the *āyatana* model—for a better understanding of how we can be more mindful and aware of our experiences and thinking (in the case of **hearing**):

<u>an experience of hearing</u>	<u>the <i>khandha</i> model</u>	<u>the <i>āyatana</i> model</u>
ear	(form)	eye-base <i>cakkhv-āyatana</i>
sound	form	form-base <i>rup'āyatana</i>
ear-consciousness	consciousness	mind-base <sup>5</sup> <i>man'āyatana</i>
ear-contact <sup>6</sup>	formations	} dharma-bases* <i>dhamm'āyatana</i>
feeling born of ear-contact	feeling	
recognizing the sound or voice	perception	
reacting to sound (words etc)	formations	

**Table 2.1** The process of hearing (in terms of sense-bases and aggregates) [SD 57.25 (Table 1.1.2)]  
[“Dharma” (*dhamma*) is sometimes translated as “phenomenon/-mena” or “state/s.”]

<sup>5</sup> What we broadly refer to as “the mind” encompasses “mind-base” and “dharma-bases.” The mind-base is the objective aspect (the observer or “screen”) while the “dharma-bases” are the subjective aspects of mental experience (what shows or plays on the screen).

<sup>6</sup> Contact (*phassa*) is not listed amongst the 5 aggregates in the suttas where it is implicit with feelings (*vedanā*). The Abhidhamma and Comys include it in the aggregate of formations.

## 2.2 HOW THE *KHANDHA* MODEL WORKS

### 2.2.1 Form (*rūpa*)

**2.2.1.1** In the *khandha* or aggregate model, **form** (*rūpa*)—here we take the case of “sound” (or a voice)—what we hear or think we hear.<sup>7</sup> We are assuming here that we know the language well enough, and we should also take into consideration the effect that body language (including *how* we think the words were spoken). Such a hearing then ranges from everyday conversation to listening to a Dharma talk and hearing ambient sounds wherever we are.

**2.2.1.2** We may include special kinds of hearing, such as listening to music, or an experienced bird-watcher listening to the birds, or a forest-dweller hearing familiar forest sounds. However, I shall not discuss them in any great detail since such skilled or involved hearing is often more sophisticated than the daily listening referred to above. However, anyone with such special abilities may study the notes here and apply the understanding to their own experiences, and perhaps write or share with us their insights for a better understanding of the Buddha Dharma.

**2.2.1.3** Technically, from here on (with the rest of the sections on feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) we are actually discussing only *one* aggregate, that of **consciousness**; this is what is really happening: we are *conscious* of *hearing* (as an example). Since this is too broad a category to be useful for an in-depth analysis or understanding of hearing (or any of the sense-experiences or thinking), we use more categories for examining more closely *how* we are conscious of hearing. Hence, we have **the dharma-bases** (*dharmāyatana*), that is, feeling, perception and formations, which may be understood as the objects or activities of the mind-base (*manāyatana*).

Hence, these last 4 stages of the *khandha* model involve **the mind**, conscious and unconscious. From the angle of the sense-bases (*āyatana*) [Table 2.1], we have **the eye-base** (the functional eye-faculty) linked with the **form-base** (the sound-object). Now the 3<sup>rd</sup> link is **the mind-base**, the mind (*mano*) as our attention. Its action is termed *manasikāra* (literally, “minding”). When we attend rightly (without negative emotions), it is “wise attention” (*yoniso manasikāra*); when we attend with greed, hate or delusion, it is “unwise attention” (*ayoniso manasikāra*).

### 2.2.2 Feeling (*vedanā*)

**2.2.2.1** Now, when we carefully recollect our experience of *hearing* something (such as the words of a conversation or a talk), the first thing we notice is our **feeling** (*vedanā*) about it, note the **perception** (*saññā*), which comes *after* feeling (as we shall see). Almost at once we are attracted to a voice or the words, or we are repelled (or taken aback) by a sound or words that we hear.

Ordinarily, we do not have any or much control over this reaction of liking or disliking. After some such experiences, we may tell ourselves not to react in such a way. Perhaps we may be better at hiding our feelings, but internally or privately, we still react in the same manner anyway. Then, we may, when the occasion is right (or wrong), share our real or intimate feelings of that event with some close friend or even before others who are our captive audience. The point is that so long as we do not understand the nature of this process and train ourselves with positive emotions, we will remain negatively reactive, conditioned by greed, hatred and delusion.

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<sup>7</sup> I’m taking the case of hearing *broadly* without distinguishing between the actual sounds that we hear or what we thought we have heard, as often happens in daily life. Only the deeply mindful and the awakened hear sounds as they are and understand them accordingly. Our purpose here is to understand how we hear things and what happens then.

**2.2.2.2** On closer scrutiny of why we feel the way we do in reaction to those sounds or words, we will notice that we tend to link them with some past experiences, or more exactly to **the memories** of some past experiences. We are the result of what we know or recall; we are thus defined, dictated and limited by what we know. This is what happens when we depend only on the 6 sense-bases: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts.

We are **limited** by what we know when it prevents us from knowing what really is before us. In defining the present by our past, we have relegated ourselves to being merely an echo or shadow of something dead and gone. Even our past is but a delusion: it does not exist any more except in our reactions of liking, disliking and ignoring a mind-object.

The past can, however, influence, even shape the present in a **wholesome** way. The past can help us better understand the present when we have learned from the past. This means that we see the wrong and the right just as they should be, and the unwholesome and the wholesome just as they were. When we understand our past in this way, we are unlikely to repeat our mistakes. Instead, we now learn how to avoid the darkness that is our weaknesses and follies, and keep to the path of light that is right and good. This path leads to **wisdom**, learning from experience, seeing true reality and freeing us from being caught in the past.

### **2.2.3 Perception (*saññā*)**

**2.2.3.1** We need to perceive mindfully and wisely. With mindfulness (*sati*), we see the past for what it really is, basically that it is gone (*atīta*). With wisdom (*paññā*), we are able to relate this past to a bigger picture of on-going causes and effects, and so better understand our conduct, human behaviour and true reality: that everything is *impermanent, unsatisfactory and nonself*.

**2.2.3.2** As we learn to perceive correctly and wisely—that the past is gone, and that we can learn something wholesome from it—we see the present just as it is, arising and falling away—that is, as what is capable of wholesome change. This is **self-refuge** (*atta,saraṇa*): our ability and willingness to grow, to better ourselves by seeing true reality. This is **self-knowledge**, that is, we know just *what not to do* (the unwholesome), *what to do* (the wholesome) and *what to see* (calm and clarity). We keep to this straight path of **self-realization**.

### **2.2.4 Formations (*saṅkhāra*)**

**2.2.4.1** When we understand perception better, we also confront **formations** with wisdom. We see how we are responsible for our own actions, beginning with the way we think. When we have left the past where it should be, we can now simply enjoy the present because we know it rises and falls away. It's like looking at how these letters in the words here change, how the words themselves change, how the sentences rise and form ideas, how the ideas merge into understanding, how understanding brings calm and clarity, how calm and clarity bring mental freedom. Everything is teaching us. This present moment is everything, a window into wisdom, a door into the garden of truth and beauty.

**2.2.4.2** Without self-knowledge, we rely on *perceptions of the past*, which are really projections of greed, hatred and delusion into the past (what we thought happened), and into the future (hoping for what we want to happen). Without any understanding of greed, hatred and delusion, we have no idea where we are heading. We are merely echoes and shadows of the past; the beliefs we have and the religion we follow, merely echoes and shadows of the past. We are but creatures and slaves of a power

beyond our ken. Our lives continue to be led by what we cannot know, by knowledge in the slavish service of belief and faith.

**2.2.4.3** With self-reliance and self-affirmation, we are free from being a creature of the past; we cut loose the bonds of dependence on hope and faith. We live in the **peace and joy** of seeing in the present how we can shape, tame and free our own body, speech and mind by charity, love and wisdom.

With **our body**, we respect the person of others, accepting them as they are. Charity begins with the body, our bodily acts. We allow *life, happiness and freedom* to grow and prosper.

With **our speech**, we see, guide, unify and heal others so that they joyfully see true reality for themselves, and learn to free themselves from their own past and false perceptions, and see their liberating potentials.

With **the mind**, we share *love, light and life* by accepting others as they are, the wholesome good and better they can be, so that by their own effort, they can attain the best in life and beyond.

### **2.2.5 Consciousness (viññāna)**

**2.2.5.1 Consciousness** refers to how we see the world outside and create our world within. When we understand and wisely use consciousness as mindfulness and wise attention [2.1.2.4], then this inner world is our path to self-awakening, and the world outside is that awakening, the true reality that rises and falls right before us. When we close our eyes in meditation, when we free the ears of sound, when we smell the fragrance of moral conduct, when we taste the food of peace, our mind is a vision of nirvana beyond time and space. The vision is like the parting of the clouds on high revealing a majestic peak. Even when the clouds fill the skies again, we know that timeless peak is there.

**2.2.5.2** We see a distant star clearly when our telescope stands stably still directed to that star, and well focused on it. In our cognitive act, this vital stage is called “**(mental) engagement**” (*samannāhāra*) or simply “attention.”<sup>8</sup> As we study the stars, we see a nebula exploding, a supernova or giant star turning to a tiny dwarf. Unwholesome thoughts turn a great mind into a narrow one, unable to see beyond itself.

**The Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18), using the *khandha* model, warns us how from just hearing something we can have a mental explosion of thoughts called “mental proliferation” (*papañca*), thus (with the aggregates listed in the far right column, below):

... dependent on <b>the ear and sound</b> ,	<u>ear-consciousness</u> arises.	FORM
The meeting of the 3 is	<u>contact</u> . <sup>9</sup>	
With contact as condition,	there is <u>feeling</u> .	FEELING
What one feels,	one <u>perceives</u> .	PERCEPTION
What one perceives,	one <u>thinks about</u> .	FORMATIONS
What one thinks about,	one <u>mentally proliferates</u> .	CONSCIOUSNESS

With what is thus mentally proliferated as the source, **proliferation of conception and perception** assails a person regarding past, future and present sounds cognizable through the ear.

(M 18,16) + nn, SD 6.14

<sup>8</sup> See **Mahā Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 28,27) SD 6.16.

<sup>9</sup> “Contact” is link 6 of the dependent arising in the “rebirth cycle” of the present existence: Table 8.3a (SD 5.16).

The last 2 lines of the Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta (M 18,16) quote means that as a result of **mental proliferation**, we perceive (recall) past sounds and conceive (imagine) future sounds—we thus “read more” into—even the present sounds. As a result, craving and suffering arise and abound in us!

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## (Māra) Rādha Sutta 1

The First (Māra) Discourse to Rādha

S 23.1

- 1 At Sāvattthī.
- 2 Then the venerable Rādha approached [189] the Blessed One,<sup>10</sup> saluted him and sat down at one side.
- 3 Sitting at one side, the venerable Rādha said this to the Blessed One:  
“Bhante, it is said, ‘**Māra**, Māra.’ In what way, bhante, might Mara be?”<sup>11</sup>

THE MEANING: MĀRA IS THE AGGREGATES

4 “When there is **form**, Rādha, there might be Mara, or the killer (*māretā*), or the killed (*mīyati*).<sup>12</sup> Therefore, Rādha, see form as *Mara*, see it as *the killer*, see it as *the killed*.

See it as a disease, as a tumour, as a dart, as misery, as real misery.<sup>13</sup>

Those who see it thus see rightly.

5 When there is **feeling**, there might be Mara, or the killer, or the killed. Therefore, Rādha, see feeling as *Mara*, see it as *the killer*, see it as *the killed*.

See it as a disease, as a tumour, as a dart, as misery, as real misery.

Those who see it thus see rightly.

6 When there is **perception**, there might be Mara, or the killer, or the killed. Therefore, Rādha, see perception as *Mara*, see it as *the killer*, see it as *the killed*.

See it as a disease, as a tumour, as a dart, as misery, as real misery.

Those who see it thus see rightly.

7 When there are **volitional formations**, there might be Mara, or the killer, or the killed.

<sup>10</sup> Rādha was a poor brahmin of Rājagaha who, neglected by his family in his old age, resorted to becoming a monk. The Buddha declared him the foremost of monks who inspires wit in others (*etadaggaṃ paṭibhāṇakeyyānaṃ* (A 1:25,15). His 2 verses are at **Tha 133 f** = Dh 13 f. Comy: Whenever the Tathagata saw this elder, a subtle topic occurred to him. Thus the Blessed One taught him the Dharma in various ways. In Rādha Saṃyutta, 2 vaggas have been preserved by way of questions, a third by way of request, and a fourth by way of intimate discourse (*upanisinnaka,kathā*, lit, “sitting-up-close talk”) (SA 2:337,6).

<sup>11</sup> Comy: Here “Māra” is a metaphor for death and the aggregates (*marāṇa,māra, khandha,māra*) (SA 2:335,23 f).

<sup>12</sup> *Māro vā assa māretā vā yo vā pana mīyati*. Comy glosses *māretā* with *māretabbo* (SA 2:335,24 f), but the words are clearly agent nouns with an active sense. *Māretā*, “that which kills”; *mīyati*, “subject to death”; for detailed discussion, see SD 61.21 (3.1.1.1, 3.1.2.2-3.1.2.5, 3.1.3.4 f).

<sup>13</sup> *Rogo ti passa gaṇḍo ti passa sallan ti passa aghan ti passa agha,bhūtan ti passa*.

Therefore, Rādha, see volitional formations as *Mara*, see it as *the killer*, see it as *the killed*.  
*See them as a disease, as a tumour, as a dart, as misery, as real misery.*  
*Those who see it thus see rightly.*

**8** When there is **consciousness**, Rādha, there might be Mara, or the killer, or the killed.  
 Therefore, Rādha, see consciousness as *Mara*, see it as *the killer*, see it as *the one who is killed*.  
*See it as a disease, as a tumour, as a dart, as misery, as real misery.*  
*Those who see it thus see rightly.”*

#### THE PURPOSE OF DHARMA TRAINING

**9** “What, bhante, is the purpose of **seeing rightly**?”  
 “The purpose of seeing rightly, Rādha, is revulsion.”

**10** “And what, bhante, is the purpose of **revulsion**?”  
 “The purpose of revulsion is dispassion.”

**11** “And what, bhante, is the purpose of **dispassion**?”  
 “The purpose of dispassion is liberation.”

**12** “And what, bhante, is the purpose of **liberation**?”  
 “The purpose of liberation is nirvana.”<sup>14</sup>

**13** “And what, bhante, is the purpose of **nirvana**?”  
 “You have gone beyond<sup>15</sup> the range of questioning, Rādha.  
 You weren't able to grasp the limit to questioning.  
 For, Rādha the holy life is lived with  
 nirvana as its ground, nirvana as its destination, nirvana as its final goal.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Vimutti kho rādha nibbān'atthā*. Comy: This “liberation of the fruit” is for the purpose of nirvana without clinging (*phala, vimutti nāmesa anupādā, nibbān'atthan ti*, SA 2:335,26 f).

<sup>15</sup> This para is also at **S 48.42/5:218,19-21** (SD 29.3) and **M 44,29/1:304,20-22** (SD 40a.9). “Have gone beyond,” Be Se *accayāsi* (aor of *atīvāti*); Ce *accasarā* (aorist of *atisarati*); Ee *assa* here and *ajjhaparam* below are prob wr.

<sup>16</sup> The whole sentence: *nibbān'ogadham hi rādha brahma, cariyam vussati nibbāna, parāyanam nibbāna, pariyosānam*. ***Nibbān'ogadha*** is often taken to mean “the plunge into nirvana” or “merging with nirvana,” which Comys support by linking *ogadha* with *ogāha*, “a plunge” (from the verb *ogāhati*, “to plunge into”). But ***ogadha*** is here a variant of *ogādha*, from the verb *ogādhati*, which Comys take as synonymous with *patiṭṭhahati*, “to be established.” They consistently gloss *ogadha* with *patiṭṭhā*, “support” (U 70,21, UA 346,19; It 28,26, ItA 1:112,11). *Gādha* is used both lit and fig in **S 263**. See CPD svv *ogadha*, *ogādhati*, *ogāha*. SED defines *gādha* (from the root *gādh*, to stand firmly) as on firm ground in the water, a shallow place, a ford.