

SD 63.10

Jarā,dhamma Sutta

The “Nature to Decay” Discourse

S 48.41

Theme: The Buddha ages, too.

Translated by Piya Tan 2010, ©2025

1 Sutta significance

1.1 The Jarā,dhamma Sutta (S 48.41) is a short statement made by the Buddha himself that his body ages, too; that is, his body decays, like any other.

1.2 The past and present causes of the Buddha’s pains and trauma and their nature have been studied in **SD 61.5b** The Buddha’s karma: see especially (1.1.3) on the Buddha’s physical illnesses.

2 The nature of the Buddha’s body

2.1 THE BUDDHA’S BODY FEELS PAIN

2.1.1 Evolving views of the Buddha’s person

2.1.1.1 If we are to follow the sutta accounts of the Buddha’s life, often related in his own words, we have a clear picture of an awakened teacher with a human body, with the excellent physique of a kshatriya (noble or warrior). Yet it is still a human body, subject to the frailties and vicissitudes of a human body; it ages, feels pain, falls sick, decays and dies.

2.1.1.2 The later suttas—the **Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (D 30) and the **Brahm’āyu Sutta** (M 91)—tell us that the Buddha is further endowed with the 32 marks of the great man (*mahā,purisa,lakkhaṇa*). While the Lakkhaṇa Sutta explains how the bodhisattva gained each of the 32 marks as a result of his wholesome karmic life,¹ the Brahm’āyu Sutta highlights the belief by traditional brahmins that these marks affirm the status of a fully self-awakened one, the Buddha.²

Again, from the suttas (supported by the Commentaries), being able to read these 32 marks were regarded as a praiseworthy ability that required previous training to recognize them. This means that, as these marks were presented in the early suttas, they should not have been easily visible physical marks. In other words, the original conception of the 32 marks would probably have intended nuances, perceptible only to a keen observer who was trained in the art of detecting them. As such, they are neither abnormal nor pathological physical marks that are plainly visible.³

2.1.1.3 In the Commentaries we begin to see a literal application of these 32 marks [2.1.1.2], and the view that the Buddha was not only literally omniscient, but that his body, too, was in perfect, almost divinized, form. **The Commentary** to the Jarā,dhamma Sutta, for example, seemed reluctant to admit that the Buddha’s body could show real signs of aging and repeatedly says that all these changes were not apparent to others but only to Ānanda, who saw wrinkles on only the Buddha’s face and (right) bare

¹ D 30/3:142-179 (SD 36.9).

² M 91/2:133-146 (SD 63.8).

³ On the physical forms of the marks as symptoms of bodily pathology, see SD 36.9 (5). See SD 63.8 (1.2.2.2).

shoulder (*thero ca dvinnarṃ aṃsa, kūṭānarṃ antare vaḷiya, vaṭṭakarṃ disvā evaṃ āha*) (when the upper robe was adjusted onto the left shoulder, VA 1:240,12-16).

The Commentary adds that since the Buddha's sense-faculties were invisible, they could not be seen to have undergone deterioration. Ānanda could only infer the "changes" on the basis of his own observation of the Blessed One's body. The Buddha's body that was straight like Brahma's was only "bent forwards" (*brahm'ujju, kayo purato vaṅko*) [hinting at only the appearance of a slight drooping, SAṬ:Be 2:499,13].⁴

We can see all this Commentarial depiction of the Buddha's body as the beginning of an apotheosis of the Buddha that was fully fledged in later forms of Buddhism.

2.1.2 Past causes of the Buddha's bodily pains

2.1.2.1 It should be recalled that the bodhisattva's ascetic practices were no ordinary exercises but yogic postures and routines done by someone very familiar with them. Many of these exercises were repetitive and strenuous, thus demanding great effort and patience.

We must consider a third factor, **old age**, as the cause of the Buddha's bodily pains. His aged body would naturally feel the rigours of one who spent much of the waking hours either teaching, walking (and exercising), or attending to bodily needs—almost all such activities were done in an upright and mindful posture.

The Saṃyutta Commentary on the Avassuta Pariyāya Sutta (S 35.243) explains that during the 6 years of the bodhisattva's ascetic practice, he experienced great bodily pains. As a result, in his old age, he suffered from "back winds" (*piṭṭhi, vāta*), an Indian term for rheumatism. It was thus natural or only human that the Buddha's back would ache. (SA 3:52,9-24)

2.1.2.2 The 4th and final category of the Buddha's unpleasant experiences is that of **illness and physical deprivation**. We have at least half a dozen references⁵ to the Buddha suffering from a debilitating back-ache, where he is recorded as saying, "My back aches. I will stretch myself." (*Piṭṭhi me āgilāyati. Tam ahaṃ āyamissāmī ti (or āyameyyāmī ti)*).⁶

2.1.3 The Buddha suffers and feels pain

2.1.3.1 Devadatta's personal attempts on the Buddha's life⁷ caused the Buddha great pain (not to mention potentially mortal danger). Devadatta pushed a boulder down Mount Vulture Peak while the Buddha was just below on the ground. Midway, the boulder smashed into twin projecting rocks and a splinter flew off from the boulder and **wounded the Buddha's foot** causing it to bleed.

Two early texts, both called "Sakalika Sutta" (the discourse on the stone splinter), relate the Buddha recovering from the wound on his foot.

The first text, **the (Devatā) Sakalika Sutta** (S 1.38), tells us that the Buddha's foot has been cut by a stone splinter. "Severe pains assailed the Blessed One—bodily feelings that were painful, racking, sharp, piercing, harrowing, disagreeable. But the Blessed One endured them, mindful and clearly aware, without

⁴ SA 3:244,24-245,3.

⁵ At least 2 of the refs refer to the same occasion.

⁶ **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,1.5/3:209); **Sekha S** (M 53,5/1:354), SD 21.14; **Avassuta Pariyāya S** (S 35.243/4:184), SD 60.6; **Nandaka S** (A 9.4/4:359); **Naḷakapana S 1** (A 10.67/5:123); **Naḷakapana (S 2 A 10.68/5:126)**; **Cv 7.4.3** (V 2:200), **Cv 7.4.4** (V 2:201). See SD 43.11 (1.3-1.5).

⁷ On Devadatta's personal attempts on the Buddha's life, see SD 61.5a (4); SD 61.5b (1.1.2).

becoming distressed.” Then, 700 devatas of the Satullapa host appeared; 7 of them, in turn, praised the Buddha for his fortitude.⁸

2.1.3.2 The second text, **the (Māra) Sakalika Sutta** (S 4.13), records the Buddha as resting because his foot has been badly cut by a splinter that flew from a boulder hurled down from the top of Mount Vulture Peak by Devadatta. While he is mindfully resting in a reclining posture, Māra mocks him for “lazing around” like an intoxicated poet. The Buddha at once identifies the invisible voice as being that of Māra, and Māra at once departs.⁹

2.1.4 The Buddha falls ill

2.1.4.1 There are at least 3 suttas—each appropriately called **Gilāna Sutta** (the discourse on the sick)—that record, in parallel terms, how the 2 great arhats—Mahā Kassapa and Mahā Moggallāna—and the Buddha himself, fell sick but quickly recovered by mindfully reflecting on the 7 awakening factors. The 3 suttas are as follows:

		<u>the ill</u>	<u>location</u>	<u>attended by</u>	
Gilāna Sutta 1	S 46.14	Mahā Kassapa	Pippali Cave	the Buddha	SD 43.11
Gilāna Sutta 2	S 46.15	Mahā Moggallāna	Mount Vulture Peak	the Buddha	SD 43.12
Gilāna Sutta 3	S 46.16	the Buddha	Bamboo Grove	Mahā Cunda	SD 43.13

All 3 Suttas locate the Buddha as residing in the same venue: the squirrels’ feeding-ground in the Bamboo Grove, near Rāja,gaha.

2.1.4.2 Just as one’s negative emotions or the lack of a positive attitude can prolong one’s illness or worsen its pains and effects, one’s *positive emotions and wholesome mind* can help speed up one’s recovery, even prevent bad health or minimize its negative effects. In other words, this is *not* the “mantra” effect of the words but rather the person’s own positive mind that heals the body.

In **the Gilāna Sutta 3** (S 46.16), the Buddha who is “sick, in pain, gravely ill,” instructs the elder Mahā Cunda to “recite the awakening factors.” Mahā Cunda then recites to the Buddha thus (abridged):

These **7 awakening factors**, bhante, have been well pointed out by the Blessed One. When cultivated, grown, they bring about direct knowledge, self-awakening, nirvana.

The awakening factor that is

- mindfulness,
- dharma-investigation,
- effort,
- zest,
- tranquillity,
- mental stillness,
- equanimity,

has been well pointed out by the Blessed One. When cultivated, developed, it brings about direct knowledge, self-awakening, nirvana. (S 46.16/5:81), SD 43.13

⁸ S 1.38/1:27 (SD 61.4).

⁹ S 4.13/1:110-112 (SD 61.7).

2.2 THE BUDDHA'S LAST DAYS

2.2.1.1 The majestic **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) records the Buddha as going through 2 episodes of dysentery, and possibly a 3rd one. These painful episodes occurred during the 80-year-old Buddha's last rains retreat. **The 1st dysentery attack** was when the Buddha was staying at the village of Beḷuva [D 16,-2.21 f]. The Sutta recounts:

Now when the Blessed One had entered the rains retreat, **a serious illness**¹⁰ arose in him, with severe pains, as if he were about to die. But he endured all this mindfully and fully aware, and without complaining. ...

Then, the Blessed One made an effort to ward off the illness and dwelled, having determined his life-force. Then, the Blessed One's illness abated.¹¹ (D 16,2.23/2:99), SD 9

Despite the inopportune moment, he made an effort to recover [D 16,2.23 f]. The Buddha then declared his openness that had no secret teachings [§2.25], and admonished us to take the self as refuge [§2.26], that is, to exert our own personal accountability and work for our own spiritual freedom.¹²

2.2.1.2 The 2nd dysentery attack the Buddha experienced was a serious one. It occurred after he had taken a meal of *sūkara,maddava*¹³ offered as alms-meal by Cunda the metal smith in his mango grove at Pāvā. The *sūkara,maddava* apparently upset the Buddha's stomach and he had a relapse of the dysentery he suffered earlier on at Beḷuva [D 16,2.7]. Nevertheless, he bravely bore it:

Then, the Blessed One, having eaten the *sūkara,maddava* [truffles or pork] from Cunda the smith,¹⁴ a serious illness arose in him, **severe pains with bloody diarrhoea**, with sharp pains as if he were about to die. But he endured all this mindfully and fully aware, and without complaint.

(D 16,4.20/2:128), SD 9

2.3 THE BUDDHA'S BODY IS A HUMAN ONE

2.3.1 The Buddha's body

2.3.1.1 In symbolic language, we may speak of the Buddha as the embodiment of human wisdom and self-awakening. In other words, he is the final fruition of the spiritual evolution of humanity towards freedom from the limits of the body or senses. Since the Buddha has *a human body*, he is able to sense and feel like any human body. However, his *awakened mind* understands what the body senses and feels, and is untroubled by them.

Knowing, taming and freeing his mind, the Buddha attains nirvana, that is, he has overcome suffering that keeps one in this world. It is his awakening that frees the Buddha from the world. None of the dhyanas, even the formless dhyanas, in themselves, are able to provide any way out of samsara. How-

¹⁰ The "severe illness" here [as at D 16,4.20] shows symptoms of dysentery.

¹¹ **Sakka Vatthu** (DhA 25.8) relates how Sakka, assuming human form, personally attends to the Buddha with devotion (SD 54.20).

¹² D 16,2.21-26/2:99 f (SD 9).

¹³ D 16,4.18-19/2:127. *Sūkara,maddava* was either wild-boar meat, or soft-boiled rice in milk, cream, butter and ghee, or a kind of alchemic elixir (DA 2:568; UA 400). Most modern scholars think it was prob "truffles" (D:R 2:137 n31). See SD 9 (13.2).

¹⁴ *Atho kho bhagavato cundassa kammāra,puttassa bhattam bhuttavissa ...* . Comy explains carefully the phrase "having eaten the *sūkara,maddava*": "It arose *when* he had eaten, but not *because* he had eaten. If it had occurred when he had not eaten it, it (the hunger) would have been extremely painful; but because he ate it, he was able to walk on his own (*bhuttassa udapādi, na pana bhutta,paccayena, yadi na abhuttassa uppajjissatha atikharo ahoṣi, ten'eva padasā gantum asakkhi*, D 2:568,25-27).

ever, dhyanas can provide meditative bliss *within* samsara. Hence, we see the pre-eminence of the 4 form dhyanas for the early Buddhists.¹⁵

2.3.2 The import of the Jarā,dhamma Sutta

2.3.2.1 It is not the location of one’s physical body—even in the highest heaven—that frees one from samsara and suffering. It is only when one’s mind is fully free from the senses—when one is awakened—that one is really free from suffering. One’s wisdom in understanding the body as it is and accepting that understanding leads one to the path that frees one from ignorance and suffering.

2.3.2.2 The Jarā,dhamma Sutta records the Buddha’s teaching that even the Buddha’s body is subject to *change, decay and death*. His awakened mind is no more subject to change, decay and death. His mind is not subject to the ways of the world; his mind is unconditioned and free. The Buddha arises in the world reminding us that when we reflect on the frailty of our body as it is, accepting its **impermanence**, we will understand why there is **suffering**. And when we see the connection between impermanence and suffering, we go on to understand the reality of **nonself**. We will then be ready for awakening.

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Jarā,dhamma Sutta

The “Nature to Decay” Discourse

S 48.41¹⁶

1 Thus have I heard.

1.2 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in Migarā’s mother’s mansion¹⁷ in the eastern park outside Sāvattthī.

2 Now at that time, the Blessed One emerged from his evening solitary retreat and was sitting massaging¹⁸ [warming] his back in the last rays of the sun.¹⁹

3 Then the venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed One.

¹⁵ On the Buddha passing away by going through the 4 dhyanas, see Buddhaghosa’s views, DA 594 f, in Yang-Gu AN (tr), *The Buddha’s Last Days*, 2003:185-187.

¹⁶ For a previous tr, see SD 42.5.

¹⁷ *Migāra,mātu pasāda*, built by the lady Visākhā, “Migāra’s mother” (*migāra,mātā*). She was given this appellation for gently inspiring her father-in-law, the seth Migāra, to listen to the Buddha and become a streamwinner. A son of Visākha and Puṇṇavaḍḍhana was also named Migāra. See DhA 4.8/1:387-419 (tr DhA:B 2:59-84); DA 3:859; MA 2:165; SA 1:148; AA 2:124. For her story: SD 14.11 (1).

¹⁸ *Anomajjanto*, from *anu + ava + majjati* [from √MRJ, wipe], *anomajjati*, “to rub along over, to stroke; to beat, pound” only in the phrase, *gattāni pāniṇā* ~, “to rub one’s limbs with one’s hands” (M 1:80, 81, 509; S 5:216). More commonly *anumajjati*, as *anumajjato* (M 1:246, 2:93, 212), *anumajjanto* (S 1:82; Miln 90), *anumajjāmi* (M 1:246, 2:93, 212), *anumajjivā* (A 4:86), *anumajjeyyāsi* (A 4:86). Here *gattāni*, “limbs” is pl of *gatta*, “body.” Comy here says “the back” (SA 3:244).

¹⁹ Comy discusses the question as to how the sun’s warmth can pierce through the Buddha’s fiery aura (*rasmi,-teja*), and concludes that it cannot do so. Then what is warmed? The aura itself is warmed. Just as when one sits under a spreading tree, the sunshine does not touch the body, but its radiance spreads all around, and it is like being surrounded by a heat of fire (SA 3:243,26-244,5). This pious comy conjecture prompted the PTS tr to quip: “The Master was sitting warming his aura (?)” (S:F 1930 5:101 n2).

Having approached and saluted the Blessed One, he massaged the Blessed One's limbs. While massaging the Blessed One's limbs, he said to him:

3.2 "It is strange, bhante! It is a wonder, bhante!"²⁰

The Blessed One's complexion is no longer pure and bright, his limbs are all slack²¹ and wrinkled,²² his body is stooped, and some change²³ is seen in his faculties—in the eye faculty, ear faculty, nose faculty, tongue faculty, and body faculty.²⁴ [217]

The Buddha on his own body's decay

4 "So it is, Ānanda!

In youth, one is subject to **age** [decay];

in health, one is subject to **ill-health**;

in living, one is subject to **dying**.

jarā,dhammo²⁵ yobbaññe

vyādhi,dhammo ārogye

maraṇa,dhammo jīvite

The complexion is no longer pure and bright, (the flesh on) the limbs is all slack and wrinkled, the body is stooped, and some change is seen in the faculties—in the eye faculty, the ear faculty, the nose faculty, the tongue faculty, the body faculty."

5 The Blessed One said this. Having said this, the well gone, the teacher, further said this:

8 Shame on you, wretched decay,

aging that steals beauty away!

So has this puppet²⁷ charming to you

been crushed down by aging.

dhī taṃ²⁶ jammi jare atthu

dubbaṇṇa,karaṇī jare

tāva mano,ramaṃ bimbaṃ

jarāya abhimadditaṃ

9 Though one may live a hundred years,
even so one is headed for death.

No one is spared;

it surely tramples all.²⁸

yo'pi vassa,sataṃ jive

so'pi maccu,parāyano

na kiñci parivajjeti

sabbam evābhimaddatī ti

—evaṃ—

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²⁰ *Acchariyaṃ bhante, abbhutam bhante*. The tr is contextual. Both *acchariya* and *abbhuta* are indecls expressing wonder: "**acchariya**: wonderful thing, a marvel, prodigy," and "**abbhuta**: extraordinary, strange," frequently in exclamations: *acchariyaṃ bhante, abbhutaṃ bhante* (D 2:155,20; M 1:83,21 (Comy); A 2:50,4); do. foll by *yatra hi nāma ...* (how wonderful, that ...); M 1:254,4; do. + *yāva ...* (D 2:133,31). *Acchariyaṃ vata bho, abbhutaṃ vata bho* (D 2:107,7, 129,23 (scil, *tathāgatassa mah'iddhi,katā*, etc); do. + *yaṃ vata ...* (Sn p94,11 + 12; D 1:60,9, 2:107,8; M 2:98,29; S 1:178,12; U 16,10 (= *abhūta,pubbaṃ bhūtaṃ*, UA). For other senses and refs, see CPD & DP svv *acchariya* + *abbhuta*.

²¹ "(The flesh) on his limbs is slack," *sithilāni ca gattāni*. Comy: The flesh, coming away from the bone, becomes loose and hangs here and there. (SA 3:244,13-23)

²² "Wrinkled," Be *valiya,jātāni*: Ce Se *vali,jātāni* (pref); Ee *baliya,jātāni*.

²³ "Some change," *aññathattaṃ* (abstr of *aññathā*), "becoming other, alteration." See CPD: *aññathatta*; *aññathā*; DP: *aññathā*,

²⁴ On Comy's apparent reluctance to admit that the Buddha's body can show real signs of aging, see (2.1.1.2).

²⁵ The Sutta's title comes from this phrase.

²⁶ Be Se *dhī taṃ*; Ce Ee *dhītaṃ*. Cf Sn 440: *dhi-r-atthu jīvitaṃ*. *Dhi* or *dhī* (indecl) is an exclamation expressing reproach or displeasure or disgust

²⁷ Comy: *bimba* = *atta,bhāva*, "person, individual" (SA 3:245,5). On *bimba*, cf M 82,25/2:64 = Dh 147 = ThaA 769; S 5.9/549*/1:134.

²⁸ These last 2 lines are at S 3.25/442cd/1:102.