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Vakkali Sutta

The Discourse on Vakkali | S 22.87

Theme: Sexuality, suicide & sainthood

Paraphrased translation by Piya Tan ©2003, 2023

1 Introduction**1.1 Two Vakkalis?****1.1.1 Vakkali 1**

There are either 2 monks named Vakkali, or 2 versions of the story of the elder Vakkali. **Vakkali 1** is the monk who kills himself at Kāla.silā (Black Rock) and dies an arhat, described in **the Vakkali Sutta** (S 22.87/3:1190124). His story is given in full here.

Vakkali 1 is only mentioned in the Vakkali Sutta and the Saṃyutta Commentary. He is said to be very sick and bed-ridden. Due to the sufferings that his illness brings upon him, he reflects on the nonselfness of the 5 aggregates. Then, he is said to have “used the knife,” that is, killed himself. Following the story of another monk, Godhika, who dies in a similar manner, Vakkali conditioned himself in such a manner that just upon attaining temporary release through dhyana, he kills himself. [1.2]

1.1.2 Vakkali 2

Vakkali 2 is a young monk who is obsessed with the Buddha’s physical beauty, and becomes a monk just to be able to gaze at him. We do have any detailed account about Vakkali 2 in the suttas. However, there is a hint about his conduct in **the Saṅghaṭṭi,kaṇṇa Sutta** (It 3.5.3) is also related to Vakkali’s case, that is, of someone who is deeply attached to the Buddha, filled with sensual lust. No matter how closely he follows the Buddha, even holding on to the hem of his robe, he, lacking right mindfulness, will not awaken to true reality.¹

Interestingly, of the Commentaries, only that on **the Vakkali Sutta** (S 22.87), that is, the Saṃyutta Commentary, mentions Vakkali 1 in any detail. The Apadāna (past-life legends of the monks and nuns), too, speaks of **Vakkali 2**, as does its Commentary, and a few other Commentaries and Buddhaghosa in his Visuddhi,magga, as follows:

Apadāna	ThaAp 529, 38 verses = Ap 2:465 f
Apadāna Commentary	ThaA:Ee No 532/491-495
Aṅguttara Commentary	AA 1:248-251
Dhammapada Commentary	DhA 25.11/4:117-110) [SD 8.8(1)]
Thera,gāthā Commentary	ThaA 205/2:147-150 ²
Visuddhi,magga	Vism 4.45/129

Unlike the Saṃyutta account and its commentary, the above Commentaries make no mention of Vakkali’s killing himself with a knife, but only his attempted suicide to jump off Mount Vulture Peak.

¹ See It 92/3.5.3/90-92 (SD 24.10a). Also ItA 2:116.

² The commentator Dhammapāla cites AA and DhA as his authorities.

1.1.3 Faith and seeing Dharma

1.1.3.1 A noteworthy point is that the Buddha is recorded as uttering the line, “**he who sees the Dharma sees me; he who sees me see the Dharma.**” This may at first glance make us think that this famous saying is spoken to the same person. From the drifts of the two accounts, this is unlikely. We can at best say that this “seeing Dharma” quote is canonical in **the Vakkali Sutta** (S 22.87), where the sick Vakkali says that he regrets, saying,

“For a long time, bhante, I have wanted to come and see the Blessed One, but I do not have enough strength in my body to visit the Blessed One to see him.”

“Enough, Vakkali! What is there to see of this foul body?”

One who sees the Dharma sees me; one who sees me, sees the Dharma.

In seeing the Dharma, Vakkali, one sees me, and in seeing me, one sees the Dharma.’ [§§12 f]

Clearly, in this context, the Buddha is simply stating the priority of the Dhamma, in the spirit of **the Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2),³ that is, placing the teaching above the teacher.

This famous saying also fits Vakkali 2’s context very well. He is reminded to overcome his lust by reflecting on the Buddha’s “putrid body” as being impure, and to place the teaching above the teacher. It is possible that there are 2 Vakkalis, and these 2 different contexts fit the same “seeing Dharma” saying perfectly.

Another possibility is that the “seeing Dharma” quote was *added* later to the Vakkali 2 story, since it fits the context there very well, too. However, it is not difficult to imagine the Buddha himself uttering this famous saying when it fits the teaching for Vakkali 2 very well indeed. Any teacher telling us the story of Vakkali 2 is likely to refer to the “seeing Dharma” quote anyway.

1.1.3.2 Another point to note is that only **Vakkali 2** is declared to be the foremost of the monks how have **faith** in the Buddha. This is to highlight that Vakkali 2 is probably a very good meditator himself, but is easily troubled by lust due to his youth and emotional inclination. The Buddha notices this and uses a skilful means—invoking samvega in Vakkali 2 [§7, SD 8.8(1)]—and then appearing before him to comfort him, thus helping him with attaining dhyana.

This commentarial story is interestingly dramatic. Vakkali 2 see a radiant image of the Buddha just as he leaps off Mount Vulture Hill (that is, a cliff). At that very moment he attains deep dhyana, with psychic powers, so that he is able to float in the air and then slowly settle down on the ground before the Buddha himself.

This is what in religious language we call an **epiphany**, a life-transforming vision. Vakkali 2 is certainly no ordinary monk. His own **Apadāna** (ThaAp 526) relates his past life association with Padumuttara Buddha,⁴ he showed great faith in that Buddha, too. Another interesting point is that while the Dhammapada Commentary only says that Vakkali 2 becomes a monk when he “has come of age” (*vaya-p-patto*), the Apadāna says that he is only 7 years old (*satta, vasso’ham pabbajjīm anagāriyam*, ThaAp 529,24). In other words, Vakkali 2 has what we must construe as a boyish infatuation over the Buddha. This, we must also note, is a late canonical legend.

1.2 The Saṃyutta episode of Vakkali’s suicide is identical to that of the monk Godhika (**Godhika Sutta**, S 4.23), both occurring at Kāla, silā (Black Rock) on the side of Isigili (today, Sona Hill).⁵ Godhika’s reason

³ S 6.2 = **Uruvelā S 1** (A 4.21), SD 12.3.

⁴ Padum’uttara was the 15h past buddha from Gotama Buddha.

⁵ On the location of these places, see S Dhammika, 1999:97 (map). The Isigili crest gives a panoramic view of the other 4 hill crests around Rājagaha: Vulture’s Peak, Vebhāra, Paṇḍava and Vepulla (M 3:68 f).

for suicide, however, was his falling away (6-7 times) from temporary release of mind due to his sickness.⁶ So when he attained release of mind, he committed suicide to gain liberation.⁷ Vakkali, however, apparently tried to kill himself out of his chronic depression.

However, the Commentarial accounts do not say that he committed suicide (an account that could have spilled over from the Godhika story). The Commentaries only say he was merely contemplating suicide, when he leaped into the air out of faith and joy on seeing the Buddha (that is, his hologram) before him. It is said that he then gently moved downwards and settled on the ground, fully rejoicing in the Buddha. Understandably, he is declared to be the foremost of those monks who have faith (A 1:24) [see DhA account below, SD 8.8(1)].

1.3 The climax of the Vakkali Sutta is the Buddha's declaration, "Vakkali, one who sees the Dharma sees me; one who sees me, sees the Dharma" (*Yo kho vakkali dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati; yo maṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati*)⁸ [§2]. The Saṃyutta Commentary explains: Here the Blessed One shows himself as the Dharma-body, as stated in the passage "The Tathāgata, the great king, is the Dharma-body" [untraced]. For the nine-fold supramundane Dharma [4 paths, their fruits, nirvana] is called the Tathāgata's body (SA 2:314). **Bodhi** thinks that the Commentary has misquoted the reference to a statement in **the Aggañña Sutta** (D 27)⁹ that says:

He whose faith¹⁰ in the Tathagata is firm, rooted, established, unshakeable by any recluse or brahmin, any deva or Māra or Brahmā or anyone in the world, can truly say: "I am a son of the Blessed One, an offspring born from his mouth, born of the Dharma, created by the Dharma, heir to the Dharma."

Why is that?

⁶ "Temporary release of mind," *sāmayika ceto, vimutti*, which SA explains as the mundane meditative attainments (*lokiya samāpatti*), ie the absorptions and formless attainments, so called because at the moment of absorption the mind is freed from the opposing states and is resolved upon its object. He fell away from this liberation on account of illness, being disposed to chronic illness due to (the humours of) wind, bile and phlegm (SA 1:183). On humour-related illness, see **Sīvaka S** (S 36.21), SD 5.6, **Samaṇa-m-acala S 1** (A 4.87.5/2:87), SD 20.14, and (**Samaṇa**) **Sukhumāla S** (A 5.104/3:131).

⁷ S 4.23/1:120-122 (SD 61.16); SA 1:183; DhA 1:431-433.

⁸ Cf **Saṅghāṭi, kaṇṇa S** (It 92/3.5.3/90-92), SD 24.10a. Cf also "He who sees dependent arising, sees Dharma": **Mahā Hatthi, padopama S** (M 28,28) + SD 6.16 (5). See Harvey 1995a:231-234.

⁹ S:B 1081 n168.

¹⁰ "Faith," *saddhā*. There are 2 kinds of faith (*saddhā*): (1) "rootless faith" (*amūlika, saddhā*), baseless or irrational faith, blind faith. (M 2:170); (2) "faith with a good cause" (*ākāravati, saddhā*), faith founded on seeing (M 1:320, 8 401,23); also called *avecca-p, pasāda* (S 12.41.11/2:69): *avecca* (fr *aveti*, "he goes down to, understands"), "having understanding, penetrated" + *pasāda*, clear brightness, satisfaction, faith. "Wise faith" is syn with (2). *Amūlaka* = "not seen, not heard, not suspected" (V 2:243 3:163 & Comy). **Gethin** speaks of two kinds of faith: the cognitive and the affective (eg ERE: Faith; also Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963:387): "Faith in its cognitive dimension is seen as concerning belief in propositions or statements of which one does not—or perhaps cannot—have knowledge proper (however that should be defined); cognitive faith is a mode of knowing in a different category from that knowledge. Faith in its affective dimension is a more straightforward positive response to trust or confidence towards something or somebody...the conception of *saddhā* in Buddhist writings appears almost, if not entirely affective, the cognitive element is completely secondary." (Gethin 2001:107; my emphases).

Because, Vāseṭṭha (and Bhāradvāja), this designates the Tathagata: “The body of the Dharma”¹¹ or “the body of Brahmā”¹² or “one who is Dharma” or “one who is Brahmā.”¹³

(D 27,9/3:84), SD2.19

The close connection between these two passages centres around wise faith (*saddhā*) which is Vakkali’s strongest spiritual faculty (*indriya*). The Buddha in fact declared Vakkali to be the foremost amongst the monks who have faith (*etad-aggam saddhā’dhimuttānam*).¹⁴

1.4 The conclusion of the Sutta [§39] is important in countering the wrong view that some form of “unsupported” (*apatiṭṭhita*) consciousness remains after the passing away of an arhat (as proposed, for example, by Peter Harvey, 1995a:208-210). As soon as Vakkali and Godhika¹⁵ die, Māra on both occasions looks for their rebirth-consciousness (*paṭisandhi,citta*) but fails to do so, since they are “unestablished” or “unsupported” (*appatiṭṭhita*), that is, find no footing for a new life. It is clear here that the death-consciousness (= rebirth-consciousness) does not survive in an “unestablished” or “unsupported” condition, since the texts (here and at S 1:122)¹⁶ state that with the passing away of the arhat, consciousness, too, ceases.¹⁷

It is probable that Harvey arrived at his thesis from translating *appatiṭṭhita* as “unsupported” rather than “unestablished,” which would then not support his thesis. Here, it helps to think in Pali, rather than in English.

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¹¹ “The body of the Dharma,” *dhama,kāya*, a term that reflects such statements as “He who the Dharma sees me; he who me sees the Dharma” (S 3:120) and “seeing the recluses...this is the highest blessing” (Sn 16). The Buddha made the first statement to Vakkali who had joined the Order because he was physically attracted to the Buddha. Vakkali was “seeing” merely the external conditioned form of the Buddha. The true “seeing” is the understanding of the nature of true reality, ie, the vision of the 4 truths or the 3 characteristics (DhsA 350). See S:B 1081 n168; Gombrich 1992a:165; Harrison 1992; Collins 1993a:356 n9.2.

¹² “The body of Brahmā,” *brahma,kāya* (D 3:84; J 1:95). Here *brahma* is an adjective commonly found in the early Suttas to mean “divine, perfect, excellent, supreme, holy,” as in *brahma,cakka*, “the divine wheel” (M 1:70; A 2:9); *brahma,cariya*, “the holy life” (D 1:84; sv PED); *brahma,jāla*, “the perfect net” (D 1); *brahma,daṇḍa*, “the supreme penalty” (V 2:290; D 2:154); *brahma,yāna*, “the way to the highest good; the best vehicle” (S 5:5; J 6:57); *brahma,-vihāra*, “the divine abode” (D 2:196, 3:220; Tha 649; Dha 262; Vism 295 ff).

¹³ “One who is Brahmā,” *brahma,bhūta*. See eg Sn 1065a.

¹⁴ A 1:24; Sn 1146; also Divy 49; VbhA 276; Vism 1:129.

¹⁵ S 4.23.19/1:122.

¹⁶ See also **Parivīmaṃsana S** (S 12.51/2:80-84), SD 11.5.

¹⁷ See also S:B 421 n314 where Bodhi disagrees with Harvey’s view.

SD 8.8(1)**Vakkali Thera Vatthu**The Story of the elder Vakkali | DhA 25.11/4:118 f¹⁸

Theme: Vakkali's arhathood

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1 It is said that, one day, after Vakkali, born of a brahmin family, had reached manhood, he saw the Teacher enter Sāvattihī for alms and was at once captivated by his physical perfection. Desiring to be near the Teacher so as to be able to constantly gaze at his beauty, Vakkali became a monk.

Neglecting to recite the teachings or to meditate, he spent his whole time standing near the Teacher so that he could gaze at him.¹⁹ The Teacher remained silent waiting for Vakkali's wisdom to ripen.

2 When the Teacher knew that the elder Vakkali's wisdom had ripened,²⁰ he admonished him thus,

"Vakkali, what is there in looking upon this putrid body?"²¹

Vakkali, **he who sees the Dharma sees me; he who sees me see the Dharma.**"²²

3 But in spite of the Teacher's admonition, the elder Vakkali could not let the Teacher out of his sight. Finally, the Teacher thought,

"Unless this monk receives a moving shock,²³ he will never come to understand."

4 Now the rains-retreat was near, and on the rains-entry day, the Teacher, leaving for Rājagaha, dismissed the elder Vakkali with the words:

"Go back, Vakkali! Go back, Vakkali!" (*apehi Vakkali, apehi Vakkalīti paṇāmesi*)

5 "Now for the period of three months, I'm unable to see the Teacher in his presence. What is the use of my living any longer? I will throw myself down from a cliff."

6 And with that thought, he climbed Mount Vulture Peak.

7 The Teacher, knowing that Vakkali was weary of the world, thought, "If this monk receives no comforting from my presence, he will destroy his predisposition to the attainment of the path and the fruits."

8 Then, he sent forth a radiant image of himself for Vakkali himself to see. The moment the monk saw the Teacher, the weight of sorrow that had oppressed him vanished.

9 Then the Teacher, as though filling the dry bed of a lake with a flood of water, caused great zest and joy to arise in the monk, and pronounced the following stanza: **[4:119]**

10 Full of joy and faith in the Buddha's teaching, the monk
will reach the place of peace, the happiness of the stilling of the formations. (Dh 381)

¹⁸ This story is derived from **Vakkali S** (S 22.87/3:119-124), SD 8.8 (below). For other versions of Vakkali's story see [1.1].

¹⁹ According to **Saññoga S** (A 7.48) lust arising through just such an action of contemplating on the physical features of another. (A 7.48/4:57-59), SD 8.7

²⁰ *Ñāṇa,paripākaṃ*. The Buddha, seeing Vakkali's predisposition, knows that in the ensuing events, he will change for the better.

²¹ *Kin te vakkali iminā pūti, kāyena diṭṭhena*. Cf Mātali's description of the human body at S 932 (SD 86.4) + SD 54.21 (2.1.1.3). Cf **Khajjanīya S** (S 22.79): "I am being devoured by form" (*rūpena khajjāmi*) (S 22.79/3:87), SD 17.9.

²² *Yo kho vakkali dhammaṃ passati so maraṃ passati; yo maraṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati*. On the fuller version of this key statement, see (1.3).

²³ "Shock," (*saṃvega*), usually tr as "a sense of spiritual urgency." Burlingame uses a similar tr (DhA:B 3:263).

11 Having pronounced this Stanza, the Teacher stretched forth his hand to the elder Vakkali and said,

12 Come, Vakkali! Fear not, look at the Tathāgata!
I will lift you up like (one lifting) an elephant sunk in the mire.

Come, Vakkali! Fear not, look at the Tathāgata!
I will free you just as the (eclipsed) sun is freed from Rāhu's maw.

Come, Vakkali! Fear not, Vakkali! Look at the Tathāgata!
I will free you just as the (eclipsed) moon is freed from Rāhu's maw.

13 The elder Vakkali thought,
"I have seen the one with the 10 powers,²⁴ and he speaks to me, saying, 'Come!'"

14 He at once experienced profound joy. He thought, "How shall I go?"

15 And standing there on the cliff, on hearing the first line of the stanza, though he saw no path, he leaped up into the air before the one with the 10 powers.

As he hovered in the air, pondering on the stanzas uttered by the Teacher, he completely suppressed his zest and attained arhathood together with the analytical knowledges (*paṭisambhidā*).²⁵

16 Then, praising the Tathagata, he descended to the ground and stood before the Teacher.

On a subsequent occasion, the Teacher placed him as the foremost amongst those inclined to faith (*saddhā'dhimutta*).

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²⁴ "The one with the 10 powers," *dasa,bala* or more fully *dasa,bala,ñāṇa*. The 10 powers are: (1) knowledge of the possible and the impossible (*thānāthāna,ñāṇa*), such as in the analysis of karma (M 57, 135, 136), and the possibility regarding the realm, circumstances, time and effort, all of which would impede or reinforce the result; and also the cause of karma, etc; (2) knowledge of the result of karma (*kamma,vipāka ñāṇa*); (3) knowledge of the way leading to all destinies and goals (*sabbattha,gāminī,paṭipadā*); (4) knowledge of the world with its various elements (*nānā,dhātu ñāṇa*) (M 115,4-9/3:62 f); (5) knowledge of the different dispositions of beings (*nānādhimuttika ñāṇa*); (6) knowledge of the maturity level of beings in terms of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom (*indriya,paropariyatta ñāṇa*) (Vbh §§814-827); (7) knowledge of the defilements, cleansing and emergence in the cases of the meditations, liberations, concentrations and attainments (*jhān'ādi,saṅkiles'ādi ñāṇa*); (8) knowledge of the recollection of (his own) past lives (*pubbe,nivāsānussati ñāṇa*); (9) knowledge of the passing away and arising of beings (according to their karma) (*cutūpapāta,ñāṇa*); (10) knowledge of the destruction of the mental defilements (*āsava-k,khaya ñāṇa*) (M 1:69; A 5:33; Vbh 336). See **Mahā Sīhanāda S** (M 12,9-20/1:69-71) for details.

²⁵ There are the 4 analytic knowledges (or insights) (*paṭisambhidā*), those regarding: (1) meanings (and purpose) (*attha,paṭisambhidā*), teachings or truths (*dhamma,paṭisambhidā*), language (*nirutti,paṭisambhidā*) and ready wit (*paṭibhāga,paṭisambhidā*): SD 28.4 (4); SD 41.6 (2.2); SD 58.1 (5.4.2.13).

Vakkali Sutta

The Discourse on Vakkali

S 22.87

1 Thus have I heard.²⁶

At one time, the Blessed One was staying at the squirrels' feeding-ground in the Bamboo Grove near Rājagaha.

Vakkali is ill

2 Now at that time, the venerable Vakkali was dwelling in a potter's shed,²⁷ sick, suffering, gravely ill.²⁸

3 Then the venerable Vakkali addressed his attendants:

"Come, avuso [brothers], approach the Blessed One, pay homage to him in my name with your head at his feet, and say, 'Bhante, the monk Vakkali is sick, suffering, gravely ill.

He pays homage to the Blessed One with his head at his feet.'

Then say, 'It would be good, bhante, if the Blessed One would visit the monk Vakkali out of compassion.'"

4 "Yes, avuso," the monks replied in assent to the venerable Vakkali. They then approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, and sat down at one side.

The monks convey Vakkali's message to the Buddha

5 Sitting thus at one side, those monks said this to the Blessed One:

"Bhante, the monk Vakkali is sick, suffering, gravely ill.

He pays homage to the Blessed One with his head at his feet."

Then they said:

"It would be good, bhante, if the Blessed One would visit the monk Vakkali out of compassion."

The Blessed One consented by his silence.

The Buddha visits Vakkali

6 Then the Blessed One, having dressed himself and taking robe and bowl, visited the venerable Vakkali. **[120]**

7 The venerable Vakkali saw the Blessed One coming in the distance and stirred on his bed.²⁹

²⁶ Ce *Evam me sutam*.

²⁷ "Potter's shed," *kumbhakāra, nivesana*, which Comy glosses as *kumbhakāra, sālā* (SA 2:313). *Nivesana* usually translates as "house," sometimes as "settlement".

²⁸ Comy: After the Invitation ceremony (*pavāraṇā*) of the rains retreat, the elder Vakkali while on his way to see Blessed One fell seriously ill in the middle of the town. He could not walk, and had to be carried on a litter to a potter's shed (SA 2:313). In his Thera, *gāthā*, however, he is said to be suffering from "colic" (a stomach ailment due to "wind") (Tha 350), which ThaA says is caused by insufficient food (ThaA 2:148).

8 Then the Blessed One said this to him:

“Enough, Vakkali, do not stir on your bed. There are these seats spread and ready,³⁰ I will sit down there.”

The Blessed One then sat down on the spread seat.

9 Seated on the seat spread and ready, the Blessed One said this to the venerable Vakkali:

“I hope you are bearing it, Vakkali. I hope you are getting better. I hope your pains are abating, not rising; that their abating is evident, not their rising.”

“Bhante, I cannot bear it; I am not getting better, and my pains are not abating, but rising; their rising is evident, not their abating.”

10 “I hope then, Vakkali, that you are not troubled by restlessness and regret.”³¹

“Indeed, bhante, I have a lot of restlessness and regret.”

11 “I hope, Vakkali, that you have nothing for which to reproach yourself in regard to moral virtue.”

“I have nothing, bhante, for which to reproach myself in regard to virtue.”

12 “Then, Vakkali, if you have nothing for which to reproach yourself in regard to moral virtue, why are you troubled by restlessness and regret?”

“For a long time, bhante, I have wanted to come and see³² the Blessed One, but I do not have enough strength in my body to visit the Blessed One to see him.”

Seeing the Buddha

13 “Enough, Vakkali! What is there to see of this foul body?

One who sees the Dharma sees me; one who sees me, sees the Dharma.³³

In seeing the Dharma, Vakkali, one sees me, and in seeing me, one sees the Dharma.

The 3 characteristics of the 5 aggregates

14 What do you think, Vakkali: is **form** permanent or impermanent?” [121]

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change fit to be regarded thus:

‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self?’”

“No, bhante.”

²⁹ “Stirred,” *samadhosi* = *samacopi* (from *sañcopati*, he moves, stirs). Some say that he was shaking from a violent fever but Comy says that he was showing respect by making a movement. It is said that even one who is very ill should show respect to a senior by a gesture of rising (SA 2:313).

³⁰ Comy says that in the Buddha’s time, a seat was always ready in a monk’s quarters in case the Teacher visits (SA 2:314).

³¹ *Kacci te vakkali na kiñci kukkucam na koci vippaṭisāro ti.*

³² “Come and see the Blessed One,” *bhagavantam dassanāya upasaṅkamitu, kāmo*. Evidently, the emphasis here is on the seeing of the Buddha in a physical sense.

³³ *Yo kho vakkali dhammam passati so marṇ passati; yo marṇ passati so dhammam passati*. **Attha, sālinī** remarks that “seeing is not by the eye but by insight” (DhsA 350). SA: Here the Blessed One shows himself as the Dharma-body, as stated in the passage “The Tathāgata, the great king, is the Dharma-body” [untraced]. For the nine-fold supramundane Dharma [the 4 paths, their fruits, nirvana] is called the Tathāgata’s body (SA 2:314). Bodhi thinks Comy misquoted the reference to a statement in **Aggañña S** (D 27) (S:B 1081 n168). See (1.3) above.

14.2 “What do you think, Vakkali, is **feeling** permanent or impermanent?

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change fit to be regarded thus:

‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self’?”

“No, bhante.”

14.3 “What do you think, Vakkali, is **perception** permanent or impermanent?

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change fit to be regarded thus:

‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self’?”

“No, bhante.”

14.4 “What do you think, Vakkali, are **mental formations** permanent or impermanent?

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change fit to be regarded thus:

‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self’?”

“No, bhante.”

14.5 “What do you think, Vakkali, is **consciousness** permanent or impermanent?

“Impermanent, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change fit to be regarded thus:

‘This is mine; this I am; this is my self’?”

“No, bhante.”

The totality formula of the 5 aggregates

15 “Therefore, Vakkali,
any kind of **form** whatsoever,

whether past, future or present,³⁴
internal or external,
gross or subtle,
inferior or superior,
far or near—

one sees all forms as they each really is with right wisdom thus:

‘This is *not* mine; this I am *not*; this is *not* my self.’

³⁴ The foll lines: *atītānagata, paccupannam ajjhattam vā bahiddhā vā oḷarikaṃ vā sukhumam vā hīnam vā paṇī-
tam vā yaṃ dūre santike vā*. See (**Dve**) **Khandha S** (S 22.48) + SD 17.1a (3); **Anatta, lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59, 17-21), SD 1.2.

15.2 Any kind of **feeling** whatsoever, *whether past, future or present,
internal or external,
gross or subtle,
inferior or superior,
far or near—*

one sees all feelings as each really is with right wisdom thus:

'This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.'

15.3 Any kind of **perception** whatsoever, *whether past, future or present,
internal or external,
gross or subtle,
inferior or superior,
far or near—*

*one sees all perceptions as each
really is with right wisdom thus:*

'This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.'

15.4 Any kind of **mental formations** whatsoever, *whether past, future or present,
internal or external,
gross or subtle,
inferior or superior,
far or near—*

one sees all mental formations as each really is with right wisdom thus:

'This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.'

15.5 Any kind of **consciousness** whatsoever, *whether past, future or present,
internal or external,
gross or subtle,
inferior or superior,
far or near—*

one sees all consciousness as it really is with right wisdom thus:

'This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.'

Revulsion

16 Seeing thus, Vakkali, a well-taught noble disciple becomes

revulsed with	form,
<i>revulsed with</i>	feeling,
<i>revulsed with</i>	perception,
<i>revulsed with</i>	mental formations,
<i>revulsed with</i>	consciousness.

Being (thus) revulsed, (his lust) fades away.

Through the fading away (of lust) [that is, dispassion], (his mind) is freed.

When it is freed, there comes the knowledge: 'Freed!'

He directly knows:

'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done what is to be done, there is no more of this state of being.'"

Vakkali at Kāla,silā

17 Then the Blessed One, having given this advice to the venerable Vakkali, rose from his seat and left for Mount Vulture Hill.³⁵

18 Then, not long after the Blessed One had left, the venerable Vakkali addressed his attendants thus:

“Come, avuso, lift me up on this bed and carry me to Kāla,silā [Black Rock] on the Isigili slope.³⁶ How can one like me think of dying among the houses?”

19 “Yes, avuso,” the monks replied in assent to the venerable Vakkali and, having lifted up the venerable Vakkali on the bed, they carried him to Kālasilā on the Isigili slope.

The 2 devatas

20 The Blessed One spent that night and the rest of the day on Vulture Peak Hill.

21 Then when the night was far spent, **two devatas**³⁷ of exceeding beauty, lighting up the whole of Vulture Peak Hill, went up to the Blessed One. Having gone up to the Blessed One, and paying him homage, they stood at one side.

22 Standing thus at one side, one of the devatas said this to the Blessed One, “Bhante, the monk Vakkali is intent on liberation.”³⁸

23 The other devata said this to the Blessed One, “Surely, bhante, he will be well freed.”³⁹

24 This is what the devatas said to the Blessed One. Having said this, they paid homage to the Blessed One and, keeping him on their right, disappeared right there.

25 Then when the night has passed, the Blessed One addressed the monks thus:

“Come, bhikshus, go and visit the monk Vakkali and say to him:

25.2 ‘Avuso Vakkali, listen to the word of the Blessed One [122] and the 2 devatas.

Last night, avuso, when the night was far spent, two devatas of exceeding beauty went up to the Blessed One, lighting up the whole of Vulture Peak Hill.

They went up to the Blessed One, and after paying him homage, stood at one side.

25.2 Standing thus at one side, one of the devatas said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, the monk Vakkali is intent on liberation.”

³⁵ “Mount Vulture Hill, *gijjha,kūṭo pabbato*.

³⁶ This is the place where the monk Godhika committed suicide, too (**Godhika S**, S 4.23/1:120-122). See (1.2).

³⁷ *Devatā*, “deities.” Here referring to a god or deva of the sense-world beings. However, broadly, it can refer to any “deity” of any of the heavens: those of the sense-world, the form world and the formless world, as in the term *devatā’nussati*, “recollection on deities” (SD 15.13). Hence, Vimāna Vatthu Comy defines *devatā* as a young male god, a brahma, or a young female god (*devatā ti deva,putto pi brahmā pi deva,dhitā pi vuccati*, VvA 21). **Culla Niddesa** defines *devatā* even more broadly, in a socioreligious sense, as those who are commonly regarded (in the Buddha’s time) as being “worthy of gifts” (*devatā as ye yesaṃ dakkhiṇeyyā te tesāṃ devatā*), ie, ascetics, domestic animals (elephants, horses, cows, cocks, crows), physical elements (fire, stone, etc), lower (earth-bound) gods and high (celestial) gods (Nc 308).

³⁸ “Intent on liberation,” *vimokkhāya ceteti*. In the SD series, we render *vimutti* as “freedom,” *vimutta* as “freed,” and *vimokkha* as “liberation.” On *vimutti* and *vimokkha*, rendered as “liberation” and “deliverance” respectively, see S:B 1081 n170.

³⁹ “He will be well-freed,” *svvimutto vimuccissati*, lit, “he will be freed as one well freed,” that is to say, he would attain the fruit of rathood (SA 2:313).

The other devata said this to the Blessed One: “Surely, bhante, *he will be freed as one well freed.*”

And the Blessed One says to you, avuso Vakkali,

“Fear not, Vakkali, fear not, Vakkali!

Your death will not be in vain [will not be a bad one]. Your demise will not be in vain.””

26 “Yes, bhante,” the monks replied in assent to the Blessed One,

The monks convey the Buddha’s message to Vakkali

26.1 and having gone up to the venerable Vakkali, said to him,

“Avuso Vakkali, listen to the word of the Blessed One and the 2 devatas.

Last night, avuso, when the night was far spent, two devatas of exceeding beauty went up to the Blessed One, lighting up the whole of Vulture Peak Hill.

Having gone up to the Blessed One and paying him homage, they stood at one side.

Standing thus at one side, one of the devatas said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, the monk Vakkali is intent on liberation.”

The other devata said this to the Blessed One: “Surely, bhante, he will be well freed.”

And the Blessed One says to you, avuso Vakkali,

“Fear not, Vakkali, Fear not, Vakkali!

Your death will not be in vain [will not be a bad one]. Your demise will not be in vain.”

Vakkali’s suicide

27 Then the venerable Vakkali addressed his attendants:

“Come, avuso, lower me from the bed. How can one like me think of listening to the Blessed One’s teaching while seated on a high seat.”⁴⁰

28 “Yes, avuso,” the monks replied in assent to the venerable Vakkali, and they lowered the venerable Vakkali from the bed.

29 [The monks:] *“Last night, avuso, when the night was far spent, two devatas of exceeding beauty went up to the Blessed One, lighting up the whole of Vulture Peak Hill.*

Having gone up to the Blessed One and paying him homage, they stood at one side.

Standing thus at one side, one of the devatas said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, the monk Vakkali is intent on liberation.”

The other devata said this to the Blessed One: “Surely, bhante, he will be well freed.”

And the Blessed One says to you, avuso Vakkali,

“Fear not, Vakkali, Fear not, Vakkali!

Your death will not be in vain. Your demise will not be in vain.”

30 [Vakkali:] “Well then, avuso, pay homage to the Blessed One in my name with your head at his feet and say:

‘Bhante, the monk Vakkali is sick, suffering, gravely ill.

He pays homage to the Blessed One with his head at his feet.’

Then say,

30.2 **‘Form** is impermanent: I have no doubt about this, bhante,
I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering.

⁴⁰ This is an interesting case where we see the Buddha being respected as the Dharma, or that the Dharma is regarded with the same respect as or higher than the Buddha. Cf **Gāraṇa S** (S 6.2) SD 12.3.

I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change,
I have no more desire, lust nor affection. [123]

30.3 **Feeling** is impermanent: I have no doubt about this, bhante,

I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering.

I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change,
I have no more desire, lust nor affection.

30.4 **Perception** is impermanent: I have no doubt about this, bhante,

I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering.

I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change,
I have no more desire, lust nor affection.

30.5 **Mental formations** are impermanent: I have no doubt about this, bhante,

I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering.

I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change,
I have no more desire, lust nor affection.

30.6 **Consciousness** is impermanent: I have no doubt about this, bhante,

I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering.

I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change,
I have no more desire, lust nor affection.”⁴¹

31 “Yes, avuso,” the monks replied in assent, and then they left.

32 Then, not long after those monks had left, the venerable Vakkali used the knife.

Vakkali’s last message to the Buddha

33 Then the monks went up to the Blessed One, and sat down at one side. Seated on one side, the monks said this to the Blessed One:

‘Bhante, the monk Vakkali is sick, suffering, gravely ill.

He pays homage to the Blessed One with his head at his feet.’

Then say,

30.2 **Form** is impermanent: I have no doubt about this, bhante,

I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering.

I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change,
I have no more desire, lust nor affection.

⁴¹ This sentence seems to imply that Vakkali thinks he is already an arhat; cf my tr of **Chann’ovāda S**, M 144,7) n, SD 11.12. Apparently, like Channa (M 144,12 n), SD 11.12, Vakkali felt great pain after cutting his throat. Comy: “The elder overestimated himself. As he had suppressed the defilements by concentration and insight, he did not see himself assailed by them and so thought that he was an arhat. Disgusted with his unhappy life, he cut his throat with a sharp knife. Just then, great pain arose in him. Realizing he was still an ordinary person, he took up his main meditation object, examined it with knowledge (*ñāṇa*) and attained arhathood just as he died.” (SA 2:314). As such, he dies a “same-header” (*sama,sīsī*), one who attains 2 ends at the same time, ie, the destruction of the influxes and life’s end (cf SA 2:273; AA 4:6). Cf S:B 1082 n172 where Bodhi doubts Comy’s accuracy here. It is interesting to note here that while both Vakkali and Channa each cut their throat (*kaṇṭha,nāḷa*, SA 2:314; *kaṇṭha,nāḷi*, MA 5:82), Godhika was said to have cut his wind-pipe (*gala,nāḷi*) (SA 1:183). Bodhi however uses “jugular vein” throughout (eg S:B 1082 n172).

- 30.3 **Feeling** is impermanent: I have no doubt about this, bhante,
I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering.
I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change,
I have no more desire, lust nor affection.
- 30.4 **Perception** is impermanent: I have no doubt about this, bhante,
I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering.
I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change,
I have no more desire, lust nor affection.
- 30.5 **Mental formations** are impermanent: I have no doubt about this, bhante,
I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering.
I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change,
I have no more desire, lust nor affection.
- 30.6 **Consciousness** is impermanent: I have no doubt about this, bhante,
I do not doubt that whatever is impermanent is suffering.
I do not doubt that in regard to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change,
I have no more desire, lust nor affection.”⁴²

Māra fails to find Vakkali’s consciousness

34 The Blessed One then addressed the monks thus:

“Come, bhikshus, let us go to Kālasilā on the Isigili slope where the son of family Vakkali has used the knife.”

“Yes, bhante,” those monks replied in assent.

35 Then the Blessed One, together with a number of monks, went to Kāla,silā on the Isigili slope.

36 The Blessed One saw in the distance the venerable Vakkali lying on his bed with his shoulder turned.⁴³ [124]

37 Now on that occasion a mass of smoke and darkness was moving to the east, moving to the west, moving to the north, moving to the south, moving upwards, moving downwards, and moving in the directions in between.⁴⁴

⁴² This sentence seems to imply that Vakkali thinks he is already an arhat; cf my tr of **Chann’ovāda S**, M 144,7) n, SD 11.12. Apparently, like Channa (M 144,12 n), SD 11.12, Vakkali felt great pain after cutting his throat. Comy: “The elder overestimated himself. As he had suppressed the defilements by concentration and insight, he did not see himself assailed by them and so thought that he was an arhat. Disgusted with his unhappy life, he cut his throat with a sharp knife. Just then, great pain arose in him. Realizing he was still an ordinary person, he took up his main meditation object, examined it with knowledge (*ñāṇa*) and attained arhathood just as he died.” (SA 2:314). As such, he dies a “same-header” (*sama,sīsī*, cf SA 2:273; AA 4:6). Cf S:B 1082 n172 where Bodhi doubts Comy’s accuracy here. It is interesting to note here that while both Vakkali and Channa each cut their throat (*kaṇṭha,nāḷa*, SA 2:314; *kaṇṭha,nāḷi*, MA 5:82), Godhika was said to have cut his wind-pipe (*gala,nāḷi*) (SA 1:183). Bodhi however uses “jugular vein” throughout (eg S:B 1082 n172).

⁴³ “With his shoulder turned,” ie, with twisted shoulder. He had been lying on his back when he took the knife, but because he was accustomed to lying on his right side, he had turned to his right and had remained so (SA 2:315).

⁴⁴ *Tena kho pana samayena dhumāyitattarṃ timirāyitattarṃ gacchat’eva purimarṃ disarṃ gacchati pacchimarṃ disarṃ gacchati uttararṃ disarṃ gacchati dakkhiṇarṃ disarṃ gacchati uddharṃ gacchati adho gacchati anudisarṃ.* (S 1:122 = 3:124).

38 The Blessed One then addressed the monks thus:

“Bhikshus, do you see that mass of smoke and darkness
moving to the east, moving to the west, moving to the north, moving to the south,
moving upwards, moving downwards, and moving in the directions in between?”

“Yes, bhante.”

39 “That, bhikshus, is Māra the bad one seeking the consciousness of the son of family⁴⁵ Vakkali, wondering, ‘Where now has the consciousness of the son of family Vakkali established itself [for rebirth]?’ But, bhikshus, with consciousness unestablished, the son of family Vakkali has attained nirvana.”⁴⁶

— evaṃ —

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⁴⁵ “Son of family,” *kula,putta*, alt trs “clansman, noble youth.” It is interesting that the Buddha refers to Vakkali posthumously as *kula,putta* instead of *bhikkhu*. It should be noted that only Buddhaghosa (the author of DhA) refers to Vakkali as *thera* (elder) throughout, but the Buddha often refers to a young monk from good families as “son of family” (*kula,putta*). Vakkali was prob in his early 20s. Pukkusāti is similarly referred to as *kula,putta* in **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140). On other terms denoting “young,” see **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31,1.2/3:180) n, SD 4.1. See SD 44.10 (2.2.1).

⁴⁶ “Consciousness unestablished” (*apatiṭṭhita viññāṇa*). Māra is looking for Vakkali’s rebirth-consciousness (*paṭi-sandhi,citta*), as he has elsewhere found in the case of the unawakened dead (**Brahma Nimantanika S**, M 49,5/-1:327, SD 11.7; cf S 4:38 f). But here he fails to find any, because it is unestablished (*apatiṭṭhita*), ie, finds no footing for a new life. It is clear here that the death-consciousness (= rebirth-consciousness) does not survive in an “unestablished” (*apatiṭṭhita*) condition, since the texts (here and at S 1:122) state that with the passing away of the arhat, consciousness, too, ceases. See also **Parivīmaṃsana S** (S 12.51/2:80-84), SD 11.5. See (1.4).

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