

“The path for attaining the highest” (*brahma,patti*)

Excerpt from SD 60.5 (Mahā Kaccāna) Lohicca Sutta (S 35.132) translated & annotated by TAN Beng Sin (Piya Tan) ©2010, 2023.

1.2.2.1 Rejecting brahminical priestcraft, Mahā Kaccāna declares, that the highest attainment (*brahma,patti*) is to have a focused mind, being “free from blemish” (*anāvila*), and “without harshness (*akhila*) towards all beings” — “this is the path for attaining the highest” (*so maggo brahma,pattiyā*) [§4(6)]. Kaccāna uses 3 religious terms familiar to the brahmins, that is: *avila*, *khila* and *brahma*—which are also well known in Pali.

Where there are monastic centres and retreats that exemplify these qualities. We should happily learn from them. If we are unable to find such centres, we should look for **lay groups** or form one with the purpose of studying, practising and realizing the Buddha’s teachings. Let us now see what these key words mean and how we can ourselves put them into practice, to have a taste of the “holy life” (*brahma,patti*), even for just a moment, like a key-hole to the door of awakening. The following practices are the key to this door.

1.2.2.2 The term *anāvila* [§4(6)b] comes from *an-āvila* (*ts*), “neither turbid nor muddy, clear; undisturbed (usually said of water, also of the mind, *citta*). The allusion here is to the mind that has just emerged from dhyana and is profoundly calm and clear, which is then applied to see directly into the true nature of reality: *impermanence*, *suffering* and *nonself*.

In practice, this means we should keep our minds calm with mindfulness and clear with awareness. To help sustain such a mind, we should diligently live morally virtuous lives keeping to at least the 5 precepts, empowered by the practice of lovingkindness, with positive attitudes towards ourselves and to others.

For each of us as lay practitioners, we should educate ourselves in the best way possible for the study and practice of the suttas. A good broad-based education will help us live a rich life of learning and teaching that can benefit from the truth and beauty of the suttas and our contemplative lives. *Anāvila* thus is a word reminding to prepare our minds and hearts to be calm and clear to embrace the Buddha’s teachings and to disseminate it by our own example and diligence.

1.2.2.3 As used here, *akhila* [§4(6)c] is a well-known Pali term, which means “free from ‘barrenness or hardness (of soil)’” (*khila*), referring to hard barren soil between fields, where at best only weeds grow. The application here is, in a literal sense, (a) (of the soil) “with no barren spots.”¹ (b) Metaphorically, it means “free from the hardness or harshness of mind, arising from defilements (*rāga*, *dosa*, *moha*), or by the 5 hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇāni* = *pañca ceto,khilā*, ‘mental barrenness’).”

Akhila, then, refers to a mind that is free from the mental hindrances—*sensual desire*, *ill will*, *sloth and torpor*, *restlessness and worry*, and *doubt*—so that it is able to easily attain dhyana for the same purpose as stated above [1.2.2.2]: a profoundly calm and clear mind which is applied to see directly into the true nature of reality: *impermanence*, *suffering* and *nonself*.

As lay practitioners, we should instill *akhila* in our lives by deep love for learning how to apply the teaching to as much of our lives as possible, as individuals and as a community. As individuals, we should keep our minds calm, clear and creative to resolve negative emotions

¹ D 3:146,20 (DA) = 177,12.

and challenges, and in that way to cultivate spiritual friendship rooted in love, ruth,² joy and peace [1.2.2.4]. In this way, our minds and hearts are ever rich and ready with skillful ways to work towards the path of awakening with our very breaths.

1.2.2.4 In the closing verse, Kaccāna makes an important statement: this calm and clear mind is “one free from all harshness (*akhila*) to all beings” [§4(6)c]. This is the cultivation of the divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*). Instead of worshipping Brahmā as a deity, we cultivate Brahmā-like qualities, “Godliness” (*brahma, vihāra*) that is, of **immeasurable lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity** towards all beings. This profoundly calm and clear mind is then applied to see directly into the true nature of reality: *impermanence, suffering and nonself*, and so attain the path, even nirvana.

Thus 3rd quality, **akhila** refers to working the 4 divine abodes mentioned, especially, the first divine abode, **love** (*mettā*), which we should cultivate on as many levels as possible, and use it as a reminder of our own spiritual state and progress. We must first learn to:

- **love oneself**, that is, to accept oneself as we are, forgive oneself for the unwholesome we have done, and aspire better oneself daily and periodically;
- **love others** with the love they need, accepting them as they are, forgiving them for the unwholesome they have done, and to be a support to them as they work to better themselves;
- **love joyfully**, showing it gently, firmly and purely, recalling how spiritual friendship is so vital for a wholesome life and Dharma practice; and
- **love peace**, that is, to always see how impermanence level us in our differences, and to allow this wisdom to sort things out when we face great difficulties.

May we be free from harshness to all beings (*akhilam sabba, bhūtesu*).

1.2.2.5 Finally a reflection on “**attaining the highest**” (*brahma, patti*) in a practical way. On a simplest level, this means we should dedicate some time, possibly daily, to simply be at peace with oneself, reminding oneself that ultimately we have to assert oneself to gain the freedom of awakening (Dh 165).³ We have to open the door of freedom ourselves and walk through it.

As lay practitioners, we must each constantly remind ourselves the moral responsibility we have for our own actions of body, speech and mind. Just as we care for our body, so do others: we need to respect this body by respecting it with good health, a proper diet, generous joy and sufficient peace. Respecting the body of others thus means taking responsibility for sexuality and respecting the body and space of others.

While we celebrate the joys of our bodies, we must be mindful of the joint karma we are creating. There will be moments when we must mourn the pains that this very same body gives. We must also be aware that our body does not always obey us: we fall sick, we get hurt; so do others, too. We must then respect the body to let it heal itself.

1.2.2.6 Not everyone feels the drive of sex. For various reasons, we may simply not have any sexual relations, especially because we simply do not have a feeling for it. We are contented to remain **celibate** (*brahma, cāri*). There are precepts that can accommodate us,

² On *tr karuṇā* as “compassion,” a divine abode (*brahma, vihāra*), SD 38.5 (2.3.2.1); SD 48.1(5.2.1.3); SD 60.2 (5.4.2.2 n).

³ SD 49.10 (1.2.2).

so that we can direct all our energies to mental cultivation.⁴ This is a great blessing when we have a natural feeling for celibacy. We must have done something good in the past that now gives us this strength. Let us now use it wisely and joyfully.

If we do not have this inclination or blessing for a celibate life, then we should learn to celebrate the joys of love and friendship as if we are getting to know the other anew each time. A time may come when we feel ready to share our lives. When this sharing is guided by something higher—the love for Dharma—it is likely to be a bountiful life with for accomplishing the good that cannot be done alone (such as full-time Dharna work). We must let this happen as a natural blessing.

The Dharma-spirited lay life is thus rich and beautiful. Even in our aloneness, we are never lonely. In our togetherness, we become better individuals, those minds and hearts singularly seeking truth and spreading beauty. Even if we are unable to attain the highest truth in this life itself, we aspire at least never to fall below the path of streamwinning. For this is assured by the Lord himself, that we can reach the path in this very life.⁵

R851 Inspiration 501
TAN Beng Sin ©2024

⁴ That is, the 8 precepts (*aṭṭha* or *aṭṭh'āṅga sīla*), of which the 3rd is “abstinence from incelibacy” (*abrahma-cariyā veramaṇī*): **(Tad-ah)uposatha S** (A 3.70,9-16), SD 4.18; **Vitthat'uposatha S** (A 8.42), SD 89.11; **Nav'aṅ'uposatha S** (A 9.18), SD 59.4.

⁵ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1) or any of the other 9 suttas of S 25. (SD 16.7)