

Having nothing, taking nothing

Excerpt from *SD 61a Māra: a Buddhist mythology of evil and reality of badness*, Piya Tan © 2023.

2.5.3 Kappa Mānava Pucchā (Sn 5.11) Sn 1092-1095

2.5.3.1 Kappa Maṇava asks the Buddha about an “island” (*dīpa*) that remains well above the floods of decay and death, so that suffering will not arise again. Kappa’s question and the Buddha’s answers are as follows:

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| <p>1 <i>majjhe sarasmiṃ tiṭṭhatam</i>
(<i>icc’āyasmā kappo</i>)
<i>oghe jāte maha-b,bhaye</i>
<i>jarā,maccu,paretānam</i>
<i>dīpam pabrūhi mārisa</i>
<i>tvañ ca me dīpam akkhāhi</i>
<i>yathā-y-idaṃ nāparam siyā.</i></p> | <p>Sn 1092</p> | <p>For those standing in the middle of a stream,
(said the venerable Kappa,)
when a great flood arises;
for those overwhelmed by decay and death—
tell me of an island, sir.
Please show me the island
so that this (decay and death) is no more.</p> |
| <p>2 <i>majjhe sarasmiṃ tiṭṭhatam</i>
(<i>kappā ti bhagavā</i>)
<i>oghe jāte maha-b,bhaye</i>
<i>jarā,maccu,paretānam</i>
<i>dīpam pabrūmi kappa te.</i></p> | <p>Sn 1093</p> | <p>I will tell you of that island, <i>d</i>
(Kappa, said the Blessed One,)
for those overcome by decay and death, <i>c</i>
standing in the middle of a stream <i>a</i>
when a great flood arises. <i>b</i></p> |
| <p>3 <i>akiñcanaṃ anādānam</i>
<i>etaṃ dīpam anāparam</i>
<i>nibbānam iti nam brūmi</i>
<i>jarā,maccu,parikkhayam</i></p> | <p>Sn 1094</p> | <p>Having nothing, taking nothing,
that island with nothing further,
I call it nirvana (the quenched),
the total destruction of decay and death.</p> |
| <p>4 <i>etad aññāya ye satā</i>
<i>diṭṭha,dhammābhiniibbutā</i>
<i>na te māra,vasānugā</i>
<i>na te māraṣṣa paddhagū¹ ti</i></p> | <p>Sn 1095</p> | <p>The mindful who know this,
are quenched here and now.
They go not under Marā’s power;
they are not Māra’s minions.</p> |

Sn 1093

In the middle of a stream means “in samsara,” because the flow is time itself, which has neither beginning nor end. Whatever exists must exist in time; since we exist, we are **overcome by decay and death**. The stream is dangerous, especially **when a great flood arises**. We do not always notice this, but we will when we are flooded with sensuality (*kām’ogha*), with existence (*bhav’ogha*), with views (*diṭṭh’ogha*) or with ignorance (*avijj’ogha*). It is **a great flood** because it is that of birth, of old age, of disease and of death.

Sn 1094

That island is a metaphor for a shelter, a cavern, a refuge, a resort, a support; that is, where suffering will cease, that is to say, the cessation of renewed existence in the sense realm, the form realm and the formless realm; that is in samsara. This island is a metaphor for **nirvana**.

¹ Be Ce Ee *paddhagū* [ū: no need underscored]; Se *paṭṭhagū*. Comy: *paddhā paddhacarā paricārika* (Nc:Ne 149,5); *na te māraṣṣa paddhacarā paricārakā sissā siyā*, “They would not be Māra’s minions, attendants, pupils” (SnA 597,24 f). See PED: svv *pattha* + *paddhagu*. Cf Skt *prādhva*, “journey.”

Having nothing (*akiñcana*) is the antidote of *having*, meaning identifying with what we own. We may only use something that we have worked for or been rightly given, but the reality is that we can own nothing. (The notion of “owning” is conventional reality; it only works properly when there is moral order.)

The opposite of *nothing* is often seen as “something” (*kiñcana*), but what is it really? Lust is *something*, hatred is *something*, delusion is *something*, conceit is *something*, a view is *something*, defilement is *something*, misconduct is *something*. When we have something, we have either *paid* for it or are *paying* for it or we have *to pay* for it—this is **karma**.

Taking nothing is the antidote of *taking*, meaning not wanting, not seeking, not grasping, not clinging. It is the ending of having and taking [2.6.4.2 (38)].

That island with nothing further: There is no island better than this. It’s not just an island; it frees us from the floods (sensuality, existence, views and ignorance). This means our old debts no longer trouble us; we create no new debts; there is no more karma for us. No more *something*!

Nothing further is also a metaphor for freedom from time: nirvana is beyond space-time; hence, it is death-free.

I call it nirvana: This is the Buddha’s message for us; he has won nirvana and now teaches us how to gain it for ourselves. What does nirvana free us from? It first frees us from karma as “the weaver” (*sibbanī*), the seamstress² (that is, craving and ignorance, the roots of karma). We are free from “the weaving” (*vāna*) together of existence after existence without end. The second is “the jungle,” that is, the various realms that we can fall into at any time, even now.³ Samsara is both “the weaving” (diachronic existence) and “the jungle” (synchronic existence).

They both are characterized by decay and death: decay is the impermanence taking away what we are and what we have, until in the end even our breath is taken away. But death is not the end; it is a new beginning of the whole cycle again and again.

The total destruction of decay and death refers to the abandoning, settling or ending of the seemingly or otherwise endless being and having, that is, death-free nirvana.

² A 3:399; DhS 1059; DhA 363; Sn 1040,

³ Nc explanation is ambiguous, since *vāna* is a homonym meaning either “weaving” or “jungle.” Both are used in comys in playful etyms of *nibbāna*. We see the same polysemy in the component **-vāna** in the phrase *tañhā,sañkhāta,vānābhāvato nibbānaṃ* (SnA 1:253,2); it can mean either “weaving” or “jungle.” Without further details or context, it is often difficult to determine whether a comment is explaining *nibbāna* as “absence of weaving” (ie, of craving as weaving one existence to the next) or as “absence of the jungle” (ie, of craving as entangling one in the various realms of existence). Here SnA may be taken as explaining *nibbāna* as the absence (nir) of weaving (vāna). This etym is given more fully elsewhere as: “That craving is called ‘weaving’ because it weaves together, stitches together, existence with existence, or karma with its fruits. Nibbāna is that which has abandoned this weaving” (*sā pan’esā tañhā bhavena bhavaṃ, phalena vā saddhiṃ kammaṃ vinati saṃsibbatī ti katvā vānaṃ ti vuccati; tato vānato nikkhantaṃ ti nibbānaṃ*, DA 2:465,3-5 = MA 2:175,17-20, = SA 1:196,21-23). The derivation of *nibbāna* accepted by modern scholars is from the verb *nibbāti* or *nibbāyati*, “to go out,” referring to the going out of a fire. These verbs and their prefixed form, *parinibbāyati*, are common in the Nikāyas. In *tam pi pañca,gati,vān(an)ena vāna,saññitāya tañhāya nikkhantattā nibbānaṃ ti vuccati* (SnA 1:300 = KhpA 152,23 f), the etym of *nibbāna* can be taken as being derived from *vāna* meaning “jungle,” with the prefix *nir-* indicating absence, ie, as diachronic existentiality. In *tañhā,sañkhāta,vānābhāvato nibbānaṃ* (SnA 1:253,2), already noted, *nibbāna* can be taken as “absence of weaving (*vāna*).” In *tam pi pañca,gati,vānena vāna,saññitāya tañhāya nikkhantattā nibbānaṃ ti vuccati* (Sn 152,23 f), the etym of *nibbāna*, the component *vāna* may be taken in the sense of “jungle,” with the prefix *nir-* indicating absence, ie, as synchronic existentiality. Either way, in terms of awakening, *nibbana* is simply beyond etymologies and definitions, as it is the “unconditioned” end of suffering.

Sn 1095

The mindful who know this are the arhats. They are “mindful” in the sense that they know and understand that “all conditioned things are impermanent” (*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*).⁴ They are mindful of the reality that a thought or an event is just a moment, but our memory of it stretches this reality beyond that moment into the present and even the future. Then we seek those things to feed that memory (the past), and we desire to have it, to collect it.

We have made “something” of the past and go in quest for more and more of it. We seek something imagined—something that does not exist. We like it when we think we have found something *like it* (this is a case of lust); we hate it when we do not have it, when it’s *not it* (this is a case of hatred); or we are confused by *it* (this is delusion). We fail to understand that the “something,” that *it*, is all imaginary and does not exist. But then, we hopelessly wish or pray that there *must* be something—we don’t even know we are deluded. Essentially, this is suffering, especially when this becomes habitual.

Then we have the idea that something that existed in the past is **the same** as something we have *seen, heard, sensed or known* (*diṭṭha, muta, suta, viññāta*) as something in the present, and we hope to keep that **sameness** with things even into the future. In the present, we work to see this same-ness—as something *seen, heard, sensed or known*—in our own self,⁵ our family, religion, community, even world—without seeking to understand what it is that we see as “same,” why we desire that “sameness,” and how this idea is affecting other people and the environment.

This last idea is called “**self-identity view**” (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*). It basically keeps us within a cocoon of fixed ideas about ourself and what others are or should be. This *is* suffering and *causes* suffering simply because of the idea that there is “something” that does not change. This may be in our bodies (like race or colour), feelings (a religious or powerful feeling), thinking (a view), intentions (how we habitually act) and experiences (looks, sounds, smells, tastes and touches). We seek some kind of identity or oneness in any such thing. In short, we have failed to see or accept change in ourself, in others or in the world.

They are quenched here and now: They have fully put out the fires of *greed, hatred and delusion*. They understand the past, the future and the present, and are thus not defined by any of these. In fact, there is nothing (*akiñcana*) by which we can define an arhat, an awakened person.

Māra, on the other hand, works to weave us to the past and the future; our present is mostly a jungle of views that we have of this and that, of being and non-being, and of having and wanting—because of such ideas, such as:

- we are stuck in states of pleasure as the devas;
- we resort to measuring and exploiting others as asuras;
- we keep doing something out of habit or fear as animals;
- we are caught in a cyclic habit of hoping for “something” as pretas;
- we enjoy violence and use it to get our way as hell-beings;
- we are stuck with doubts and uncertainties as humans.

⁴ This is the first of the 3 teachings on *impermanence, suffering and nonself*, highlighted in Dh 277-279: SD 26.8 (1.1.2).

⁵ Although we often read “ourselves” here, the reality is that we usually only think about *our self* or about “others” in relation to *ourself*. Hence, everything is in the singular: *my* (or perhaps *our*) family, religion, community, or world. It is a self-centred view.

All this is Māra's jungle, in which we are often caught and where we often remain, not knowing why, not understanding the true meaning and purpose of it all. We are then under Māra's control. We are caught in Māra's jungle and become **Māra's minions** because we keep identifying ourselves with a particular state.

In important ways, being **human** (mentally) is the best of these 6 states, so long as we are willing and able to learn about what we really are—that we are impermanent, changing and becoming otherwise. **Learning** is good insofar as we are able to use our mind to rise beyond our mere form, that is, to experience the mind as it is—at the highest mental level, this is called dhyana (*jhāna*).

When we are good at focusing the mind and using it to see true reality (impermanence, etc), we then *shape* and *master* the mind. Then, following the Buddha's teaching and practice, we *free* the mind. We are no longer Māra's minions. We are true learners of Dharma, even arhats.

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