

ENGLISH TRANSLATION ⁽²⁾

(20) 5. Maha Vagga

1. SOTANUGATA SUTTA

By Sidney Tin Htut

Introduction

Life is a continuum of thoughts which does not end even at death in normal circumstances unless one has developed ultimate wisdom and has opted to end the sufferings associated with life. For ordinary people life is so precious that we regard sufferings that are associated with life as ‘acceptable’. Thus, we look forward to continuation of life in whatever forms that may occur in future. This desire for life is labelled as ‘*bhava tanha*’ in Pali.

The universe and its all forms of existences, both visible and invisible, basically exist in duality which you may call it ‘*ying* and ‘*yang*’ in Chinese, or negative and positive in terms of science; and it is known as ‘arising and ending’ in Buddhist psychology. To understand this reality in depth is regarded as insight wisdom in Buddhism, which may seem simple, yet it is still hard to perceive and accept it as an ultimate fact. This insight is called ‘**anicca**’ in Pali.

Most of us accept life as ‘pleasurable’ although it has ups and downs, enjoying and enduring life’s manifestations as it come along. We hardly accept life as a whole, as ‘suffering’ since unfavourable or unpleasant things come and go as part of a natural phenomena and we are soon overwhelmed by more pleasurable things and circumstances. Thus, it is hard to know and accept life as a suffering, which in Pali is known as ‘**dukkha**’.

The hardest of all is to know and appreciate the ultimate fact that there is no such thing as a ‘permanent self,’ or whatever you may label it; ‘soul, atman, atta’ or whatnot. This insight wisdom is called ‘**anatta**,’ the opposite of ‘atta-belief,’ which harbours in all of us as we have a desire for life and wish for an eternal existence, a ‘bhava-tanha’ as mentioned earlier.

One of the aims of a good Buddhist is to know and appreciate anicca, dukkha and anatta, the three facts of the ultimate or unconditional truths, collectively known as ‘**paramatta sissa**’ in Pali, and to obtain insight wisdom.

This insight wisdom ‘**nana**’ can be achieved by three ways and in three levels; by learning, known as ‘**sutta-maya**’ in Pali, by pondering or deep thinking ‘**cinta-maya**’ and by practising insight-meditation or ‘**bhavana-maya**.’

The first two wisdoms may be achieved by some Buddhists since we have been exposed to many literature and sermons and may have acquired knowledge on the three facts of life to a degree, but the last two, namely, 'cinta-maya and bhavana-maya nana' could only be obtained by those who practise vipassana insight meditation.

Thus, the importance of practising vipassana could not be over-emphasised as it can be an assurance or a passport to your 'new and favourable life' in the future in the circle of existences or 'samsara' in Pali.

Sotanugata sutta is a sermon expounded by the Buddha which is especially relevant to those who are practising vipassana but could not become enlightened in this life due to some inhibitions. It is an assurance given by the Buddha to those who are in practice, that they would become enlightened in one of the four ways as described in the sutta. This Sotanugata sutta has been explained and elaborated further by the most venerable 'Mogok Sayadaw U Vimala' in one of his discourses. It has also been transcribed and published in Burmese by the 'Mogok Vipassana Trust' in a booklet.

May this 'dhamma dana' serve me as an aid to my enlightenment in the future.

Sidney Tin Htut

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'Sotanugata sutta - Discourse on Benefits Acquired by Hearing' (the Dhamma)

191. Bhikkhus, definite benefits accruing from what has been acquired by hearing, what has been constantly practised by reciting, what has been borne in mind and what has been penetratingly known by intellect are these four kinds.

What are the four ?

Bhikkhus, a bhikkhu in this Teaching has learnt the Teaching, namely Sutta, Geyya, Veyyakarana, Gatha, Udana, Itivuttaka, Jataka, Abbhutadhamma and Vedella. That bhikkhu has taken these in by hearing, constantly practised these by reciting, borne in mind and penetratingly known by intellect. If that bhikkhu dies (by any chance in forgetfulness), he will be reborn in a certain deva realm. There, in that person who is endowed with wellbeing in that deva realm, those dhammas are clearly manifest. Bhikkhus, arising of recollections may be slow in him, but he can realise the truth quickly. Bhikkhus, **this is the first of the (definite) benefits** accruing from what has been acquired by hearing, what has been constantly practised by reciting, what has been borne in mind, and what has been penetratingly known by intellect.

Another kind, bhikkhus, is that a bhikkhu in this Teaching has learnt the Teaching namely, Sutta, Geyya, Veyyakarana, Gatha, Udana, Itivuttaka, Jataka, Abbhutadhamma and Vedella. That bhikkhu has taken in by hearing, constantly practised by reciting, borne in mind and penetratingly known by intellect. If (by any chance) that bhikkhu dies in forgetfulness, he will be reborn in a certain deva realm. There, in that person who is endowed with wellbeing in that deva realm, those dhammas are not clearly manifest. Then a bhikkhu of high attainments in psychic power who has a well-practised mind expounds to the deva audience the Teachings (of the Buddha), and it occurs to that (forgetting) person thus; ‘The noble practice of the Teaching which I have practised before is the same as this dhamma (which this bhikkhu is expounding).’ Bhikkhus, arising of recollection may be slow in him, but he can realise the truth quickly.

Bhikkhus, if a drum expert hears a sound of a drum on his long journey, he has no uncertainty in discerning whether it is the sound of a drum or not, but he can decide with certainty that it is the sound of a drum. In the same instance, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu has learnt Sutta, Geyya, Veyyakarana, Gatha, Udana, Itivuttaka, Jataka, Abbhutadhamma and Vedella. That bhikkhu has taken in by hearing, constantly practised by reciting, borne in mind and penetratingly known by intellect. If (by any chance) that bhikkhu dies in forgetfulness, he will be reborn in a certain deva realm. There, in that person who is endowed with wellbeing in that deva realm, those dhammas are clearly manifest. Then a bhikkhu of high attainments in psychic power who has a well-practised mind expounds to the deva audience the Teachings (of the Buddha), and it occurs to that (forgetting) person thus; ‘The noble practice of the Teaching which I have practised before is the same as this dhamma (which this bhikkhu is expounding).’ Bhikkhus, arising of recollection may be slow in him, but he can realise the truth quickly. Bhikkhus, **this is the second of the (definite) benefits** accruing from what has been acquired by hearing, what has been constantly practised by reciting, what has been borne in mind, and what has been penetratingly known by intellect.

Another kind, bhikkhus, is that a bhikkhu in this Teaching has learnt the Teaching namely, Sutta, Geyya, Veyyakarana, Gatha, Udana, Itivuttaka, Jataka, Abbhutadhamma and Vedella. That bhikkhu has taken in by hearing, constantly practised by reciting, borne in mind and penetratingly known by intellect. If (by any

chance) that bhikkhu dies in forgetfulness, he will be reborn in a certain deva realm. There, in that person who is endowed with wellbeing in that deva realm, those dhammas are not clearly manifest, and a bhikkhu of high attainments in psychic power who has a well-practised mind does not expound to the deva audience the Teachings (of the Buddha), but a deva expounds the Teachings to the deva audience, and it occurs to that (forgetting) person thus; ‘The noble practice of the Teaching which I have practised before is the same as this dhamma (which this bhikkhu is expounding).’ Bhikkhus, arising of recollection may be slow in him, but he can realise the truth quickly. Bhikkhus, if a conch-trumpet expert hears a sound of conch-trumpet on his long journey, he has no uncertainty in discerning whether it is the sound of a conch-trumpet or not, but he can decide with certainty that it is the sound of a conch-trumpet. In the same instance, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu has learnt Sutta, Geyya, Veyyakarana, Gatha, Udana, Itivuttaka, Jataka, Abbhutadhamma and Vedella. That bhikkhu has taken in by hearing, constantly practised by reciting, borne in mind and penetratingly known by intellect. If (by any chance) that bhikkhu dies in forgetfulness, he will be reborn in a certain deva realm. There, in that person who is endowed with wellbeing in that deva realm, those dhammas are not clearly manifest; and a bhikkhu of high attainments in psychic power who has a well-practised mind does not expounds to the deva audience the Teachings, but a deva expounds the Teachings to the deva audience; it occurs to that (forgetting) person thus; ‘The noble practice of the Teaching which I have practised before is the same as this dhamma (which this bhikkhu is expounding).’ Bhikkhus, arising of recollection may be slow in him, but he can realise the truth quickly. Bhikkhus, **this is the third of the (definite) benefits** accruing from what has been acquired by hearing, what has been constantly practised by reciting, what has been borne in mind, and what has been penetratingly known by intellect.

Another kind, bhikkhus, is that a bhikkhu in this Teaching has learnt the Teaching namely, Sutta, Geyya, Veyyakarana, Gatha, Udana, Itivuttaka, Jataka, Abbhutadhamma and Vedella. That bhikkhu has taken in by hearing, constantly practised by reciting, borne in mind and penetratingly known by intellect. If (by any chance) that bhikkhu dies in forgetfulness, he will be reborn in a certain deva realm. There, in that person who is endowed with wellbeing in that deva realm, those dhammas are not clearly manifest; and a bhikkhu of high attainments in psychic

power who has a well-practised mind, does not expound to the deva audience the Teachings (of the Buddha), and a deva does not expound the Teachings to the deva audience either; a deva who has been before him will remind him thus: “Friend deva, remember the noble practice of the Teaching what we have practised before. Oh, friend deva, you try to remember that! Oh, friend deva, you try to remember that.” Then, that (forgetting) deva replies, “Friend deva, I remember! Friend deva, I remember!” Bhikkhus, arising of recollection may be slow in him, but he can realise the truth quickly.

Bhikkhus, two friend who have been playmates of childhood days in the dust at a certain time and in a certain place meet again, one asks the other, “Friend, do you remember this event in our childhood days?” and that friend says, “Friend, I do remember! Friend, I do remember!” In the same way, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu has learnt Sutta, Geyya, Veyyakarana, Gatha, Udana, Itivuttaka, Jataka, Abbhutadhamma and Vedella. That bhikkhu has taken in by hearing, constantly practised by reciting, borne in mind and penetratingly known by intellect. If (by any chance) that bhikkhu dies in forgetfulness, he will be reborn in a certain deva realm. There, in that person who is endowed with wellbeing in that deva realm, those dhammas are not clearly manifest; and neither a bhikkhu of high attainments in psychic power who has a well-practised mind nor a deva does not expound to the deva audience, but the deva who has been before him will remind him thus: “Friend deva, remember the noble practice of the Teaching what we have practised before. Oh, friend deva, you try to remember that.” Then, that (forgetting) deva replies, “Friend deva, I remember! Friend deva, I remember!”

Bhikkhus, arising of recollection may be slow in him, but he can realise the truth quickly. Bhikkhus, two friends who have been playmates of childhood days in the dust at a certain time and in a certain place meet again, one asks the other, “Friend, do you remember this event in our childhood days?” “Friend, I do remember! Friend, I do remember!”

Bhikkhus, arising of recollection may be slow in him, but he can realise the truth quickly. Bhikkhus, **this is the fourth of the (definite) benefits** accruing from what has been acquired by hearing, what has been constantly practised by reciting, what has been borne in mind, and what has been penetratingly known by intellect are these four kinds. (Thus said the Bhagava). ⁽²⁾

Commentary ⁽³⁾

The commentary on Sotanugata sutta given by the late Ven. Mogok Sayadaw U Vimala, who was well versed in both sutta and abhidhamma, and a well documented arahat who had left dhatu relics explained further that the acquiring of knowledge of the sutta, geyya, veyyakarana, gatha, udana, itivuttaka, jataka, abbhutadhamma and vedella, in essence, is the discernment of ***anicca, dukkha, and anatta*** by hearing, reciting (sutamaya & cintamaya nana) and by vipassana insight (bhavanamaya nana), but not necessarily by higher supra-mundane magga nana.

It is definite that those who have learnt anicca, dukkha, anatta and have practised vipassana to discern these realities by sutamaya, cintamaya and bhavana maya nana would become enlightened in the next life should they be unsuccessful in perceiving nibanna in this life despite ardent effort.

Devas are more intelligent than humans and a slight incitement by any of the four ways mentioned in the sutta is enough for them to see the truth, (although devas are usually submerged in sensual pleasures and enlightenment is difficult for devas who have not practised vipassana in the past life.

Research in the insight level required for such knowledge ⁽⁶⁾

Since the discernment of ***anicca, dukkha and anatta*** can be acquired by learning (hearing, reciting) and by introspection through vipassana meditation, it is of interest to know which level of the insight wisdom would be the equivalent to procure sutamaya and cintamaya nana of “anicca, dukkha, and anatta.”

Research into the literature shows that the stage of insight into the causal relation between *nama* and *rupa*, which is associated with *kinkhaviyarana visuddhi*, purity of escape from doubt, can lead to the causal relationship between consciousness and corporeality, known as ***piccaya parigha-nana*** and the stage of dissolution of psycho-physical phenomena, ***sammasana-nana*** will ensure good rebirth and the attainment of the lower stage (*cula*) of *sotapanna* path, according to the *Visuddhi-magga*. ⁽⁴⁾

The late Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw explained in the discourse on *Sallekha sutta* as follows. The joyful experience that results from this insight gives rise to abundant faith that in turn ensures rebirth in the higher worlds. In the *Alagaddupama sutta* of *Majjima-nikaya* the Buddha says: “All the persons who have faith in me are assured

of rebirth in the deva-worlds.” The commentary explains this canonical passage as follows: “This saying of the Buddha refers to those who practise *vipassana*. These yogis have no fruits of Ariyan Path other than the vipassana practice and faith. They have only faith in the Buddha. While they are striving for vipassana insight, there wells up in them a certain kind of faith in the Buddha and his faith lands them in the deva-world as if it takes them by the hand and elevates them there.” Here the faith referred to in the Pali text is the strong faith that arises again as a result of vipassana insight. This faith usually wells up during the blip of lower level of insight (*sammasana nana*), but it is not yet manifest until the development of further insights. It shows itself clearly with the emergence of *udayabbya* insight. According to the commentary, the yogi who has this kind of faith is called *cula-sotapanna*. This seems to have been quoted by

Visuddhimagga.⁽⁵⁾

May those who have practised vipassana and have come across this assurance be free of the anxiety-dukkha should they find it difficult to perceive magga nana.

With ananta cetana and metta,

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