

A Discourse on Worldly Vicissitudes

by
The Venerable Mahāsī Sayādaw
of
Burma



An English rendering by
U On Pe (Tet Toe)

Buddha Sāsanānuggaha Organisation
Mahāsī Translation Committee, Rangoon

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Edited by

Bhikkhu Pesala

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Editor's Forward

A number of the late Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw's lectures have been translated into English for the benefit of a wider audience. Most of these valuable books have been reprinted before in Malaysia but this new edition has been specially prepared for distribution in the UK.

The Venerable Sayādaw's discourses were addressed to meditators practising intensively at Mahāsi Sāsana Yeikthā, in Rangoon. They therefore contain many Pali words which, though familiar to those who have heard regular discourses, may not be so familiar to others. I have prepared this edition of the Discourse on Worldly Vicissitudes (Lokadhamma) bearing in mind that it will be read by many who may be unfamiliar with Pali terms. Nevertheless many Pali terms remain for the benefit of those who are familiar with them.

In the footnotes, references are to the page numbers of the Pali texts of the Pali Text Society which, in the translations, are given at the top of the page or sometimes in the body of the text. However, in the case of the Dhammapada or Sutta Nipāta, references are simply given to verse numbers.

The discourses were delivered in Burmese, and the recorded discourses were then published as books in Burmese. These were later translated to English and published. I have done my best to adapt them for print by removing some repetitions and filling in some elisions that are common in discourses, but unsuitable for books. I have added some footnotes to explain some terms that, though understood by a Burmese audience, would mean little to others.

Please feel free to print out copies for your own use, or for free distribution, but do not host the PDF file on your own web site, nor link to it directly. Post a link to the appropriate page on my web site so that readers can see the book in context, and obtain the most recent edition.

If you spot any errors please let me know.

Bhikkhu Pesala
London, September 2009

Preface

This book of discourses by the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw, originally published in Burmese, is one of the popular Suttas, translated and published in English version. The translation is undertaken by U On Pe (Pen-name Tet Toe), a well known writer and scholar of English, who is a member of the Translation Committee of Mahāsi Sāsana Yeikthā.

The Sutta Piṭaka consists mainly of discourses delivered by the Buddha himself on various fitting occasions and form one of the three Baskets of the Dhamma known as "Tipiṭaka." It is like a book of prescriptions as the discourses embodied therein were expounded to suit different occasions and the temperaments of various persons.

Out of a series of Suttas that the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw has delivered expounding the Buddha's teachings, a number of selected Suttas have been translated into English particularly for the benefit of foreign readers and generally for all people who are interested in Buddhist philosophy. The selection was made by the Translation Committee of the Buddha Sāsana Nuggaha Organization with the final blessing of the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw.

Biography of the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw

Born in the year 1904 at Seikkhun, a prosperous village, well-known for its handloom industry, in the historically renowned district of Shwebo in Upper Burma, Bhaddanta Sobhaṇa, popularly known as the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw, is regarded as a pre-eminent teacher of vipassanā meditation both in Burma and abroad. He ranks among the foremost for his virtue, concentration, and wisdom.

Through constant practice and perseverance since his first initiation into the Saṅgha at the age of twelve, the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw, Mahāthera, Sāsanadhaja-siripavara dhammācariya, Aggamahāpaṇḍita, Chaṭṭha-saṅgītipucchaka, has risen to great heights as an illustrious teacher and guide in the field of practical vipassanā. The Venerable Sayādaw has taken pains to write in common language for easy understanding by his disciples in general the highly difficult philosophy of Dhamma with particular emphasis on the practical vipassanā exercise as to how they should begin and then proceed step by step for the ultimate attainment of Wisdom (*paññā*).

In translating the selected Suttas into English, the Translation Committee has put its best efforts to maintain the essence contained in the sutta and the scholarly accuracy of its author and also to make it a readable translation. All these books on Dhamma are couched in common linguistic style and in

plain terms for the benefit of the ordinary laymen to grasp and fully understand the true concept of the profound Buddhist philosophy.

This present book will, it is hoped, serve as a useful guide, and prescribe a way from the crushing miseries of this transitory life to real happiness. It points out an easy method of restraining all the ignorant cravings and blind urges through the medium of simple meditation practice which will provide one with requisite stability of mind. The basic truth about what we call life is made up of mind and matter (*nāmarūpa*) brought about by the law of kamma. It is accordingly prone to decay, old age, disease, and finally death. The life of mortals is full of suffering, difficult, and problematic. To tackle with worldly vicissitudes which is inevitable, and to be able to withstand misery and minimize anger, sorrows, frustrations, desires arid perplexities to which men are subjected, this book of Dhamma should prove to be useful.

The Venerable Mahāsī Sayādaw has quoted a number of instances and cited therein a few relevant stories from the teaching of Buddha in a simple and interesting way so as to convince the reader that no sufferings befall the man who is not attached to mind and matter and that the wise who control their temper and thoughts will be able to withstand the onslaughts of worldly vicissitudes the inevitable ups and downs of life. It clearly indicates that the uninformed man does not possess true knowledge and serenity of mind whereas the wise man guards his thoughts and purges himself of all the vices of the mind under any circumstances in the vicissitudes of life.

May you all be able to restrain yourself according to Dhamma and gain happiness.

Min Swe (Secretary)
Buddha sasana Nuggaha Organization
Mahāsī Sāsana Yeikthā, Rangoon.

A Discourse on Worldly Vicissitudes

The Thingyan Festival

Today is the beginning of Thingyan Festival which marks the change of years from 1326 B.E. Thingyan is a Burmese term which is derived from the Sanskrit Sankranta, meaning “change” or “transfer.” The sun changes its course at the end of a twelve-month period, and the Burmese people celebrate the change of years. This festival marks the change from from the Burmese month of Tabaung, the last month on the Burmese calendar to Tagu, the first month of the Burmese year.

The Thingyan festival was “invented” by ancient brahmins who annually issued a statement of forecast for the forthcoming year. In such statement, usually published as a bulletin, called Thingyan-sa in Burmese, it is stated that Thagyamin the king of the *devas*, would come down to the human world riding a bullock or some animal. In fact, the king of the *devas* never came down to the human abode; that is what the brahmins invented. According to the traditional beliefs, however, the planet Sun changes its course on its revolution around the world. This, of course, is just a traditional assumption. According to modern science, the earth orbits around the sun and it is believed that on such a day as today every year the earth completes one orbit. Anyway, today is the beginning of Thingyan Festival for the Burmese to mark the end of the old year and the beginning of the new one.

During the time of the Buddha, in Middle India, the time marking the end of year was the full moon day of Tazaungmon, the eighth month of the Burmese calendar falling usually in early November. You all know that the year on the European calendar ends on 31st December. It is a fixed date, unlike the Burmese date of the end of the year. In the case of the Burmese date, astrologers have to work out to fix it. They announce the date of beginning of the festival of Thingyan which usually extends to three days, at the end of which the Burmese New Year begins.

Burmese Buddhists usually observe this occasion by keeping Sabbath, or if they cannot keep Sabbath, and some don't, they keep their minds pure. They want to welcome the new year with a pure mind. It would be better for every one of the Burmese laity to keep Sabbath during Thingyan, and if possible on the New Year Day too. Keeping Sabbath and keeping one's mind pure is like sending off an old friend and welcoming a new visiting friend cheerfully. Not only is it advisable to keep one's mind pure, but it is also desirable that one should give charity and practise meditation. That would make for a greater purity, and such a frame of mind could ward off evils and

disasters that the new year may bring. Praying for one's own welfare and peace and peace and welfare for the whole world at the beginning of the year is commendable. As for us, we contribute to this auspicious occasion by delivering discourses on every Sabbath day. I have given you a discourse on the Sakkapañña Sutta. Today, however, I am going to give you a discourse on a subject which concerns everybody, every being, which they should understand and practise. It is a discourse on worldly vicissitudes (*lokadhamma*).

What is Lokadhamma?

The term "*Lokadham*" (in Burmese) is derived from the Pāli term "*Lokadhamma*." "*Loka*" is of three kinds: *Sattaloka*, *Saṅkhāraloka*, and *Okāsaloka*. *Sattaloka* means all living beings. Each being is one world. That is, each person or being is a world.

Okāsaloka means the abodes, places of residence, or habitats of beings. So we have the human world, the world of *devas*, the world of *brahmas*, the lower realms of misery: hell, the animal kingdom, the abode of hungry ghosts (*peta*). The abode of animals and hungry ghosts are on the earth; the abode of *devas* and *brahmas* are celestial worlds.

Saṅkhāraloka means the continuous activities of the physical and mental elements of beings, and the changes and movements of inanimate things such as the earth, trees, forests, mountains, abodes, water, air, fire, etc. In brief, it includes all evolutionary processes of mental and physical phenomena.

The discourse I am giving today relates to the world of sentient beings (*sattava*). So "the world" in this context means "living beings" and Dhamma means "the natural law." *Lokadhamma* means the natural consequences that every being has to experience and contend with. The Buddha gave two discourses¹ on *Lokadhamma*: a short one and a longer one. I am now quoting from the Pāli text of the longer discourse.

The Lokadhamma Sutta

"Atthime, bhikkhave, lokadhammā lokaṃ anuparivattanti, loko ca attha lokadhamme anuparivatta'ti. ... loko ca ime attha lokadhamme anuparivattati."

"Bhikkhus, the eight manifestations of worldly vicissitudes are always following all living beings, otherwise known as "the world," and all beings are also following worldly vicissitudes."

¹ The Book of Eights, Gradual Sayings, Mettavaggo: the Paṭhama Lokadhamma Sutta and the Dutiya Lokadhamma Sutta (ed.)

There are eight manifestations of worldly vicissitudes, and these are always following living beings. If a man is in the sun, his shadow always follows him — he cannot prevent it from following him. So, like the shadow, these worldly vicissitudes always follow all beings. Similarly, beings are always pursuing worldly vicissitudes.

The Eight Worldly Vicissitudes

“What are the eight? Gain (*lābho*), loss (*alābho*), popularity¹ (*yaso*), unpopularity (*ayaso*), blame (*nindā*), praise (*paṣaṃsā*), happiness (*sukha*), suffering (*dukkha*).” These eight worldly vicissitudes are in pairs: gain and loss, popularity and unpopularity, blame and praise, happiness and suffering. Four are desirable and the other four are undesirable.

What is gain? It is getting pleasant and desirable things, useful things; for human beings, gold, silver, diamonds, gems, cattle, land, etc. To get these things either by hard work, or without trying, is good; the more, the better. To be successful in business and other means of living is to be endowed with gain or wealth. For monks, getting the four essential requisites, that is to say, almsfood, robes, lodgings, and medicine, is good. Conversely, loss means being deprived of these things or failure in business. It is to be regretted if one tries to get wealth and fails. One will probably be unhappy that one does not get it while others do. More deplorable than that is to lose what one has already got. There are five enemies or destructive forces in life, and because of these enemies, one’s property may be lost or destroyed. In this pair of circumstances, getting wealth is liked by one and all. It does not matter whether one gets it by fair means or foul. Fools do not mind getting it by foul means. Well, nobody likes being denied what has been longed for or hankered after; neither the modern man nor the ancient. Everybody dislikes being reduced to destitution.

Popularity means having a spouse, friends, and companions, followers and retinue, and a lot of people upon whom one can exert one’s authority and influence. Unpopularity means being deprived of these favours. In this pair, too, everybody likes to have a full compliment of companions and followers. First, one remains single; then marries, then gets children. One moves about in society and has friends, associates and followers upon whom one can exert one’s influence. One likes such circumstances, and would welcome more people around one. If one is deprived of them one will feel

¹ Often translated as “fame.” The meaning is having lots of friends, associates, and supporters, so I have translated this pair as popularity and unpopularity (ed.)

dejected. When one fails to get the friendship of those one should have made friends with, or loses one's servants or followers, one will surely feel unhappy.

Then comes blame, which means being scolded, criticized, and ridiculed. Praise means being honoured and held in high regard. In this third pair, too, one would not like to be scolded, ridiculed, or criticized. One may or may not deserve such blame, but one would not surely like it either way. One cannot tolerate ridicule. If one doesn't have patience and a forgiving spirit, one feels hurt especially when the criticism is well deserved. It is like letting a stick fall on a sore; it hurts very much. One who is criticized feels gravely hurt at the thought that he has been publicly ridiculed.

As for those having a good time, if the criticism is deserved, they would have enough patience to receive it and contemplate their faults with equanimity. Yet nobody likes being criticized or ridiculed. Nobody; neither the young nor the old. As for getting praised, everybody likes it. Even if the praise is undeserved and mere flattery, one would accept them with a smile.

Prosperity and Happiness Are Very Important

The fourth pair is gain and loss. Gain is of two kinds, material gain and mental gain. In other words, prosperity and happiness. These two are important. If one were endowed with both, one would not need anything else. People are always striving to get them. So a wise man of old said, "All people hanker for wealth, and thus extend the sea of distress because nobody can really achieve his purpose." His remark is apt. Material and mental gain together are prosperity, it is what people hanker after and take great pains to achieve. To be free from physical pain and discomfort and to get the good things of life is very important indeed. So people are making endless efforts to obtain it. To be free from all sorts of unhappiness, and to be happy all the time is very important, and so people strive for it.

Let us look at the problem, What is material welfare, and what is mental well-being? Let's call the two things together prosperity. What is prosperity in the human and celestial worlds? They are of the same kind. To achieve it, one must have several supporting factors. One must have prosperity, benefits of all sorts, good food and a comfortable home, attendants, etc. If one is fully equipped with all these accessories, one will probably be wealthy and happy. If there is anything lacking, then some sort of distress might occur, but can anyone be "fully endowed" with these things? There is no one in the world who is so endowed. Striving to get these things, one has to undergo an assortment of troubles, and the "sea of distress" is ever widening.

Distress comprises physical discomfort and unhappiness. Physical discomfort includes pain, disease, beating, torture, accidents, etc., and these are like the scorching of the sun or fire. Nobody likes them, of course — everybody fears them. Then there is mental unhappiness of all kinds, such as, annoyance, anxiety, dejection, sadness, and other kinds of mental unease. Nobody likes these either — everybody fears them. Then there are verbal abuse, ridicule, or scolding by others that make a person unhappy. There are occasions, too, when people are deprived of things they love and take delight in; such privation makes for unhappiness; they are afraid of it. So people have to be alert to avoid such occasions.

Now I have completed the description of the eight worldly vicissitudes. As has been said before, everybody likes the good four and dislikes the bad four. Whatever one likes or dislikes, everyone has to accept all eight; nobody can get away from any of them, nobody can flee from them all.

Good and Bad Go Together

Sometimes one can have what one wants to have; one can achieve one's purpose. Sometimes, too, one may not get what one wants to have, or one may lose what one has already had. Even if some things remain with one all one's life, one has to leave them when one dies. So wherever one has gain, one will also have loss, which follows in its wake.

One may have a spouse, friends, companions, and followers at one time, but may be deprived of them at other times. Even the Buddha, who had a large following, was sometimes obliged to spend the Rainy Season alone. Others cannot hope to be always well attended. At last, when one dies, one has to leave all of one's attendants. So having followers is always accompanied by losing them.

One is praised because one deserves praise. It is pleasing to get praised, but one has to work hard to deserve it. Only after one has striven hard does one get praise — genuine praise, not flattery, and one is obliged to go on working hard to keep up the esteem. Even then, if someone misunderstands or hates one, or if one makes a mistake to warrant criticism or ridicule, one may suffer a loss of the esteem that one has been trying so hard to gain. Although the Buddha was totally free from defects, he was subjected to ridicule by some, so what can one say about ordinary people. Praise is always accompanied by blame.

Happiness and suffering, too, go hand in hand. If circumstances are favourable, one finds happiness and prosperity, and if circumstances are

unfavourable, one will be in distress. It is like walking. When walking, one stands only on one foot at a time while the other foot is being lifted. Likewise, happiness and suffering alternate with each other.

One Is Happy to Meet Good Fortune

One should accept the ever changing worldly vicissitudes with patience and understanding. Those who lack wisdom are extremely glad and excited when they encounter good fortune and are utterly dejected when they are in distress because of the vagaries of worldly vicissitudes.

One Is Unhappy to Meet Misfortune

One is distressed to meet misfortune as the manifestation of worldly vicissitudes. If one does not obtain blessings or is deprived of what one has already gained, if one is left alone with no friends, if one is criticised or ridiculed, if one suffers from illness and destitution, one feels bitter and dejected. That is always the case.

There are instances where some people become insane or die because they are reduced to poverty. They feel gravely affected by the loss of their wealth. According to Jainism, property is part of one's life. The greatest sin is cruelty to life, and since property forms a part of life, depriving someone of their property amounts to destroying that person's life, and is therefore a grave sin. Property, according to Jainism, is the chief supportive factor of life, and so if one is deprived of property, one may eventually die from lack of the sustenance that property gives. To say that property is part of life is quite logical according to that reasoning. Loss could kill a person.

One is unhappy if one is deprived of company and attendants. One feels miserable if subjected to criticism or ridicule, and the gravity of unhappiness can be gauged by the sharpness of criticism and the depth and breadth of the ridicule. Distress is great in the case of character assassination. Mild physical discomforts can easily be ignored, but serious diseases or physical abuse are hard to bear, and cause great unhappiness.

Arahants Are Subject to Worldly Vicissitudes

For the ordinary man, worldly vicissitudes are a common experience. The Arahants, that is, those who are free from defilements, are also subject to worldly vicissitudes. However, they can accept fortune and misfortune with equanimity. So in the Maṅgala Sutta, the Buddha said:

*“Phuṭṭhassa lokadhammehi cittaṃ yassa na kampati,
asokaṃ virajaṃ khemaṃ etaṃ maṅgalamuttamaṃ.”*

“The mind of the Arahant who is touched by worldly vicissitudes is unshaken. Sorrowless, stainless, and secure, this is the greatest blessing.”

For the Arahant there is no anxiety or dejection. In the Arahant there is not even a speck of mental defilements, so there are no dangers. This is indeed the highest state of blessedness. The Buddha said that the Arahants are free from all defilements. However, as they still reside in this world they are unavoidably subject to worldly vicissitudes. They will be until they attain final cessation (*parinibbāna*). When they are thus afflicted by the vicissitudes of life they are not affected mentally, since they are capable of keeping their minds stable. They are not overjoyed when prosperity comes, nor are they dejected when adversity strikes them. Not only Arahants, even Non-Returners can withstand the onslaughts of worldly vicissitudes. As for Once-Returners and Stream-winners, they are affected to some extent because they have not yet fully rid themselves of sensual desire (*kāmarāga*) or ill-will (*byāpāda*) and anger (*dosa*). That was why the millionaire Anāthapiṇḍika wept when he lost his young daughter, Sumanā Devī. So did Visākhā when she lost one of her young grand-daughters. However, they knew the Dhamma well, and were capable of resisting the onslaught of circumstances to a certain extent. Not only Noble Ones, even an ordinary person (*puthujjana*) could resist the onslaught to some extent if he or she remembers to contemplate the Dhamma. There is no other way to protect oneself from the ill effects of worldly vicissitudes than contemplating the Dhamma in which we all must take refuge. One should, of course, try one’s very best to fight the onslaught of worldly vicissitudes by all available practical means, but if these fails, one should take refuge in the Dhamma.

If, however, one cannot manage to tolerate worldly vicissitudes even by means of the Dhamma (that is, by meditation), one should accept the onslaughts with as much equanimity as one can muster. One should accept them as a fact of life with patience and forbearance. We must think of the obvious fact that the manifestations of worldly vicissitudes have to be met and accepted even by such Noble Ones as the Buddha and the Arahants. These Noble Ones accepted the attacks with patience and forbearance, so we should follow in their footsteps. It is vital to cultivate this attitude.

The Greatest Blessing

The Arahants who are afflicted by worldly vicissitudes are not insensate, but as they are free from all defilements and unafraid of dangers and disasters, they accept the onslaught with great equanimity. That is the best or noblest of blessings.

Of course, all blessings are excellent. However, this particular blessing is of the highest order because this is the one fully possessed by Arahants. These Noble Ones are never affected by the attacks of worldly vicissitudes. They remain calm and stable in mind; for them there is always mental stability, which spells happiness. The Buddha placed this as the last of all the blessings in the Maṅgala Sutta because it is the highest of them all.

The meditators who are now practising should strive for attainment of this blessing. This blessing is closely associated with the meditation practice because as the meditator makes a note of the constant arisings and disappearance of phenomena and ponders upon the nature of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self and as the meditators come to realize that there is after all no such thing as a living being or a dead one because both the living and dead are composites of elements and under the governance of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self, the meditator is capable of patiently accepting the onslaughts of worldly vicissitudes.

However, the person who is not engaged in meditation practice will regard all phenomena as permanent, as pleasurable; and will regard the body as his or her own. He or she is, therefore, glad and excited when good fortune comes and dejected and depressed when misfortune comes in the wake of good fortune. To differentiate between the one who knows the Dhamma and the one who doesn't, the Buddha posed the following question:

“Bhikkhus, if an uninformed ordinary person is afflicted by the eight worldly vicissitudes, and a well-informed (*sutavā*) noble disciple (*ariya*) is afflicted by them, what is the difference in their reaction? Whose efforts (to withstand the onslaught) are more distinctive?”

Now, there are two ways of being “well informed” or having wisdom. That is, there are two kinds of *suta*. They are: *āgama suta* and *adhigama suta*. The former relates to acquiring information about the words of the Buddha. In this context, such information comprises the knowledge that the eight manifestation of worldly vicissitudes are common to one and all and nobody can avoid them. Yet all happenings are bound, as in the case of other acts

and actions, by impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self with the consciousness of mind and matter. This is a mere acquiring of knowledge and is called *āgama suta*. *Adhigama suta* is deep realisation of the truth, the Four Noble Truths, with insight. Such realisation and the mere acquisition of information are necessary for one to withstand the onslaughts of worldly vicissitudes. The Buddha asked about the difference in the reaction of one who is fully equipped with them.

The bhikkhus replied, "Oh Lord: all the Dhamma originates with the Buddha who is the one we take refuge in, and it is for the Buddha to make expositions of the Dhamma. It would, therefore, be well that the Buddha give the discourse which we will listen to and cherish all our lives." That is, the bhikkhus requested the Buddha to answer his own question.

The Buddha said that the uninformed worldling does not accept prosperity with the consciousness that it will undergo changes in accordance with the natural laws of impermanence, causing suffering, and that it does not belong to oneself, there being no such thing as a self. He accepts prosperity with joy, thinking it is "mine," it belongs to "me." He does not know the realities.

Such uninformed individuals who lack faith in the Dhamma, acquire wealth and estates either by earning them or by getting them without really trying hard. They take it to be success. They think all these properties are theirs, that they belong to them. They do not realize that these things are after all not permanent; they will be either lost or destroyed by theft or fire, or they will decline or collapse owing to unfavourable circumstances and eventually be lost. These persons do not realise that they themselves are not immortal because they are composed of mind and matter, which are also perishable. They do not realize that wealth and estates that have come into their possession are causes for anxiety, worry, and troubles of all kinds. They are not well informed. In places where Buddhism does not flourish, people are not given such information. Even in Burma there are people who are not well informed and are, therefore, oblivious to the true nature of the vicissitudes of life.

In the case of loss of wealth and property, one who is not well informed is incapable of contemplating impermanence, and for that reason suffers from misery. The Buddha continued to explain that getting a gift produces, and then takes away, the pure, wholesome state of mind of the uninformed person, and deprivation of the gift does the same. Those who are incapable of realizing the truth about the gift of wealth and prosperity as impermanent, feel joy when the gift is in their possession. However, this sense of possession

does not make for a meritorious mental state, nor for a chance to listen to a religious discourse or practise meditation, because they are too busy making money. Such persons cannot tolerate the loss of their wealth, nor can they remain without trying to get more. If they cannot get wealth they will be disappointed, and if they lose what they have already have they will feel dejected. There is no chance for their minds to be in a meritorious state. They will let their time pass mourning their loss.

The degree of their joy and sorrow over the gain and loss of wealth depends upon the size of the wealth. Therefore, the Buddha continued explaining that the one who has wealth will feel pleasure and sorrow when the wealth is obtained and lost to the extent of how much value he placed on the wealth. He is pleased when he gets wealth and is angry when he loses it and continues feeling sorry for the loss.

Not Free from Misery

Such an ordinary person, the one who rejoices the gain and mourns for the loss, will not be free from getting new existences, and thus, will not be free from the misery of old age and death, anxiety, sorrow, lamentation, and all kinds of unhappiness — so said the Buddha. This is obvious. Rejoicing the gain and mourning for the loss, a person does not have time for wholesome deeds or a meritorious state of mind because he is constantly serving greed and anger. He does not have time for effort to get out of *saṃsāra* and so he is not free from the misery of birth, old age, and death. Anxiety, sorrow, and dejection are common occurrences, and it is the loser who gets them. Then there is the trouble of keeping the possessions intact, guarding them against enemies and thus losing sleep and appetite for food. These are the troubles at hand, and if only one can ignore these troubles, there will be some relief. These remarks can be applied to the case of the other three pairs of worldly vicissitudes. However, I will touch on them briefly.

Popularity and Unpopularity

Ordinary people like to be surrounded by companions and aides. When one gets children after marriage, and also servants and disciples, one feels gratified. One would think that having such a full complement is a permanent state of affairs, forgetting that such things — as all things — are impermanent. The sense of permanence or pleasure is, after all, just an illusion. One often fails to realise that. There are cases of separation or death of spouses and children, and people are plunged into misery, sometimes so great that it

culminates in suicide. There is no chance for a meritorious mental state because if one gains one has greed, and if one loses one has anger and sorrow. These states of mind occur frequently, one after another, and there is no chance for gaining merit. Therefore, rebirth, old age, death, anxiety, and sorrow continue to occur for them.

Blame and Praise

When one receives praise one is overjoyed. When one is subjected to criticism and slander one feels utterly dejected. It is because one does not realise that praise and blame are transient, not at all permanent. When one is joyful from praise one is overwhelmed with greed, and when one is distressed from blame one is overwhelmed with anger. There is no chance for a wholesome state of mind to occur. As wholesome kamma is lacking, one is not free from rebirth, old age, and death and all the attendant troubles and misery.

Happiness and Suffering

When one gets what one wants and can use it, one is gratified. When one is happy one often fails to see that this state of being is impermanent and conducive to misery. In fact, happiness or pleasure in secular affairs satisfies people because they have been travelling, working, and striving simply to gain this kind of happiness. This kind of happiness is alluring. That is why a certain *deva* once said, while enjoying the pleasures of a celestial festival in the celestial garden of Nandavana, that one would not know the meaning of happiness until one got to Nandavana. He said that this celestial garden was the place of real pleasures. One who thinks too much of such pleasures will surely come to grief when faced with suffering, the opposite of happiness. One would not then be able to observe that all things are impermanent and conducive to misery. Such a person usually feels “I am suffering” when he is suffering and “I am happy” when enjoying pleasures. So when one has happiness, one is overwhelmed with greed and when faced with suffering, one is overwhelmed with anger. Such individuals will not be free from rebirth and its consequences. They will not escape from *saṃsāra*.

The foregoing remarks relate to the state of being for the uninformed who lack faith in the Dhamma when faced with the eight worldly vicissitudes, but in the case of the Buddha’s Noble Disciples, they can tolerate the onslaughts of worldly vicissitudes, and have a great chance of gaining merit, and thus being liberated from *saṃsāra*. Thus said the Buddha.

Special Attributes of the Well-informed

For those who are well-informed and wise — the Noble Ones — if gifts and gains come to them, they contemplate their impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self nature, and also upon their changeability and instability, and so are unmoved. They have right thought, so they know rightly when the gifts and gains are lost or destroyed. This is the difference in reaction between an ordinary person and a Noble One. The Noble One is fully furnished with learning (*āgama suta*), and at the same time he has realised for himself through meditation the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self nature of all phenomena. That is realisation (*adhigama suta*). Not only the Noble One, but even the ordinary pious person (*kalyāṇa puthujjana*) is furnished with learning and realisation. The ordinary pious person is included in the group of pious and good people led by the Noble Ones. Even one who has just listened to and accepted the Buddha's teaching should be called his disciple.

Contemplating Gain and Loss

The Buddha's disciples should contemplate the impermanence of gifts and gains when they come, and also the troubles attendant upon wealth and prosperity. Here, troubles do not relate to physical discomforts and ills; they relate to the illusions resulting from enjoyment of pleasure, and the pains and sorrows caused by gain and the loss. The suffering referred to here is of three kinds: the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhārā dukkha*), the suffering caused by instability (*vipariṇāma dukkha*), and intrinsic suffering¹ (*pariyāya dukkha*). *Saṅkhārā dukkha* is the result of the impermanence and unpleasantness of things that occur and the absence of any control over them. The gain made is liable to be destroyed and such perishability is unpleasant and undesirable. That is the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena. The second kind is occasioned by the changes and destruction of things that one has gained. If one does not continue getting those things or if the things already obtained are lost or destroyed, suffering caused by change will be the result. Intrinsic suffering is, in fact, included in the second kind because it relates to the cause of suffering. So one who gains things should contemplate their impermanence and perishability, and the perishability of the owner of these things. That is right thought.

If one does so, one will not be overwhelmed by joy and satisfaction the gains may have brought. "The right thinking person's feeling of joy will soon disappear; it will not remain long with him," said the Buddha. In the same

¹ Referred to in the Paramattha Dīpanī as *dukkhadukkha* — the suffering of pain (ed.)

manner, the sorrow that may be occasioned in the mind of the right thinking person will be short-lived. Such persons will say that gains come when they come and go when they go. Some more will probably come when circumstances are favourable. "I was born with nothing on, and now with whatever I have, I am fully equipped," they would think. They would also contemplate the perishable nature of all things.

An earthenware pot breaks when it falls, but a metal pot doesn't. That is only natural. One should take into consideration the nature of things and accept the results with a calm mind. There are instances, however, of older people getting angry when young people break things by letting them fall. These old people often failed to recognize the nature of things. A broken thing cannot become unbroken even if one grieves about it. So we should always contemplate the impermanent and perishable nature of things and accept the consequences by paying wise attention (*yoniso-manasikāra*).

If one can take things as they happen, with a sense of acceptance and accommodation, one will not suffer so much from losses. For an ordinary person, the suffering diminishes; for a Stream-winner or Once-returner the suffering is much less, and for an Arahant there is no suffering at all. The person who can control his mind over the gain and the loss of wealth will have ample time to obtain a meritorious mental state. When one achieves gains, one can expel the mental state of joy and possession by making a note of that mental state. In the same way, one can make a note of dejection and thus expel it when one is faced with losses. If such dejection occurs at all, it will soon fade away, and there will be peace of mind. The Buddha said that the one who is not glad of gains, nor sorry for losses will not hanker after gains or feel dejected over losses. Such a person will be doing his own work, that is, meditation practice.

Free from Misery

The disciple of the Buddha who has expelled joy and sorrow alike will be free from rebirth, old age and death," said the Buddha.

What the Buddha taught is that if one does not let his emotions loose on the gains and the losses that may occur to him he will be able to devote his time to making a note of impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self nature of all things physical and mental, and eventually such a person will be able to attain nibbāna. Once he has attained that state, there will be no new existence for him, and thus he is liberated from the misery of old age and death. If one has attained the path knowledge of Stream-winning, one will undergo no

more than seven existences before attaining the ultimate state at which there is no more new existence, that is, *parinibbāna*, the end of *saṃsāra*. For the Once-returned there are at most two more existences, and for the Non-returned just one more existence before the attainment of *nibbāna*. If one becomes an Arahant in the present existence, there are no more new existences.

The one unmoved by gains or losses is free from sorrow, dejection, and misery; in fact, all kinds of suffering. "That I say for sure," the Buddha said. Freedom from misery of all kinds bears fruit in mental peace even in the present existence. By pondering upon the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self nature of all things gained or lost, one will not be moved to sorrow, and will thus gain peace of mind. This peace can be gained even in the present existence if one is equanimous.

The Best Method of Overcoming Anxiety

The Buddha said, "The method of overcoming anxiety, sorrow, despair, and grief is following the path of four kinds of [Satipatthāna](#). That is the only way to eliminate misery."

This is the best way of removing misery because it is the only way to attain Arahantship and thus gain complete freedom from all kinds of suffering. That is the assurance the Buddha gave.

This relates so far to the first pair of worldly vicissitudes, that is gain and loss. The results of the *Satipatthāna* practice relating to the other three pairs are the same. I will speak briefly about them.

Contemplating Popularity and Unpopularity

When the informed disciple of the Buddha has a full complement of companions and servants, he ponders upon that situation by noting the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self nature of all things. He knows that he will not always have companions, and also that there are troubles over the affairs of family, servants, and associates. They can be separated from him for one reason or another, and if he ponders upon that impermanent nature of the situation he will not suffer when actual separation occurs. He can control his mind and thus find relief. He will realise that it is better to live alone because then one is free from responsibilities and encumbrances. So if left alone, one will not feel sorry but, on the contrary, one will feel happy; he will not be affected by the deprivation. As one is thus not overwhelmed by sorrow, one will have time to devote to meditation practice and achieve freedom from all kinds of misery.

Reflecting on Blame and Praise

Likewise, when one is showered with praises, one must contemplate the impermanent state of the acclamation. One must consider the fact that praises are given to “me” who is after all just an aggregate of mind and matter, for there is no “I,” and that soon enough that “I” will be subject to condemnation and contempt. One must remain unmoved, and thus find peace of mind. One must strive to live a blameless life and thus acquire real benefit so that one will not lose anything from others’ criticism or condemnation. If one can do that, one will not be affected too much by other people’s opinions, and will have time to practise meditation, and thus seek release from all kinds of suffering.

The Connection Between Happiness and Unhappiness

We must contemplate the situation where prosperity and well-being prevail in this way: although I am now enjoying whatever I wish to have I won’t get them always, for when unfavourable circumstances come, all these desirable things will disappear and I will be in trouble. Now I am healthy and comfortable, but this happiness is subject to change, and so when happiness changes to unhappiness, I will surely suffer. Even now, as I am enjoying the good things of life, I discern that all things, including myself, are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self.” If you are thus well prepared, you will suffer little and lightly when happiness is changes to unhappiness.

In the same way, when unhappiness comes, you must contemplate the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self nature of things, and say to your self that unhappiness will not prevail for ever, and when circumstances change, happiness will come again. If it doesn’t come during this life-time, it will surely come in the next existence because all things are subject to change. Even during this life-time, changes for the better will come by the power of the wholesome deeds you have done. If you ponder thus, the sting of misery will not be so sharp, and you will find relief. If you persistently make a note of the suffering that is occurring, your concentration will develop, sorrow and dejection will fade away, and you will feel happiness.

A Very Effective Remedy

If you suffer from ill-effects owing to someone’s efforts, or to diseases, or to climatic conditions, and if you have no other remedy to alleviate the pain and suffering, meditation on the suffering of illness can give at least some relief if it cannot give you a complete cure. If the pain and suffering

remain in your body, the meditation practice could render relief to your mind. However, if you are angry or frustrated by the physical suffering, your mind will suffer too. The Buddha compared this dual suffering to being pierced by two thorns at the same time.

Let us say a man has a thorn in his flesh, and he tries to extract the thorn by piercing another thorn into his flesh. The second thorn breaks into the flesh without being able to extract the first thorn. Then the man suffers the pain from the two thorns at the same time. So also, the person who cannot make a note of the physical pain through meditation, suffers both physical and mental pain. However, if he can contemplate well on the physical pain, he will suffer only that physical pain and will not suffer mental pain.

This kind of suffering only physical pain, is like that suffered by the Buddha and Arahants for they, too, suffer physical pain. They suffer from the ill-effects of heat and cold, flea-bite and other kinds of discomfort. Though they suffer from the physical pain, their minds remain stable, so they do not suffer mental pain. So the meditation method is the best remedy for physical pain and suffering. There are instances of relief gained by this method for those suffering agony even to the point of death.

The informed person who is a disciple of the Buddha can contemplate the true nature of happiness when it occurs, and thus save himself from being overwhelmed by joy, and when unhappiness comes, save himself from overwhelming misery, and thus maintain equanimity. Only this method can overcome the vicissitudes in life. When one's mind is calm and stable despite the onslaughts of worldly vicissitudes, one will be able to maintain a noble mental state by making constant note of the changes occurring in the six sense-doors, and contemplating impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. Constant meditation practice will develop one's mental powers, that is, insight will mature, and gradually lead to the four stages of the Noble Path. Thus, one will be liberated from the meshes of misery. This is the assurance that the Buddha gave.

Vicissitudes prevail in all planes of existence and nobody, not even the Buddha, is exempt from them. The Buddha, however, can endure their onslaught with great patience and mental stability. We should follow his example and work hard. People naturally wish for good things in life and try their best to get them, and at the same time they try to avoid the bad things such as pain and suffering, but nobody can escape from their onslaughts. Even the Buddha cannot avoid them. We must, therefore, say to ourselves, "Even the Buddha could not avoid the onslaughts of worldly

vicissitudes; how can an ordinary person like me hope to do so?" Reflecting on the patience and the equanimity of the Buddha when enduring such onslaughts, we should try our best to follow his example. I will now tell you something about the worldly vicissitudes that the Buddha suffered.

The Buddha Experienced Worldly Vicissitudes

Once the Buddha was residing near a Brahmin village called Pañcasālā. The reason for his stay was that he foresaw that five hundred maidens of that village would attain Stream-winning. On the day for ceremonial worshipping of the planets, the young maidens were permitted to go out of the village to bathe in the river. They were returning to the village after their bath. At that time the Buddha entered the Pañcasālā village for almsfood.

The name Pañcasālā means "five houses." The village was founded by only five households and later it developed, and became a larger village. Since there were five hundred maidens the population of the village must have been no less than two thousand and there would naturally be many houses, as many as a hundred or so.

The villagers were then under the spell of Māra, the evil one, and so they could not prepare almsfood for the Buddha. The Buddha did not receive even one spoonful of rice. On his return, Māra asked the Buddha, "Bhikkhu, did you get almsfood?" The Buddha then said, "Māra, you prevented the villagers from offering me food, didn't you?" Māra then said, "Would you please go back and walk again for food?" He meant to make the villagers jeer at the Buddha.

At that moment the five hundred maidens had arrived at the village-gate on their return from the river. They worshipped the Buddha and sat down at an appropriate distance. Māra asked the Buddha, "If you don't get food, don't you feel unhappy?" The Buddha had come to this village to get this occasion so that he could deliver a discourse for the five hundred maidens. So the Buddha said, "Hey, Māra! Even if I don't get anything to eat today, I will remain joyful like the great *brahmas* of the Ābhassarā realm."

Intended especially for the five hundred maidens, the Buddha said in the following verse:

*"Susukhaṃ vata jīvāma, yesaṃ no natthi kiñcanaṃ.
Pītibhakkhā bhavissāma, devā ābhassarā yathā."* (Dhp. v 200)

"Happily we live, we who have no impediments,
Feeders on joy we shall be like the gods of the Radiant Realm."

People kill and steal to make a living. They may do business by lying and cheating. Such people think that they achieve happiness by enjoying the fruit of their misdeeds, but really they are in for misery, for they are going to hell because of their misdeeds. Even if one earns one's livelihood by honest means, one cannot be said to earn one's living happily unless such pursuits are free of desire and anxiety. As for the Buddha, there was no passion arising from desire and anxiety, nor any anger arising from disappointment at being denied his needs, nor any delusion arising from false notions of prosperity. The Buddha was free of defilements and thus remained calm with mental stability despite the fact that he did not get any almsfood on that day. This is happiness from Dhamma. So the Buddha lived happily despite hardships.

However, it may be asked whether the Buddha could live happily without food for the day. All beings in the sensual planes of existence are obliged to have the four nutriments¹ to keep themselves alive, that is, to maintain their physical existence. One can possibly keep oneself alive with the first three; one surely requires to have food. Man has to take food two or three times a day. Animals have to go out to get food. Of the three factors of life, namely, food, clothing and shelter, food is the most important. To go out to get food is the greatest trouble, and all beings are in constant search of food. The ants are industrious; they move about to seek food day and night. They cannot remain calm and stable without food. Then asked about food, the Buddha replied that, like the *brahmas* of the Ābhassarā realm, joy was his nutriment.

The *brahmas* do not eat. They are always in a state of *jhāna* out of which comes joy (*pīti*) and bliss (*sukha*), and they live on that. They are never hungry — they enjoy bliss that is highly developed when they have attained the second stage of *jhāna*. Of the *brahmas* who have attained this second stage, the *brahmas* of the Ābhassarā realm have the most distinctive kind of bliss. That is why the Buddha said that he could remain happy like the *brahmas* of Ābhassarā region although he did not have food to eat for that day.

Joy can be substituted for food. That fact is borne out as clearly in the mundane world as in the spiritual world. Some persons are overjoyed at the success of something they have worked so hard to accomplish and while that great joy lasts they have no desire for food or sleep. Those who feel joy over some meritorious deeds that they have done, can remain without one or two meals. Those who are deep in meditation remain sitting for one or two days without getting up to take food or to urinate or defecate. The Buddha could remain calmly sitting for one whole week when he was in

¹ Volitional activities (*kamma*), consciousness (*citta*), climate (*utu*), and food (*āhāra*).

phala samapatti or *niroda samapatti*. He could remain without food quite easily for one day simply by meditating. So he said that joy was the food for him for that day. The reply was made by the Buddha to Māra's question, but the five hundred maidens heard this discourse and all of them attained the state of Stream-winning.

Why did these maidens become Stream-winners merely by hearing the Buddha's simple reply to Māra's question? The reason lies in the fact that these maidens had special perfections (*pāramī*). They had had an opportunity to see the Buddha in person and worship him and also to hear his discourse. So they were overwhelmed with joy and had confidence in the Buddha arising from their conviction of his nobility as evidenced in his being free from defilements and his joy despite deprivation of food for that day. They pondered upon the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self nature of the joy, and thus gained insight leading to attainment of the stage of Stream-winning.

The audience attending this discourse can also gain such insight and attainment if only they can clearly visualise the scene at the gate of the Pañcasālā village and contemplate the Buddha's reply to Māra's question. They can have joy, too, and if they contemplate the joy, they can gain attainment similar to that attained by the five hundred maidens of the village.

King Milinda's Question

With reference to [this incident at Pañcasālā village](#), King Milinda put this question to Venerable Nāgasena: "You say that the Buddha was the recipient of abundant gifts in the form of almsfood, robes, dwellings, and medicine — the four requisites for a monk — yet you also say that the Buddha did not get even a spoonful of rice on his alms round at the village of Pañcasālā. These two statements are contradictory. If the Buddha received an abundance of alms, it should not be possible that he received not even a spoonful of rice. If that is so, then it should not be said that the Buddha was a recipient of abundant gifts. Venerable Nāgasena, please explain this contradiction."

Venerable Nāgasena's Answer

"King Milinda, it is correct to say that the Buddha received abundant gifts. It is also correct to say that the Buddha did not get even a spoonful of rice at Pañcasālā village. Nevertheless, the fact that he did not get almsfood at Pañcasālā village does not prove that the Buddha was in privation. Let us say that a villager came to the palace with a gift of honey for the king. If the

doorman of the palace said to the villager: "This is not the time for his Majesty to receive visitors. Get away, or you will be taken into custody. The villager was frightened and beat a retreat, taking away with him the gift that he had meant to make to the king. The king was deprived of this gift, but does that mean that the king was in a state of privation?"

"In the same way, the Buddha was a recipient of abundant gifts, but on that occasion, Māra acted like the doorman of the king, preventing the villagers from offering almsfood to the Buddha. Does that prove that the Buddha was in privation? You shouldn't take it that way. Except for that single day, for forty-five years, that is, for over sixteen thousand, four hundred days, the Buddha had an abundance of gifts offered to him daily. So it is correct to say that the Buddha had an abundance of gifts." Thus Venerable Nāgasena replied to the king's question.

We must know that in view of the perfection of giving (*dāna pāramī*) that the Buddha had fulfilled in his earlier existences for four aeons and one hundred thousand world cycles, he had received an enormous amount of gifts of all kinds. Yet for one day at least he had to suffer privation owing to the evil machinations of Māra. He had to endure loss for a short time. As for us ordinary human beings, worldly vicissitudes will visit us without fail. If we can follow in the footsteps of the Buddha with great confidence in him and cultivate patience to withstand the onslaughts of adversity, we will be relieved to a certain extent of the pangs of misery.

The Buddha Had to Eat Coarse Grains

Once, twelve years after having attained Buddhahood, the Buddha went to a town called Verañja in Western Part of India. He sat down underneath a neem tree called Naḷeru near that town. The tree was so named after the ogre who had taken possession of it, just as in Burma we have certain trees said to have been possessed by some spirit and called by the name of that spirit. Accompanying the Buddha were five hundred bhikkhus.

At that time a certain brahmin who was a resident of that town came to the Buddha, making various accusations. The Buddha gave the confrontational brahmin a discourse, and the brahmin attained the stage of Stream-winning. The brahmin then requested the Buddha to spend the current Rains at that town. The Buddha granted his request, and he and his five hundred disciples spent the Rains there.

The brahmin of Verañja had requested the Buddha to stay for the Rains, but he had not offered to build a monastery for him, and the hundred disciples

had to seek shelter wherever available near that tree. The shelters for them were probably the smaller neem trees around that big neem tree. As there was a drought that year, the monks did not have trouble from getting wet with rain.

During that period Māra was doing his evil work. He made the people living within a radius of one yojana¹ ignorant of the Buddha, the monks and religion. Besides, there was a famine. People themselves were supplied with food under a ration system. In those times communication was so primitive that the distribution of goods must have been inadequate. The people were starving. There was no one in the town who would offer food to the monks.

At that time five hundred horse-dealers from Kashmir in Northern India arrived at that town. As there was famine, there was no one to buy a horse, but the rains had come to their native place and so they were obliged to remain in that town. These horse-dealers were willing to offer food to the Buddha and his disciples, but as they were travellers they had no facilities to make the offering a daily affair. They had with them a large supply of pulaka² — a coarse kind of grain for feeding their horses. This could be crushed, boiled, and eaten. The horse-dealers fed their horses only once instead of twice daily as they used to do, and offered the horse-food to the Buddha and the monks. As they were just travellers they could not afford to cook the grain and offer the meal. The monks had to make do with what was offered them.

The grain had to be boiled and set out in the sun to dry, and then the dried grain had to be pounded, soaked, and taken as porridge. The work had to be done by groups of eight or ten monks each. The horse-dealers offered butter and honey also. The Venerable Ānanda mixed grain with butter and honey and offered the meal to the Buddha. It is said that devas added their celestial food in the mixture. The Buddha accepted the food and after taking it, spent the entire day sitting under the great neem tree in the attainment of fruition (*phala samapatti*). All the monks, with the exception of Venerable Ānanda, were Arahants. Venerable Ānanda was then only a Stream-winner. So, all the other monks were also sitting under their respective neem trees and attaining cessation for the whole day. In this way the Buddha and the five hundred Arahants spent the entire Rains at that famine-stricken place. This episode inspires our admiration for the Buddha and his disciples.

To a person of ordinary intellect this episode is not quite credible. He would probably ask why the Buddha, who had done meritorious and noble deeds for so many life-times, should have been obliged to take this meagre

¹ As far as can be travelled in a day with one yoke of oxen (PED), about 6 or 7 miles.

² Often translated into Burmese as mayaw rice — maybe barley, oats, or wheat (ed.)

kind of food for the entire Rains. Why should his disciples, who were all Arahants have to take such meals? The answer is simple. Neither the Buddha nor the Arahants were exempt from worldly vicissitudes. That should be a brief but satisfactory answer. The answer in the Apadāna Pāli text says:

“Phussassāhaṃ pāvacane, sāvake paribhāsayaṃ.

Yavaṃ khādatha bhuñjatha, mā ca bhuñjatha sālayo.

Tena kammavipākena, temāsaṃ khāditaṃ yavaṃ.

Nimantito brāhmaṇena, verañjāyaṃ vasiṃ tadā.” (Ap. v. 89)

The Buddha said, “During the time of Phussa Buddha I spoke harshly to his disciples, telling them to eat coarse grains, not soft, fine rice. In retribution for this abusive speech, I accepted the request of Verañja Brahmin and spent the Rains at Verañja and was obliged to eat coarse grains.”

It may be asked if it would not be better for the Buddha to avoid this particular town that was bewitched by Māra and go to another place to spend the Rains. Retribution would have followed the Buddha wherever he went, so it made no difference whether he stayed for the Rains at Verañja or elsewhere. Māra would follow him and play his tricks upon the residents who would have offered him and his disciples almsfood. It had been better that he stayed at Verañja because it was there the horse-dealers stopped and offered at least coarse grain to him and his disciples.

Then it may be asked why Māra did not play his tricks upon the horse-dealers too. Well, he was a bit late. He had bewitched the townspeople, but by then the horse-dealers had already made an offer of coarse grain to the Buddha and his disciples. Anything that had already been offered to the Buddha could not be interfered with by anybody. That is what the Milinda Pañha and the Commentaries state.

We now know why the Buddha had to pay for the abusive language he had used in an earlier existence. What about his disciples, the five hundred bhikkhus? We may take it that if such a person as the Bodhisatta had made such a verbal unwholesome kamma, these five hundred future Arahants must have committed similar misdeeds in one of their previous existences.

All we will have to contemplate is that if such a personality as the Buddha had to endure retribution in the form of being denied alms, we ordinary persons will surely face such adversity one day, and all we must do is to follow in the footsteps of the Buddha and endure the hardship. We should reflect in this way and, while being deeply respectful of the Buddha’s patience and endurance, practise patience and endurance like him. We

should also take note of the patience and endurance of the Buddha's five hundred disciples who were obliged to pound the coarse grain and eat it, a kind of grain inferior to the cheapest rice that we have to eat, and find admiration for them.

So the Buddha said: "Ānanda, you are a good person, you have achieved success. You have conquered greed and base desires."

The Buddha's conquest of the scarcity of food lay in his infinite patience and endurance. The village of Verañja was famine stricken, but the nearby villages were not; they were quite well-off. The Buddha's disciples did not blame the Buddha for having stayed at the village of Verañja. They all endured with patience. That is why the Buddha said to his personal attendant, Ānanda, that all of his disciples had achieved success.

Their conquest of greed lay in the fact that these bhikkhus did not go for their almsfood for a distance that did not enable their return on the same day, nor did they move to another place, thus breaking their vow to observe the Rains. Their conquest of their desire for obtaining gifts by base means lay in their refraining from advertising their nobility, declaring to the people that they had attained Arahantship to make the people want to offer them alms.

After the Buddha had praised the five hundred bhikkhus for their conquest of greed and base desires, he predicted that in future times monks would become greedy. He said: "Many of the monks of the future will be too choosy about the alms offered to them. They will say that that particular rice is too tough, or too soft, that particular curry is too salty, or with too little salt, sour or cold." One can find such monks today.

King Asoka and Half A Gooseberry

Many of you know how powerful King Dhammasoka was, and how rich he was. He could spend a billion of the currency of his day on charity for Buddhist religious purposes. Yet, at last, this rich and powerful king had only half a gooseberry, according to the Visuddhimagga:

*"Sakalaṃ mediniṃ bhutvā, datvā koṭisataṃ sukhī.
Aḍḍhāmalakamattassa, ante issarataṃ gato."*

"King Asoka was extremely wealthy, having enjoyed enormous revenue, spent one billion¹ in charity, but at last he was reduced to the possession of half a gooseberry. Thus had he been deprived of his power and affluence."

¹ Koṭisataṃ = 100 x 10 million, or 1 Billion (ed.)

The king was old and ailing, so his ministers turned over the royal treasury to his grandson, the Crown Prince. The king was so keen on giving alms that he gave away in charity the golden cups and plates that contained his daily food. So the ministers saw to it that his food was sent to him in silver cups and plates, and he gave away the silverware too. Then copper cups and plates were furnished, and he gave them away until at last only half a gooseberry was sent him in an earthenware cup. The king asked his followers, "Who governs this land?" The followers said that he did. The king said, "Not so. I have fallen from the position of king. I possess only half a gooseberry." Soon thereafter he passed away. So says the treatise [Divyāvādāna](#). So does the *Visuddhimagga*. We should ponder the story of King Asoka, and thus practise contentment and seek relief from misery.

The Buddha Without Followers

Once the Buddha, who had usually had hundreds of followers around him, was left without any attendant. One day as the Buddha was travelling, accompanied by his personal attendant [Nāgasamāla Thera](#), his attendant requested the Buddha to accept his alms bowl and robes and said that he would leave the Buddha. The Buddha was obliged to receive his own bowl and robes and walk on alone. However, that was not for long. Nāgasamāla Thera was robbed of his own bowl and robe, and was beaten on the head, so he went back to the Buddha.

On another occasion, the Buddha went to the village of Jantu with a bhikkhu by the name of [Meghiya](#) as his companion. As they were walking by a mango grove, Meghiya said to the Buddha that he would like to practise meditation in that grove, and so asked the Buddha to take his alms bowl and robes.¹ The Buddha asked Meghiya to wait for another bhikkhu to come along, but Meghiya was insistent, so the Buddha accepted the bowl and robes, and remained alone. The Buddha was not alone for long. Meghiya went into the mango garden and sat on a rock and began his meditation. As he was doing so, he was assailed by unseemly thoughts and desires. The reason for this was that on that very rock for one hundred of his previous existences, Meghiya had enjoyed sexual pleasures with dancers and handmaids, when he was a king in those existences. So traces of his past pleasures were associated with that rock, and he was unwittingly aroused by them in his thoughts. He had forgotten that he was a bhikkhu and

¹ As the Buddha's personal attendant, Meghiya would have been carrying the Buddha's alms bowl and extra robe as well as his own (ed.)

imagined himself as a king who was enjoying pleasures on this rock. On this rock, too, as the king, he had sentenced a robber to death, and another to a prison term for similar charges.

Meghiya was surprised at the unexpected unseemly thoughts that assailed him while he was meditating. Then he came to understand the reason for the Buddha's reluctance to allow him to meditate in that grove. So he returned to the Buddha.

On another occasion, at the city of Kosambī a dispute arose among the monks regarding an incident of leaving some water in the rinsing bowl in a latrine. It was a trivial matter, but the dispute developed, and the monks were split in two groups. The Buddha tried to reconcile the differences in vain, so he left the Ghositārāma monastery and went into Pārileyya forest and remained there for the Rains, alone. Venerable Ānanda would have accompanied the Buddha, but the Buddha said that he wanted to remain alone. In the Pārileyya forest a huge elephant attended upon in Buddha's needs. The Buddha went into the village of Pārileyya to obtain almsfood. The villagers built a hut with a roof covered by leaves for the Buddha to live in. From a lay person's point of view, the Buddha's living conditions for that period were unsatisfactory, but to the Buddha it was a life of real happiness, of peace of mind.

We all should contemplate the Buddha's state of mind in such unfavourable living conditions and seek real happiness by cultivating peace of mind.

Worldly people would not like to be alone and would be sad to be left unattended. Who would ever want to be without companions, and who could ever avoid such a condition? Everybody will have to go through such conditions of deprivation, for it is the natural order of worldly vicissitudes. The Buddha was left alone again for some time in the final year of his life, just before he attained *parinibbāna*. The Buddha was then staying at a large village called [Medatalumpa](#) about twenty-four miles from the city of Sāvattthī. King Pasenadi of Kosala came to worship the Buddha. Before he entered the Buddha's living chamber, the king took off the royal regalia and entrusted them to Dīghakārāyaṇa, a nephew of General Bandhula, himself a high army official, and the king entered alone. He made obeisance to the Buddha and conversed with him on matters relating to religion.

Meanwhile, Dīghakārāyaṇa gave the regalia to the king's son, Viṭaṭūbha, and made him king. They left the old king at the monastery, leaving behind only a horse and a maid, and went to the capital city of Sāvattthī. When the old king came out of the Buddha's chamber, the maid reported the matter

to him. The old king then decided to go to his nephew, King Ajātasattu, to seek the latter's help in fighting his usurper. The distance was 45 yojanas (about 300 miles), so when the old king got to a rest-house on the outskirts of the city of Rājagaha, he died of illness and also from sheer exhaustion.

King Pasenadi Kosala was in those days a very powerful king in Middle India, but as ill-fate decreed, he died with no companion other than a handmaid and a horse in a rest-house outside a foreign capital city. It is a sad story, but it illustrates the workings of unfavourable circumstances according to the natural order of things. So when we contemplate the fate of this great king we can find relief from the suffering occasioned by the onslaughts of worldly vicissitudes.

The Buddha and Slander

The Buddha had all the attributes of nobility and holiness as evident in the nine major attributes of the Buddha,¹ and was therefore free from all defilements and defects of any kind. There should be no pretext for any slander or criticism; on the contrary, there are many reasons and occasions for highest esteem for the Buddha. All the beings, human and celestial, were untiring in their praises, tributes, and adoration. Yet the unbelievers who were dead set against the Buddha tried their best to bring about occasions and invent excuses to slander him. These opponents never failed to take every available opportunity to cast aspersions on and slander the Buddha and his teachings.

The Accusations Made by Ciñcamāṇa

Unbelievers persuaded a female recluse named [Ciñcamāṇa](#)² to make accusations against the Buddha. Ciñcamāṇa, dressed finely and properly, went toward Jetavana monastery at night-time and slept at a house of the unbelievers near to the monastery. In the early morning she hurried toward the city as if she had come out of Jetavana monastery. When passersby asked her why she was in a hurry and where she had slept, she replied coyly: "What can you gain from knowing what I have been doing?"

¹ 1) Worthy (*arahaṃ*), 2) Fully Enlightened (*sammāsambuddho*), 3) Endowed with knowledge and conduct (*vijjā-caraṇa sampanno*), 4) Fortunate or well-spoken (*sugato*), 5) Knower of the worlds (*lokavidū*), 6) Incomparable guide (charioteer) of trainable persons (*anuttaro purisadamma sārathī*), 7) Teacher of gods and human beings (*satthā devamanussānaṃ*), 8) Awakened (*buddho*), and 9) Blessed (*bhagavā*).

² Ciñcamāṇavikā, often referred to as Ciñcamāṇa (ed.)

Ciñcamāṇa had been doing this for a month or so, and then when people enquired what she had been doing, she said by way of confession, "I went to the Jetavana monastery and slept with Gotama." Three or four months later, she placed a bale of cloth on her stomach, tied it around her waist, and covered it with her outer garment to make it look as if she was pregnant. Then one day during the Buddha's discourse at the Jetavana monastery Ciñcamāṇa walked into the audience and made accusations saying, "Oh great monk, it is good that you have been giving discourses, but you have neglected the pregnancy you have caused and failed to make arrangements for my confinement."

That was a shameless attempt to discredit the Buddha, but soon, owing to the great powers of the Buddha, the false bulge of the stomach slipped down. The audience was angry and drove Ciñcamāṇa out of the monastery. The wicked female recluse was swallowed up by the earth when she got out of sight of the Buddha, and went directly down the deepest bowels of hell.

The Accusations Made by Sundarī

A similar case is the story of [Sundarī](#), a beautiful female recluse of a group of unbelievers, who did exactly as Ciñcamāṇa had done. She loitered near Jetavana monastery and walked as if she had come out of the monastery. When asked by people, she said, "I went to Gotama and slept with him in his chamber." Then the unbelievers hired thugs to kill the girl and throw the corpse on a rubbish tip near the monastery. Then they spread a rumour that Sundarī was missing, and reported the case to King Kosala. When the king asked them if they could think of a possible place of crime, they said, "Lately, Sundarī had been living in Jetavana monastery. We don't know what has become of her." The unbelievers pretended to make a search around the monastery. They then pointed to the rubbish tip and exclaimed that the girl's corpse was in it. They placed the corpse on a cot and paraded it in the streets for the citizens to see. Then they reported to the king that Gotama's disciples killed the girl because they did not want her affair with their teacher to become known to the public. The king ordered without properly judging the case that the matter be made known to the public.

That was a good chance for the unbelievers to make capital out of the incident. They went round the city and proclaimed that Gotama's disciples had killed the girl to conceal her affair with their master. Many people misunderstood the disciples of the Buddha and cast aspersions on them. The disciples reported the matter to the Buddha. In reply to the charges, the Buddha gave the following discourse:

*“Abhūtavādī nirayaṃ upeti,
Yo vāpi katvā na karomicāha.
Ubhopi te pecca samā bhavanti,
Nihīnakammā manujā paratthā”ti. (Dhp v 306)*

“He who makes false charges against another goes to hell; he who denies what he has done also goes to hell. These two wicked individuals get the same result of falling into hell.”

The bhikkhus repeated the Buddha’s verse to the people, and those who cast slanderous remarks were frightened. They said among themselves, “Making false charges pushes one to hell. We did not see what had happened and would not know whether or not it happened as these persons had accused. They may have made false accusations. Then if they denied that they had done it, they would go to hell. It doesn’t seem to be as these unbelievers have charged.” So the people stopped saying anything damaging to the monks. The slanderous campaign died down within a week.

King Kosala sent out detectives to find out the truth about this case. The assassins who had killed Sundarī were drinking with the money they had received from the gangsters who had asked them to kill the girl. As they were getting drunk, one of them said to another, “Hey fellow, didn’t you strike just one blow with the stick and kill Sundarī? So you are now drinking with the money you got for killing the girl, aren’t you? All right! All right! So be it.” The detectives who had heard this pounced upon the assassins and took them to the presence of the king. The king tried the case, and both the assassins and the unbelieving conspirators confessed. Then the king ordered them to go round the city and make a public confession. They were ordered to declare publicly that it was they who killed Sundarī, and that Gotama and his disciples were innocent. This public confession made the case clear and proved the innocence of the Buddha and his disciples, and people rid themselves of any misunderstanding.

The Story of Māgaṇḍiyā

Once the Buddha and the bhikkhus went to the city of Kosambī. One of the wives of the reigning King Utena, Queen [Māgaṇḍiyā](#), bribed some rogues and ordered them to go out and abuse the Buddha and his disciples as they entered the city. The reason for this action was that Māgaṇḍiyā bore a grudge against the Buddha. She was a very beautiful young lady, and so her father, a brahmin, turned down all offers of marriage from the sons of high-class

families. He used to tell them that they were not worthy of his daughter's hand. He was searching for a suitable bridegroom. The Buddha foresaw that the brahmin and his wife would become Non-returners, so he went near to where the brahmin was holding a lighting festival.

Seeing the Buddha, the brahmin Māgaṇḍi said to himself "This man is a cut above all of the others. There won't be any equal of him in this world. This man, or this monk, is worthy of my daughter." So he accosted the Buddha saying, "Sir, I have a beautiful daughter, and I wish to offer her to you. Please wait at this place," and hurried back home. When he arrived home he said to his wife, "I have found a man suitable to be our daughter's husband. Follow me with our daughter, suitably dressed." When the three of them came to the spot where the Buddha had been asked to wait, they found only the Buddha's footprint, which he had purposely left for them to see.

It was only when the Buddha willed, that his footprint was impressed upon the earth. The footprint could not be erased during the period set by his will. Also it could be seen only by those whom he had willed to see it. The brahmin's wife turned to her husband and asked: "Where is your bridegroom?" The brahmin said, it is here that I have asked him to wait. Where is he gone now?" And looked around, and pointing to the footprint said, "Ah, here's his footprint!"

The brahmin's wife was versed in the art of fortune-telling. She looked at the footprint and said, "The owner of this footprint is not one who enjoys sex." The brahmin silenced her saying that her knowledge of fortune telling was too little, and hurried after the Buddha. The brahmin said to the Buddha when he found him, "Venerable sir, I hereby offer you my daughter to be at your service."

The Buddha did not reply to the brahmin directly. He said, "brahmin Māgaṇḍi, I will tell you something." Then he told the brahmin the story of his renunciation and his attainment of Enlightenment and his stay for forty-nine days in seven places till he came to sit under the Ajapāla Banyan tree, and also Māra's campaign against him, including Māra's daughters' attempts at seduction, which failed and disappointed Māra. The Buddha told the brahmin couple this to make them understand that he was free from sexual desire. He also wanted the brahmin couple to gain an insight into the Dhamma, so he gave the following reply:

*"Disvāna taṇhaṃ aratiṃ ragañca,
Nāhosi chando api methunasmiṃ.
Kimevidaṃ muttakarīsapuññaṃ,
Pādāpi naṃ samphusituṃ na icche"ti. (Sn v 841)*

“Although I had seen the three daughters of Māra, sexual desire did not arise. Needless to say, seeing this girl whose body is full of urine and excrement, did not arouse sexual desire. I have no desire even to touch her body with my foot.”

The brahmin and his wife who heard this reply became Non-returners. They entrusted their daughter to the care of her uncle, Cūḷa Māgaṇḍi, and entered the Saṅgha, soon becoming Arahants.

Māgaṇḍiyā was angry when she heard the Buddha’s reply. She was offended when the Buddha said that her body was full of urine and excrement. She said to herself, “Well, if he didn’t want me, he should say so. Why did he say that I am full of excrement and urine? That is downright derogatory.” Then she continued saying to herself, “Well, let it be. I can get a good husband. Then I will show Gotama what I can do to him.”

Her uncle presented her to King Utena of the Kosambī kingdom. The king was pleased with Māgaṇḍiyā’s beauty and made her a queen. There were two other queens already. They were Vāsuladattā, the daughter of King Chandrapajjota, and [Sāmāvati](#), an adopted daughter of a rich man named Ghosaka. There were five hundred handmaids for each of the three queens.

The king gave eight kahāpaṇas daily for Sāmāvati to buy flowers. The money was handed to her slave [Khujjuttarā](#) who had to go out daily to buy flowers. One day at the house of Sumaṇa, the flower-seller, there was an almsgiving ceremony for the Buddha and the Saṅgha. The flower-seller asked Khujjuttarā to stay longer than usual to hear the Buddha’s discourse after the meal. Khujjuttarā attended the discourse and became a Stream-winner after the discourse.

A Stream-winner strictly observes the five precepts. So Khujjuttarā, who had been stealing four kahāpaṇas of the eight kahāpaṇas daily, stopped doing it, and bought eight kahāpaṇas’ worth of flowers. When the queen saw more flowers than usual, she asked the slave woman, “Why, sister Khujjuttarā? Did the king give you twice the usual allowance?” Khujjuttarā said no. Then the queen asked her why there were so many flowers. A Stream-winner never tells a lie and is always strict in the observance of the five precepts. Khujjuttarā then said that she had been stealing four kahāpaṇas out of eight, and buying only four kahāpaṇas’ worth of flowers every day, but that day she had stopped stealing. When asked why, Khujjuttarā said she had had an opportunity of hearing the Buddha’s discourse at the house of the flower-seller and had come to realize the Dhamma, and so she had stopped stealing some money from the daily allowance given to buy flowers.

Here, if the queen were an evil-minded woman she would probably scold the slave woman and ask her to repay the stolen money. However, Queen Sāmāvati was good-natured and had a mind of a person with perfections (*pāramī*). Being compassionate, she contemplated the change in Khujjatarā's attitude and character. The queen reflected that since Khujjatarā said she had realized the Dhamma, had stopped stealing and spoken the truth without fear, the Dhamma that she had realized must be very special, and it would be good to know that Dhamma. That is what Queen Sāmāvati thought to herself. So she said to Khujjatarā, "Elder sister, please let us drink the Dhamma that you have imbibed." The slave-woman said that if she had to recount the discourse, she must first make herself clean and tidy. So she requested permission to take a bath and dress herself properly. She would do that in deference to the sacred Dhamma that she was asked to recount.

Having taken a bath and dressed herself appropriately, Khujjatarā sat on the seat where a preacher usually sat and recounted the Buddha's discourse properly and completely. Queen Sāmāvati and her five hundred maids became Stream-winners after hearing the discourse.

From that day on, Khujjatarā was elevated to the position of a mentor and permitted to attend the Buddha's discourses. Khujjatarā came back to recount the discourses she had heard. Thus, in time, Khujjatarā became learned in the teachings; and was later honoured by the Buddha as the most well-informed in the Dhamma among his lay disciples.

Having heard so often the discourses of the Buddha as recounted by Khujjatarā, Queen Sāmāvati and her maids had a strong desire to see and worship the Buddha. So she asked Khujjatarā to take them to the Buddha. Khujjatarā said, "Ladies, it is nearly impossible for you all to go out of the palace without the king's permission. So please bore small holes in the wall opposite the road so that you all may be able to look at and adore the Buddha and his disciples on their way to some rich man's house on invitation to a feast." The queen and the maids bored holes in the wall and peeped through and worshipped the Buddha and the Saṅgha. One day Māgaṇḍiyā visited Sāmāvati's chamber and saw the holes in the wall. She asked about them. Not knowing that Māgaṇḍiyā held a grudge against the Buddha, Sāmāvati told her that the Buddha was then in Kosambī and that they gazed at the Buddha, and his disciples and worshipped them from inside the palace chamber. Māgaṇḍiyā was enraged and said to herself, "Now the Buddha is in the city; I will do what I have wanted to do to him. These women are Gotama's disciples; I will do something to them, too." So she went to the

king and maligned Sāmāvati, but her efforts were of no avail. Well, that's by the way. This is just a part of the story of the two queens.

Māgaṇḍiyā gave money to her slaves and servants and asked them to go out and abuse the Buddha and drive him out of the city. Those who did not believe in the Dhamma did as the evil queen had asked them. When the Buddha and his followers walked into the city, these unbelievers followed them on the roadside and shouted abuse of all kinds. For instance, they uttered, "You are a thief, a rogue, a camel, a bull, an ass, an animal, one who will go to hell. For you there is no heaven; there is only hell." That is terrible. Once one deviates from the right path, evil deeds multiply. These people were buying evil results for their evil deeds; in fact, they achieved nothing. After so many occasions of abuse, Venerable Ānanda said to the Buddha, "Lord, this city is full of uncivilized persons. They have been abusing us for no apparent reason. Let us go to another city." The Buddha asked, "What would you do when you went to another city where people there also abused us? Where would you go then?" Ānanda replied, "Then, Lord, we would go on to another city."

The Buddha said, "Ānanda, it is not advisable to move on to another place whenever we are abused. Any problem should be solved at the place where it arises. Then only should we move on to another place." The Buddha had the courage to endure the abuse of evil persons. Thus he said:

*"Ahaṃ nāgo va saṅgāme, cāpato patitaṃ saraṃ.
Ativākyam titikkhissaṃ, dussīlo hi bahujjano."* (Dhp v 320)

"Just as the great elephant in battle endures the arrows coming from all sides, I will endure all abuse without retort. Many people are evil, and rough and rude in their actions and speech."

Many people are unable to restrain their actions and speech, and most of them are rude. One can live in the midst of such people only if one is tolerant. So, the Buddha said, "Just as a bull elephant in battle endures the arrows coming from all sides, I will endure the abuse." Continuing, he said to Ānanda, "Do not worry, Ānanda. They will be able to abuse us for just seven days. They will stop on the eighth day, and the situation will be calm and peaceful." It was as he had said. It was always the case with the mud-slinging campaigns against the Buddha. That is why there is a Burmese saying to the effect that "Slander lasts only seven days, and so does praise."

Now, of the three cases of slander, accusation, and abuse, the reason for the accusation of Ciñcamāṇa originated far in the past. In the remote past,

the future Buddha Gotama committed the sin of making false accusations regarding an Arahant named Nanda, a disciple of the Buddha Sabbābhībhū. So says the Apadāna Pāli text.¹ Regarding the accusation in relation with Sundarī, the future Buddha Gotama levelled unwarranted accusations against a Pacceka Buddha named Surabhi.² The reason for the accusation against the five hundred monks in the case of Sundarī is that these five hundred joined with their master, the future Gotama Buddha, in the latter's false accusations against a holy hermit named Bhima who had attained *jhāna*. There is no mention of the reason for being abused by Māgaṇḍiyā. Anyway, the Buddha had to endure Māgaṇḍiyā's abusive campaign because of a past sin of abusing a person against whom he should not have borne any grudge.

Sin is terrible; retribution for any sin will follow anyone, even if he was a future Buddha, to the very end of saṃsāra. So we should be extremely careful in avoiding sins of any kind. When one has to face slander, false accusations, and abuse, one should recall that even the Buddha had been obliged to face similar calumny and had endured it, and try to practice patience to be able to endure it.

Physical Suffering and the Buddha

Suffering is of two kinds, physical and mental. As for mental suffering, the Buddha was completely free from it. When confronted by disappointments, rejection, sorrows, even the danger of death, the Buddha was free of mental suffering. His mind was always pure. It is the same with an Arahant; even an Non-returner, who has rid himself of anger and other mental defilements, has no mental suffering. However, in a Once-returner some traces of ignorance, craving for existence, and pride linger, so we cannot say that a Once-returner is completely free from mental suffering. As for an Arahant, he is free from defilements, and is therefore free from mental suffering. However, as for physical suffering, no one is exempt.

The Buddha was obliged to bear physical pain quite often. This is clear by what the Buddha sometimes said about his back-ache. According to the Apadāna Pāli text, the Buddha had to suffer from this physical suffering because in one of his earlier existences he was a pugilist, and had caused pain to an opponent. Then again, when he was a son of a fisherman, he was delighted to see fish being beaten on the head. So it is said that the Buddha often had a head-ache.

Once, as the Buddha was taking a stroll on a terrace of the Mountain of Gijjhakūṭa, Devadatta rolled down a huge boulder on him. The rock struck

¹ Ap1 v 70. ² Ap1 v 67.

a ridge jutting over the Buddha, and a shrapnel struck his foot, causing severe pain. The reason for that suffering was that in one existence the future Buddha killed a cousin of his with a rock in a dispute over an inheritance, and also that when he was a king he had had culprits speared to death. Then again, the reason for his suffering from dysentery was that when he was a physician, he gave a rich man's son a medicine, which caused loose bowel motions with blood.

Then, according to the Samyutta Pāli text, once Venerable Kassapa and Venerable Mahā Moggallāna suffered from an acute disease; so did the Buddha, but the disease disappeared after they had listened to the [Bojjhaṅga Paritta](#).

Finally, the Buddha spent his forty-fifth, and last Rains at the village of Veḷuva near the city of Vesālī. At that time he suffered from a grave illness. It would have caused his passing away had he not made use of insight meditation. He averted the eventuality because he saw that it was not yet the appropriate time to attain *parinibbāna*. He said so, and according to Commentary, the Buddha practised meditation just as vigorously as he had done on the eve of his attainment of Buddhahood.

Today there are several instances in which a meditator could stave off the dire consequences from grave illness. We may say that these instances are of the same kind as the instance of overcoming diseases by Venerable Mahā Kassapa and other Arahants and the Buddha by hearing the recitation of the Bojjhaṅga Sutta and insight meditation practice.

We can find relief and solace in the fact that even the Buddha had to face the vicissitudes of physical suffering. Especially in cases of severe illness and chronic diseases, the sufferer should contemplate: "Even the Buddha cannot avoid such suffering, so what can be said for me? However, the Buddha suffered from physical suffering, but never from mental suffering. So I will practise endurance to ward off mental suffering." If you can manage to practice meditation, you should contemplate the painful feelings by noting the feelings as they really are, as they occur, without letting aversion and other unwholesome states invade. An experienced meditator can endure suffering and find relief.

The important thing is to reject the feelings of sorrow and despair by means of insight at the time when one realises that the end of life is near or that even if one recovers one will probably be incapacitated for life and that one's life will be useless. Dhamma is the best medicine for curing oneself of such anguish.

Supposing one suffers from headache for a long time and suffers greatly from it because there is no effective medicine for the disease. If, however, the medicine is available, the headache will go soon after taking the medicine. In the same way, if you don't have the medicine of meditation, you will suffer greatly and for a long time from mental anguish. The Buddha pondered thus: "This suffering that occurs now is not permanent; it will disappear in due course. What I call "I" is after all an aggregate of mind and matter, and is not permanent; there is an incessant change, and this body is not attractive and cannot be depended upon: it is all suffering. As there is a constant change of phenomena in this mind and body, it is not a self."

Or the Buddha's disciple makes a note of the arising and disappearance of the phenomena in the body and mind, and ponders upon their impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self nature, and thus knows the truth as it is. As he is doing so, there is no occasion for mental anguish, and even if it does occur it will not last long. With the disappearance of mental anguish, physical suffering also disappears or can be said to disappear. If it does not, it will possibly be quite tolerable.

One does not feel elated by the good aspects of worldly vicissitudes, nor does one feel sorrow for the bad aspect; thus one is free from satisfaction (*anurodha*), and dissatisfaction (*virodha*). So the Buddha said: "Thus, being free from satisfaction and dissatisfaction regarding worldly vicissitudes, the well-informed disciple of the Buddha is free from rebirth, old age, and death."

When in this way one gains insight and attains the Four Noble Paths; when one becomes an Arahant on reaching the final stage of Path Knowledge, and in due course attains *parinibbāna*, then there is no new existence, no old age, and no more death. Besides, as the Buddha said, "One is free from grief, lamentation, pain, sorrow, and despair."

Freedom from All Suffering

The freedom from suffering of all kinds that has been dealt with in the foregoing statements is for the present existence. When one becomes an Arahant and attains *parinibbāna*, all kinds of suffering will disappear and peace will ensue. The Buddha made this assurance in conclusion.

The uninformed ordinary person does not realise the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self nature of all the phases of worldly vicissitudes, so he or she becomes elated when encountering the good aspects, and feels dejected when the bad aspects manifest. At times of adversity he or she is overwhelmed with greed and anger, commits unwholesome kammās, and

thus cannot escape from misery. As for the well-informed person, however, he or she perceives the vicissitudes of life in accordance with their true nature. Holding right view, he or she observes their true nature of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. He or she is not overjoyed at the upturns of life nor dejected over the downturns, and so is not overwhelmed by greed and anger. He or she is likely to do good deeds in either event, and thus gains merit, especially merit through meditation practice. In the current life, he or she is free from mental anguish, and when he or she gains Arahantship and attains *parinibbāna*, will be completely free from all kinds of suffering. The well-informed person has such qualities.

According to the [Maṅgala Sutta](#) the well-informed person is not moved by the onslaughts of worldly vicissitudes. However, the uninformed ordinary person is greatly agitated. That is a great difference. So the Buddha said:

*“Phuṭṭhassa lokadhammehi, Cittam yassa na kampati
Asokam virajam khemaṃ, Etaṃ maṅgalamuttamaṃ”*

“Although touched by the vicissitudes of life, the mind of the well-informed person, who is a disciple of the Buddha is not shaken. There is no sorrow; there is no stain of defilements; there is no danger or fear. That is the most auspicious sign.”

We all should meet the onslaughts of worldly vicissitudes with the stable mind of an Arahant. If one has to endure like an Arahant, one must work to become an Arahant. If one cannot come up to that stage, one should strive for the stage of Non-returning, Once-returning, or Stream-winning. In these three stages one cannot be entirely unmoved, nor can one be stable in mind because one is not yet completely free from greed and anger. Yet when one has reached the stage of a Stream-winner one is sufficiently well-informed in the Dhamma so that one can practise vipassanā, pondering on the true nature of things, and thus endure worldly vicissitudes fairly well.

Even if a meditator has not yet reached Stream-winning, he or she can tolerate the onslaughts to a certain extent by the practice of meditation. If the meditator has developed concentration further and become aware of the distinctive nature of mind and matter, and is convinced that there is nothing attractive in these phenomena, then he or she will be able to endure vicissitudes all the better. If the meditator has developed his or her concentration still further and perceived the different phenomena separately in terms of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self, the endurance will be further strengthened, and relief will be greater.

If still further development of concentration and insight can be achieved, and the meditator can perceive the incessant changes in the chain of cause and effect in the physical and mental elements of existence with equanimity, he or she will have attained [knowledge of equanimity about formations](#) (*sañkhārupekkha-ñāṇa*). The meditator will then have acquired serenity and will remain unmoved by the rewards and punishments of worldly vicissitudes. There is no occasion for joy or sorrow. The meditator will be able to endure either fortune or misfortune with an unshaken mind. Then the meditator will have the peace and serenity of an Arahant, if not as fully as an Arahant, at least to some extent.

If the meditator strives further to develop his or her insight, he or she will reach the ultimate stage and become an Arahant, and will then be endowed with the most auspicious blessing. We should all strive to reach that ultimate stage of mental stability.

Now we have come to the end of the discourse on worldly vicissitudes, which was given to you all to mark the celebration of the Burmese New Year. May the audience who have respectfully listened to this discourse be able to practice patience and endure the onslaughts of worldly vicissitudes by way of meditation so that the vicissitudes are totally eradicated and the sublime happiness of nibbāna prevails!

Sadhu! Sadhu! Sadhu!

End of the Discourse on Worldly Vicissitudes
(29-5-1970)