

Extract from the: **Aṭṭhakavagga** (the book of eights)

Translated by **K.R. Norman**¹

Square bracket interpolations are [almost all] by K. R. Norman, who is notable amongst translators for striving to be as exact and literal as possible, rather than making risky modifications in search of ease of understanding.

From the standpoint of modern historical consciousness, there is wide agreement that the Aṭṭhakavagga is one of the earliest of the Buddha's Discourses that are collected in the Pali Canon

As an experiment, the text for discussion was re-gendered, but for copyright reasons the frequent use of male pronouns and titles has been restored here.

IV.3 Evil

780. Some evil-minded ones do indeed dispute; and those whose minds are set on truth do indeed dispute also. But the sage does not get involved in any dispute which has arisen. Therefore the sage has no barrenness of mind in this respect.

Discussion Notes (in italics) *If the function of a mind is to manage interaction of a body with an environment, including other minds, then a person who did not develop their thinking out of interaction with other minds would likely be 'barren'. So the issue here is hopefully not discussion as such, but argument that generates unwholesome emotional reactions.*

781. How could anyone overcome his very own view, [when he is] led on by desire, entrenched in his own inclination, fulfilling those [wrong views] himself? For as he knows, so would he speak.

Desire is no good justification for any view, and any view should avoid entrenchment by remaining open to change in the light of a better justification for another view. That way, there is more chance of approaching the truth and avoiding falling into error. For as people think they know, so do they speak, often without justification.

782. If any person, unasked, tells others of his own virtuous conduct and vows, if anyone of his own accord speaks of himself, the experts say he has an ignoble nature.

783. But a bhikkhu, calmed, with self completely quenched, not boasting about his virtuous conduct, [saying], 'Thus am I [virtuous]', if he has no haughtiness with respect to anything in the world, the experts say he has a noble nature.

784. <154>. When one who has formed, constructed, [and] preferred false doctrines [which are] unclean, sees an advantage for himself [in them], then he is relying upon a peace which is dependent upon [what is unstable].

Not stated in the text, is how to determine what is false and unstable from what is stable and true.

785. Clingings to [wrong] views are not easily overcome. [One] has been grasped from among many doctrines after consideration. Therefore a man lays down or takes up a doctrine from among these, clinging [to view].

786. A purified [man] does not indeed form a view anywhere in the world in respect of different existences. Because of what would a purified [man] go, having abandoned illusion and conceit? He is not involved.

A purified person is here stated to be someone who has abandoned illusion and conceit. It is suggested that they do not form views about 'different existences', which presumably means any possible views about the nature of being: ontological views.

787. An involved person is indeed involved in dispute[s] in respect of doctrines, [but] how, about what, could one dispute with one who is not involved? He has taken up or laid down nothing. He has shaken off all views in this very world.

Some views can be abandoned, but others are implied by taking part in ordinary life, such as a feeling of one's own existence, or a 'folk' view of cause and effect created out of interactions with objects, which includes the view that other things and beings exist independently of oneself.

IV.4. The Purified

788. 'I see what is purified, highest, diseaseless. Purity comes to a [man] by means of what he has seen.' Understanding this, knowing, '[It is] the highest', [and thinking] 'I am the seer of the purified', he believes that knowledge [leads to purity].

789. <155>. If purity comes to a [man] through what he has seen, or if he abandons misery by means of knowledge, [then] he who has acquisitions [which lead to rebirth] is purified by something else [than the noble path]. For his view betrays him as he speaks thus.

This pair of verses makes the point that observation and intellectual understanding is insufficient. It is unclear whether the reference to the noble path is hinted at in the text or is interpolated by the translator.

790. The [Brahman] does not say that purity comes from something else, [or is] in what is seen [and] heard, in virtuous conduct or vows, or is what is thought. Not clinging to merit or evil, he abandons what has been taken up, and does not fashion [anything more] here.

The list of things that do not contribute to nobility (purification of perfection) is surprisingly exhaustive: it is not from external influence, not from good behaviour, not by making a resolution, and not by reflecting how to achieve nobility: it seems to result from inactivity.

791. Abandoning the former [thing], they are dependent upon something else. Those under the influence of lust do not cross over attachment. They seize and let go like a monkey seizing and releasing a branch.

792. A person undertaking vows himself, being attached to perceptions, goes high and low. But the one who knows, the one of great wisdom, does not go high or low, having understood the doctrine by means of the knowledges [of the way].

793. He is not associated with any mental phenomena, or [with whatever is] seen or heard or thought. How could anyone here in the world have doubts about him, when he has such insight and conducts himself so open[ly]?

794. They do not form [views], they do not prefer, they do not say 'This is the highest purity.' <156> Releasing the knot of grasping which has been tied, they do not form a desire for anything in the world.

These four verses suggest that the problem with views, apart from the disputes they might cause, is their associated attachment. Attachment is dependency. It includes dependency on assessment of the worth and truth of any view, and any associated actions (how she conducts herself).

795. The [Brahman] has gone beyond boundaries. Knowing or seeing anything, he has not grasped it. He is not impassioned by passion; He is not attached to the passionless. Nothing else has grasped him here.

It appears that the problem with views is not the view as such, but craving, clinging grasping or attachment to that view. Thus, a view is no different to anything else that holds a person in thrall by generating greed, aversion or confusion.

IV.5. The Highest

796. When, abiding in his [own] views, [thinking]. 'It is the highest', a man esteems it as the best in the world, he says all others are inferior to this. Therefore he has not passed beyond disputes.

It is not the view in itself, but discrimination involved in the assessment of the view.

797. Whatever advantage he sees for himself in what is seen and heard, in virtuous conduct and vows, or in what is thought, grasping at that very thing there, he sees all the rest as inferior.

It is not the view in itself but the discrimination involved in assessment of that view in relation to all others.

798. That very [view] the experts call a tie, dependent upon which he sees the rest as inferior. Therefore a bhikkhu should not depend upon [anything] seen, heard or thought, or virtuous conduct or vows.

799. <157>. Nor should he form a view in the world because of knowledge or virtuous conduct or vows. He should not represent himself as equal, nor should he think of himself as inferior, nor as superior.

It is not the view in itself, but the way in which it supports an assessment of oneself in relation to all others.

800. Abandoning what has been taken up, and not taking it up [again], he should not depend even upon knowledge. He indeed does not follow any faction among those who hold different views. He does not fall back on any view at all.

Apparently it is not knowledge that is at fault, but dependency on knowledge, or joining a group that defines itself in relation to some form of knowledge.

801. If anyone has made no resolve in respect of both ends here, for the sake of different existences here or in the next world, he has no clinging [to views] grasped from among the doctrines, after consideration.

Here is another suggestion, as in verse 786, that the views in question are views about the nature of existence. The phrase 'resolve in respect to both ends here' may refer to the twin extremes of eternalism (the view that existence continues forever) and

nihilism (the view that existence ceases at death). 'Among the doctrines' may refer to the doctrines propounded by wandering teachers (sāmaññas) at that time.²

802. By him not even a minute notion has been formed here in respect of what is seen, heard or thought. How could anyone here in the world have doubts about that Brahman, who does not form a view?

803. They do not form [views], they do not prefer. Nor do they adhere to doctrines. <158> A Brahman is not to be inferred by virtuous conduct or vows. Gone to the far shore, they do not fall back [on anything].

'Gone to the far shore' is a metaphor for crossing the stream of existence (saṃsāra) to reach enlightenment (nibbāṇa).

IV.6. Old Age

804. Truly this life is short; one dies less than one hundred years old. Even if anyone lives beyond [one hundred years], then he dies because of old age.

805. People grieve for their cherished things, for no possessions are permanent. Seeing that this separation truly exists, one should not live the household life.

'Cherished things' includes interpersonal relationships as well as physical objects and social status. Becoming a follower of one of the wandering teachers, the homeless life, is the antithesis of the household life. But it is apparent from historical and sociological evidence that going forth into homelessness never meant severing all ties with one's family. Instead, the homeless person tended to enter into dependency in relation to their own family, as well as all other lay persons.

806. Whatever a man thinks of a 'mine,' that too disappears with his death. Knowing this indeed, a wise man, one of my followers, would not incline towards possessiveness.

807. Just as a man, awakened, does not see whatever he met with in a dream, <159> even so one does not see beloved people when they are dead and gone.

808. These people are seen and heard of, whose name is 'so and so'. When he has departed, only a person's name will remain to be pronounced.

809. Those who are greedy for cherished things do not abandon grief, lamentation, and avarice. Therefore the sages, seeing security, have wandered forth, abandoning possession[s].

In a sense, the household life constitutes a viewpoint, tacitly restricting towards certain kinds of view. Thus, the wealth and social status of upright British citizens in the eighteenth century might depend on their ethical and investment attitude towards the slave trade. The self-respect of upright British citizens in the twenty-first century might depend on the view that their colonial empire was a benevolent rather than rapacious.

810. Of a bhikkhu who lives in a withdrawn manner, resorting to a secluded residence, of her they say it is agreeable that he should not show himself at any dwelling.

811. Not being dependent upon anything, a sage holds nothing as being pleasant or unpleasant. Lamentation and avarice do not cling to him, as water does not cling to a [lotus-] leaf.

It can seem surprising to some that the Buddhist path (for example, meditation) involves the avoidance of any preferences, be they pleasant or unpleasant.

812. Just as a drop of water does not cling to a lotus[-leaf], as water does not cling to a lotus, so a sage does not cling to what is seen or heard or thought.

813.<160> Therefore a purified one does not think that purity is by means of what is seen, heard or thought, nor does he wish for purity.

From these verses, it is apparent that 'views' can mean any orientation towards anything, not just a thought-through opinion on a particular topic. But views about existence(s) are the prime example of views to be avoided, not least because most preferences are psychologically associated with some sort of desire towards the continuity of existence, whether for (eternalism) or against (nihilism).

¹ Norman, K.R., 2001(1992), *The Group of Discourses (Sutta Nipāta)* (Oxford, P.T.S.), pp. 104-108.

² Burford has argued that the *Aṭṭhakavagga* is such an early text that it omits doctrines that were not yet fully-formed at that time, concentrating only on arguing against views (*diṭṭhi*), and in favour of human perfection, with no reference to metaphysical ideas. Indeed, verse 786 says that:

'A purified [man] does not indeed form a view anywhere in the world in respect of different existences'.

But rebirth may be implied in verse 789 (the translation does not make this clear) and verse 877 does imply the idea of rebirth, with the view that a wise (enlightened) person is not reborn again:

'...the investigating sage, knowing their dependencies, knowing the true doctrine, is released [and] does not enter into dispute. The wise man does not go to various [renewed] existences'.

Thus, those who look to the *Aṭṭhakavagga* for an original, early, non-metaphysical version of Buddhism, which does not speak at all about rebirth, are going to be disappointed.

Burford, G., 1991, *Desire, Death and Goodness: the Conflict of Ultimate Values in Theravada Buddhism*, (NewYork, Peter Lang).

