

Bhaddekaratta Sutta **A Single Excellent Night**

MN 131

Trans: Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi

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1. Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Sāvatti in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. There he addressed the bhikkhus thus: "Bhikkhus" – "Venerable Sir," they replied. The Blessed One said this:

Discussion Notes: *The title has been translated by Bhikkhu Thanissaro as 'An Auspicious Day' and by Bhikkhu Ñanananda as 'Discourse on the Ideal Lover of Solitude'.*

The first para. is of the sort found wrapped around all the substantial texts (sutta, meaning 'thread') within the three main 'baskets' - out of nine - that form the Buddha's recorded sayings: the Longer Discourses (Dīgha Nikāya), the Middle Length Discourses (Majjhima Nikāya) and the Connected Discourses (Saṃyutta Nikāya). The first sentence establishes the claim that the first memoriser/reciter (bhāṇaka) of this text was indeed present when these words were spoken by the Buddha. The claim is reinforced by giving the location of that event in the second sentence.

2. "Bhikkhus, I shall teach you the summary and exposition of 'One Who Has Had a Single Excellent Night,' Listen and attend closely to what I shall say" – "Yes, Venerable Sir", the Bhikkhus replied. The Blessed One said this:

The second para. introduces the text, describing the teacher/monastic-follower setting within which it was delivered.

3. "Let not a person revive the past
Or in the future build [their] hopes:
For the past has been left behind
And the future has not been reached.
Instead with insight let [them] see
Each presently arisen state;
Let [them] know that and be sure of it,
Invincibly, unshakeably.
Today the effort must be made;
Tomorrow death may come, who knows?
No bargain with Mortality
Can keep [death's] hordes away,
But one who dwells thus ardently,
Relentlessly, by day, by night –

It is [they], the Peaceful Sage has said,
Who has had a single excellent night. [188]

It is common to find a section of verse plus a prose commentary within Buddhist texts. Sometimes the prose comes first, sometimes the verse, but the verse is usually the keynote summary, in the sense that it gives the teaching concisely and attractively.

Notice that here there are, in effect, four four-line verses. The first states what not to do, the second says what to do, the third gives a strong reason for doing what is recommended, and the fourth notes the benefit of so doing.

4. “How, bhikkhus, does one revive the past? One nurtures delight there thinking, ‘I had such a material form in the past.’ One nurtures delight there thinking, ‘I had such a feeling in the past,’... ‘I had such a perception in the past,’... ‘I had such formations in the past,’... ‘I had such consciousness in the past.’ That is how one revives the past.

5. “And how, bhikkhus, does one not revive the past? One does not nurture delight there thinking, ‘I had such material form in the past.’ One does not nurture delight there thinking, ‘I had such feeling in the past,’... ‘I had such perception in the past,’... ‘I had such formations in the past,’... ‘I had such consciousness in the past.’ That is how one does not revive the past.

6. “And how, bhikkhus, does one build up hope upon the future? One nurtures delight there thinking, ‘May I have such material form in the future!’ One nurtures delight there thinking, ‘May I have such feeling in the future!’... ‘May I have such perception in the future!’... ‘May I have such formations in the future!’... ‘May I have such consciousness in the future!’ That is how one builds up hope upon the future.

7. “And how, bhikkhus, does one not build up hope upon the future? One does not nurture delight there thinking, ‘May I have such material form in the future!’ One does not nurture delight there thinking, ‘May I have such feeling in the future!’... ‘May I have such perception in the future!’... ‘May I have such formations in the future!’... ‘May I have such consciousness in the future!’ That is how one does not build up hope upon the future.

8. “And how, bhikkhus, is one vanquished in regard to presently arisen states? Here, bhikkhus, an untaught ordinary person, who has no regard for noble ones and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, regards material form as self, or self as possessed as material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form. [S]he regards feeling as self...perception as self...formations as self...consciousness as self, or self as possessed of consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. That is how one is vanquished in regard to presently arisen states.

9. “And how, bhikkhus, is one invincible in regard to presently arisen states? Here, bhikkhus, a well-taught noble disciple, who has regard for the noble ones and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma, who has regard for true [persons] and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma, does not regard material form as self, or self as possessed of material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form. [S]he does not regard feeling as self...perception as self...formations as self...consciousness as self, or self as possessed of consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. That is how one is invincible in regard to presently arisen states.

4. – 9. These six paragraphs give a (quite repetitive) exposition of the first two verses, in relation to two major Buddhist teachings:

A. The nature of the human person. A ‘psycho-physical’ person consists of five ‘aggregates’ or ‘heaps’ (pañca-khandha): mental impressions of form (rūpa), feeling (vedāna), perception (sañña), mental formations (saṅkhāra - thoughts or intentions that have consequences (kamma)) and consciousness (viññāna). These five carry much more meaning than their inevitably slightly inaccurate English translations. Some of these meanings are bound to be unearthed in discussion as more texts are examined.

B. Self (atta) and not-self (anattā). The concept of a continuous, soul-like self is not among the five aggregates because the Buddhist view is that a self only exists as an ephemeral function of the causes and conditions that make up a human person.

The argument in paras. 4-9 is that persons tend to strongly identify form feeling, perception, intentions or consciousness as their ‘self’. This concept of self strongly influences their ruminations and speculations about the ‘three times’ (past, present and future): What was I in the past? In the present they are preoccupied with thinking: where have I come from and where will I go? By diminishing this obsession with themselves as a concrete thing existing unchanged over time (rather than a causally-conditioned process always taking place in this very moment), people may find it easier to be aware of what is actually happening. Then they can be peace amidst the flux of events.

10. Let not a person revive the past...
Who has had a single excellent night.

Here the verses at 3. are repeated in full for emphasis.

11. “So it was with reference to this that it was said: ‘Bhikkhus, I shall teach you the summary and exposition of “One Who Has Had a Single Excellent Night.”’”

That is what the Blessed One said. The bhikkhus were satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One's words.

The text is brought to end. Once more it is asserted that these words were spoken by the Buddha. For a modern understanding, the final line comes across as 'public relations', since dissent was unlikely, or unlikely to be reported.

Further comments made during the discussion:

S... mentioned that he first encountered this text in the Zen tradition, in the papers left by Soko Roshi. It is interesting that he had been so struck by such an early text from a different tradition, which seems to prefigure the Chan/Zen emphasis on concentrating on present experience, both in meditation and in all of life. Soen's treasured copy will have been a Chinese translation of a north Indian Sanskrit text, rather than this version from the Pāli of the southern Theravāda tradition.

K...was concerned that we still need to dwell amongst past and future events, especially during the (formal or informal) therapeutic process of grieving.

J...remarked that, as so often, there is some degree of paradox in following the Buddhist path. Of course we have to spend quite a lot of time addressing the past and the future, indeed that's why humans have evolved the cognitive powers of memory and prediction.

A...resolved that paradox with the observation that, even when addressing the past and the future, we are doing so in the present, and it is the way in which we do it that matters. S...completed that thought as depending on the extent to which we are attached (J...self-invested) to those thoughts of past and future.

J... mentioned Slavoj Žižek's criticism of the Buddhist 'meditative attitude' for concentrating on the present rather than taking some personal responsibility for the ills brought about by global capitalism. Clearly, some of the force of his argument is deflected by what was just said by A... and S... But it is a criticism to bear in mind...

¹ Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 1995, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, a translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, (Wisdom, Mass.) – notes omitted.