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(Tika) Bhaya Sutta

The (Threes) Discourse on Dangers | A 3.62

Theme: Understanding and overcoming the suffering of separation

Translated by Piya Tan ©2017

1 Sutta summary and highlights

1.1 The (Tika) Bhaya Sutta (A 3.62) is essentially about the nature of “separation” or losing what is dearest and most vital to us on a worldly level (due to fire, floods and social unrest) and on the spiritual level (due to decay, disease and death). On a worldly level, we can and will lose whatever we cherish as being dearest to us—for a child his mother, for a mother her child. On a spiritual level, the *separation* or loss is more real and final.

1.2 On a worldly level, **the mother and child**—representing what are dearest and most vital to us: love and support—may be separated from one another, or one losing the other, on account of some natural disaster, due to fire or to water (and today we may include: due to earth and to wind), and to human factors, especially inhumane violence and social unrest (and we may include religious violence and migration tragedies).

1.3 By way of summary, we can list the dangers stated in **the (Tika) Bhaya Sutta** as follows:

Worldly dangers that separate beings

- [§§1+4] a great fire
- [§§2+5] a great downpour and floods
- [§§3+6] social unrest

Spiritual dangers that separate beings

- [§7.2] decay (ageing)
- [§7.3] disease
- [§7.4] death

While worldly dangers of fire, floods and social unrest may or may not separate us from our family or significant others, **spiritual realities** of decay, disease and death truly and finally separate us from our familiar world for good, as it were. And when we are reborn in a new situation, the same process recurs all over again.

2 Related suttas and teachings

2.1 THE SATTA SURIYA SUTTA (A 7.63), SD 47.8

The Satta Suriya Sutta (A 7.63) gives a very dramatic description of widespread conflagration by way of the 7 stages of the sun’s devolution, as follows:

- The 1st sun there is no rain; all plant life burn up and ceases to be.
- The 2nd sun all streams and lakes dry up.
- The 3rd sun all the great rivers dry up.
- The 4th sun all the great lakes dry up.
- The 5th sun the great oceans become puddles.
- The 6th sun Sineru (the huge mountain ranges) or the axis mundi (galactic centre) blazes up.
- The 7th sun the mountains and the world all blaze up.

The fire, stated as the 1st worldly danger in **the (Tika) Bhaya Sutta** [§§1+4], is an echo of the cosmic conflagration of the Satta Suriya Sutta. The worldly danger—which we imagine to be totally disastrous—in fact, appears mild when compared to the spiritual dangers which simply uproot us from everything we know and love, as it were.

2.2 SIGNIFICANCE

2.2.1 Destruction by fire. According to the Commentaries, our universe will end in any of 3 ways, that is, by the elements of fire, or water, or wind.¹ The above description of a cosmic conflagration reminds us of the universe ending by **fire** or the heat element. This is not exactly a scientific statement but rather a metaphor to remind us of the possibility of the end of days, that everything, including this very universe is subject to change and destruction.

Although the great fire described in **the (Tika) Bhaya Sutta** [§1] is not a cosmic conflagration—perhaps some kind of forest fire which is quite common today in parts of the world—it seems to echo the cosmic fire that ends the world. Indeed, for many, such a great fire can end the kind of life we are familiar with, bringing us great losses, much of which is irreparable.

2.2.2 Destruction by water. Similarly, the 2nd danger—that of **water**—described in **the (Tika) Bhaya Sutta** [§2], reminds us of the cosmic dissolution that brings about the end of the universe. Although the Sutta seems to describe a great flood, it hints at the cosmic destruction by the water element. The 2nd danger mentioned in the Sutta, then, is a kind of microcosmic experience of what can happen on a cosmic scale, ending everything in this physical universe.

2.2.3 None can help us here. However, even greater than the dangers of the fire or the water that afflict such widespread and tragic losses and destruction, are the 3 dangers that radically—in a fundamental manner—not only separate mother and child, taking away all that we cherish and love, even our life itself in a total and final manner. These are the 3 dangers **of ageing, of sickness and of death** [§7]. We have to face these ourself, no one else can prevent this nor take our place in this.

We must and will *age*—just as everyone else will. No one can age for another.

We must and will fall *ill*—our body will fall sick, our mind is certainly sick in some way.² No one else can fall sick for us. We may heal some sickness but new ones will afflict us. We may prevent some physical illness but mental illness of some kind will surely afflict us.

In the end, we must *die*, as will others, too. No one else can die for us. We may speak metaphorically or poetically of some heroes sacrificing their lives for us, but, ultimately, this body must and will itself disintegrate. Just as we are born alone, we must face death ourself, too. [2.3]

2.3 THE SAMAYĀSAMAYA SUTTA (A 5.54), SD 51.15

What is briefly expressed in **the Samayāsamaya Sutta** (A 5.54) as one of the 5 occasions when it is inconducive for spiritual cultivation is elaborated in the 3rd worldly danger of **the (Tika) Bhaya Sutta** (A 3.62)—that of “inroads [raids] by savage tribes” [§3]. The Samayāsamaya Sutta lists this, briefly, as the 4th “wrong time for striving” (*asamayā padhānāya*) to be that of the fear or danger (*bhaya*), as follows:

¹ AA 3:134 (given in brief, but quotes Vism for details): Vism 13.29-44/414-417. On the various realms, see chart at SD 1.7 (Appendix). See SD 2.19 (9.4.2) The end of days.

² Of the 2 kinds of sickness—those of the body and the mind—see **Sall’atthana S** (S 36.6), SD 5.5.

Furthermore, bhikshus, there is **the fear** [the danger] of inroads [raids] by savage tribes, and people, mounted on their carts, flee from the country.

This, bhikshus, is the 4th wrong time for striving. (A 5.54,5/3:66), SD 51.15

The (Tika) Bhaya Sutta develops this idea by adding that “therein, a mother finds not her child and a child finds not his mother” (*tattha mātā pi puttāṃ na paṭilabhati putto pi mātaraṃ na paṭilabhati*) [§3.2]. The Samayāsamaya Sutta statement becomes the background for the 3rd worldly danger where we can be separated from our loved ones and those vital to our life.

2.4 The provisional and the ultimate

2.4.1 The (Tika) Bhaya Sutta is divided into two parts: the first or opening section [§§1-6] prepares us for the key teaching in the second and closing section [§§7-10]. The opening section tells us—again in two parts—of how natural disasters or man-made conditions can separate us from our loved ones and our source of life-support. In the first opening part, it says that such disasters incur great and irreparable losses upon us; the second opening part says that sometimes such disasters may not afflict us so badly.

2.4.2 In this *opening section*, the Buddha is speaking provisionally—in a conventional and limited way—of the nature of losses and suffering. “Having shown in a provisional way (*pariyāyato*) the dangers that separate mother and child,” notes the Commentary, “he now shows in a non-provisional way (*nippariyāyena*) the dangers that separate mother and son.” (AA 2:285). The closing section speaks of such losses and suffering in the spiritual or ultimate sense. *Decay, disease and death* are always there: they are inherent in us though we do not notice their effects upon us (including our significant others) in such a dramatic manner as do natural or man-made disasters. Yet, the effects of *decay, disease and death* are more total and insidious.

2.4.3 Yet, we can and must, by our own effort, overcome these inherent “dangers” and “disasters.” In closing the Sutta, the Buddha reminds us that we can only remove the dangers of decay, disease and death **by walking the noble path**. Only then, we overcome the dangers of remaining in the world and from the sufferings of separation in the world—that is, by truly renouncing the world through attaining nirvana.

By this, the Buddha is not saying whether the world is good or bad—*separation and suffering* are the inherent nature of the world. What is conditioned must change and break up. Those who have attained nirvana, or even walking the path of awakening, are able to bring great happiness to others by helping them understand and accept the world as it really is. In that way, we can all live happily as we prepare to approach and walk the path of awakening ourselves.

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(Tika) Bhaya Sutta

The (Threes) Discourse on Dangers

A 3.62

Separation

[178]

1 Bhikshus, the uninstructed ordinary person speaks of these **3 dangers [fears] that separate mother and child.**³ What are the three?

(1) There comes a time, bhikshus, where there arises **a great fire.**⁴

1.2 When the great fire has arisen, bhikshus, it burns up villages, it burns up market-towns, it burns up cities.⁵

1.3 When the villages are burning, when the market-towns are burning, when the cities are burning, therein, a mother finds not [sees not] her child and a child finds not his mother.⁶

This, bhikshus, is the first danger that separates mother and child that the uninstructed ordinary person speaks of.

2 (2) Furthermore, bhikshus, there comes a time when **a great rain-cloud arises.**

2.2 When the great rain-cloud has arisen, bhikshus, a mighty flowing flood⁷ occurs.⁸

When the mighty flowing flood has occurred, villages are washed away, market-towns are washed away, cities are washed away.⁹

2.3 When the villages are washed away, market-towns are washed away, cities are washed away, *therein, a mother finds not her child and a child finds not his mother.*

This, bhikshus, is the second danger that separates mother and child that the uninstructed ordinary person speaks of.

3 (3) Furthermore, bhikshus, there comes a time when there is **the danger of raids by savage tribesmen,**¹⁰ and people, mounted on their carts, flee the country.¹¹

³ *Tiṇ'imāni bhikkhave amātā,puttikāni bhayānāṅhi assutavā puthujjano bhāsati.* Lit, "An untutored worldling speaks of these 3 (occasions) as 'without-mother-child dangers'." **A,mātā,puttika**, lit, "not-mother-son-ish" (A:W 1:161 n1). Comy says that there is here no possibility of mutual protection (*parittāturū samattha, bhāvena n'atthi ettha mātā, -puttanti a,mātā,puttikāni*, AA 2:284). I have rendered **putta** as "child" rather than "son" for a broader context eg, *aputtaka*, "childless" ("barren of offspring," *suta,vañjho*, MA 3:322,5; cf DA 1:318 = MA 2:390,23); *aputtakaṃ sā-pateyyaṃ*, "property that is escheat (heirless)" (V 3:18,6; S 1:89,33, 91,29; J 3:299,11*; DhA 4:77,1-7).

⁴ *Hoti so bhikkhave samayo yaṃ mahā,aggi,dāho vuṭṭhāti.* Throughout: Be Ce Se -*aggi,dāho*; Ee -*aggi,dāho*.

⁵ *Mahā,aggi,dāhe kho pana bhikkhave vuṭṭhite tena gāmā pi ḍayhanti nigamā pi ḍayhanti nagarā pi ḍayhanti.*

⁶ *Tattha mātā pi puttaṃ na paṭilabhati putto pi mātaraṃ na paṭilabhati.* Comy explains **na paṭilabhati** as "not getting to see (not able to meet)" (*passitūṃ na labhati*) one another (AA 2:284).

⁷ "A great flowing flood," *mahā,udaka,vāhako*: V 1:32,7; A 1:178,13.

⁸ *Mahā,meghe kho pana bhikkhave vuṭṭhite mahā,udaka,vāhako sañjāyati.* It is understood that a great down-pour will ensue.

⁹ "Are washed away," *vuyhanti*: it has the senses of both submerging these places and sweeping them away.

¹⁰ This report prob alludes to conflicts between the Aryans and the autochthonous pre-Aryan tribesmen, the *dasa* or *dasyu*. See R S Sharma, *Ancient India: A textbook for Class XI*, Madras, 1971: 46; E J Rapson (ed), *The Cambridge History of India* 1 Ancient India, Cambridge, 1922:82-86. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dasa>.

3.2 Now, bhikshus, when there is the danger of raids by savage tribesmen, and people, mounted on their carts, flee the country, *therein, a mother finds not her child and a child finds not his mother.*

This, bhikshus, is the third danger that separates mother and child that the uninstructed ordinary person speaks of.

These, bhikshus, are the 3 dangers that separate mother and child that the uninstructed ordinary people speak of.

Possible separation

4 Bhikshus, the uninstructed ordinary person speaks of these 3 dangers [fears] when mother and child may remain together, and the dangers when mother and child may be separated.¹² What are the three?

(1) There comes a time, bhikshus, where there arises **a great fire.**

4.2 When the great fire has arisen, bhikshus, it burns up villages, it burns up market-towns, it burns up cities.

4.3 When the villages are burning, when the market-towns are burning, when the cities are burning, sometimes the mother finds the child, [179] sometimes the child finds the mother.¹³

This, bhikshus, is the first danger *when mother and child may remain together, and when mother and child may be separated* that the uninstructed ordinary person speaks of.

5¹⁴ (2) Furthermore, bhikshus, there comes a time when **a great rain-cloud arises.**

5.2 When the great rain-cloud has arisen, bhikshus, a mighty flowing flood occurs. When the mighty flowing flood has occurred, villages are washed away, market-towns are washed away, cities are washed away.

5.3 When the villages are washed away, market-towns are washed away, cities are washed away, *mother and child at times remain together, or mother and child at times are separated.*

This, bhikshus, is the second danger *mother and child may remain together, and mother and child may be separated* that the uninstructed ordinary person speaks of.

6 (3) Furthermore, bhikshus, there comes a time when there is **the danger of raids by savage tribes**, and people, mounted on their carts, flee the country.

¹¹ *Puna ca param bhikkhave hoti so samayo yam bhayam hoti aṭavi,saṅkhepo cakka,samārūḷhā janapadā pariyāyanti.* Be:Ph(ayre) aṭṭavisaṅkopo; Ce AA:Ee aṭavi,saṅkopo; Ke aṭavī,saṅkopo; A 3:66. Comy explains *aṭavi* as referring to the thieves dwelling therein" (*aṭavīti c'ettha aṭavi,vāsino corā veditabbā*) (AA 2:284)

¹² *Tāni kho pan'imāni bhikkhave tīni sa,mātā,puttikāni [yeva] bhayāni a,mātā,puttikāni yeva bhayānīti assutavā puthujjano bhāsati.* In this context, we should tr *sa,mātā,puttika* as "together-mother-and-child," ie, "mother with child," not "with-mother-and-child." Lit, "An untutored worldling speaks of these 3 mother-with-child dangers, (and yet even (yeva ... yeva) of 'mother-without-child dangers'." The 3 dangers, clearly, are the great fire, the flood, and the social unrest. Since these initially separate mother and child, we can call them "dangers that separate mother and child." However, in some cases, mother and child do not get separated despite the dangers. The emphasis is on the separation and the possibility of total separation—this is highlighted at the end of the Sutta. [§7]

¹³ *Gāmesu pi ḍayhamānesu nigamesu pi ḍayhamānesu nagaresu pi ḍayhamānesu hoti so samayo yam kadāci karahaci mātā pi puttam paṭilabhati putto pi mātaram paṭilabhati.*

¹⁴ PTS has no numbering here. Para numbering from hereon differs from PTS.

6.2 Now, bhikshus, when there is the danger of raids by savage tribes, and people, mounted on their carts, flee the country, *mother and child at times remain together, or mother and child at times are separated.*

This, bhikshus, is the third danger *when mother and child may remain together, and when mother and child may be separated* that the uninstructed ordinary person speaks of.

These, bhikshus, are the 3 dangers *when mother and child may remain together, and when mother and child may be separated* that the uninstructed ordinary people speak of.

Real separation

7 Bhikshus, there are **these 3 dangers that separate mother and child.**¹⁵ What are the three? The danger of decay [old age]. The danger of disease. The danger of death.¹⁶

7.2 (1) Bhikshus, when a child is growing old, a mother will not get her wish, thus:

“Let me age. Let my child not age!”¹⁷

Bhikshus, when a mother is ageing, a child will not get his wish, thus:

“Let me age. Let my mother not age!”

7.3 (2) Bhikshus, when a child is ill, a mother will not get her wish, thus:

“Let me fall ill. Let my child not be ill!”¹⁸

Bhikshus, when a mother is ill, a child will not get his wish, thus:

“Let me fall ill. Let my mother not be ill!”

7.4 (3) Bhikshus, when a child is dying, a mother will not get her wish, thus:

“Let me die. Let my child not die!”¹⁹

Bhikshus, when a mother is dying, a child will not get his wish, thus:

“Let me die. Let my mother not die!”

These, bhikshus, are the 3 dangers that separate mother and child. **[180]**

Freedom from the 3 dangers

8 Bhikshus, there is a path, a way, to **the abandoning, the overcoming**, of these 3 dangers²⁰ when mother and child may remain together, and the 3 dangers when mother and child may be separated.²¹

And what, bhikshus, is the path, the way, *to the abandoning, the overcoming, of these 3 dangers when mother and child may remain together and the 3 dangers when mother and child may be separated?*

¹⁵ *Tiṇi sa, mātā, puttikāni yeva bhāyāni amātā, puttikāni bhayānīti assutavā puthujjano bhāsati.*

¹⁶ Comy: Having shown the dangers that separate mother and child in a provisional way (*pariyāyato*), he now shows the dangers that separate mother and child in a non-provisional way (*nippariyāyato*). (AA 2:285). Comy qu **Vibhaṅga** which lists the 3 kinds of dangers (*bhaya*) as those of birth (*jāti, bhaya*), decay (*jarā, bhaya*) and death (*maraṇa, bhaya*) (Vbh 920/367,9).

¹⁷ *Ahaṃ jīrāmi mā me putto jīrīti.*

¹⁸ *Ahaṃ vyādhiyyāmi mā me putto vyādhiyyīti.* Be Se *byādhiyi*; Ce *vyādhiyi*; Ce:T(urnour) *vyādhiyyati*; Ee *vyādhiyyi*.

¹⁹ *Ahaṃ miyyāmi mā me putto miyyīti.* Be Se *mīyi*; Ce:T *mīyyati*; Ce Ee *miyyi*.

²⁰ The 3 dangers are those of decay, disease and death,

²¹ *Atthi bhikkhave maggo atthi paṭipadā imesaṃ ca tiṇṇaṃ sa, mātā, puttikānaṃ bhayānaṃ imesaṃ ca tiṇṇaṃ a, mātā, puttikānaṃ bhayānaṃ pahānāya samatikkamāya saṃvattanti.*

- 9 It is this very **noble eightfold path**, that is to say:
right view, right intention,
right speech, right action, right livelihood,
right effort, right mindfulness, right samadhi.

10 This, bhikshus, is the path, the way, *to the abandoning, the overcoming, of these 3 dangers when mother and child may remain together and the 3 dangers when mother and child may be separated.*

— evaṃ —

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