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Anāthapiṇḍikovāda Sutta

Advice to Anāthapiṇḍika

(as translated by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi)

THUS HAVE I HEARD . On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Sāvattḥī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park.

Now on that occasion the householder Anāthapiṇḍika was afflicted, suffering, and gravely ill. Then he addressed a certain man thus: "Come, good man, go to the Blessed One, pay homage in my name with your head at his feet, and say: 'Venerable sir, the householder Anāthapiṇḍika is afflicted, suffering, and gravely ill; he pays homage with his head at the Blessed One's feet.' Then go to the venerable Sāriputta, pay homage in my name with your head at his feet, and say: 'Venerable sir, the householder Anāthapiṇḍika is afflicted, suffering, and gravely ill; he pays homage with his head at the venerable Sāriputta's feet.' Then say: 'It would be good, venerable sir, if the venerable Sāriputta would come to the residence of the householder Anāthapiṇḍika, out of compassion.'"

"Yes, sir," the man replied, and he went to the Blessed One, and after paying homage to the Blessed One, he sat down at one side and delivered his message. Then he went to the venerable Sāriputta, and after paying homage to the venerable Sāriputta, he delivered his message, saying: "It would be good, venerable sir, if the venerable Sāriputta would come to the residence of the householder Anāthapiṇḍika, out of compassion." The venerable Sāriputta consented in silence.

Then the venerable Sāriputta dressed, and taking his bowl and outer robe, went to the residence of the householder Anāthapiṇḍika with the venerable Ānanda as his attendant. Having gone there, he sat down on a seat made ready and said to the householder Anāthapiṇḍika: "I hope you are getting well, householder, I hope you are comfortable. I hope your painful feelings are subsiding and not increasing, and that their subsiding, not their increase, is apparent."

"Venerable Sāriputta, I am not getting well, I am not comfortable. My painful feelings are increasing, not subsiding; their increase and not their subsiding is apparent. Just as if a strong man were splitting my head open with a sharp sword, so too, violent winds cut through my head. I am not getting well... Just as if a strong man were tightening a tough leather strap around my head as a headband, so too, there are violent pains in my head. I am not getting well... Just as if a skilled butcher or his apprentice were to carve up an ox's belly with a sharp butcher's knife, so too, violent winds are carving up my belly. I am not getting well... Just as if two strong men were to seize a weaker man by both arms and roast him over a pit of hot coals, so too, there is a violent burning in my body. I am not getting well,

I am not comfortable. My painful feelings are increasing, not subsiding; their increase and not their subsiding is apparent.”

“Then, householder, you should train thus: ‘I will not cling to the eye, and my consciousness will not be dependent on the eye.’ Thus you should train. You should train thus: ‘I will not cling to the ear... I will not cling to the nose... I will not cling to the tongue... I will not cling to the body... I will not cling to the mind, and my consciousness will not be dependent on the mind.’ Thus you should train.

“Householder, you should train thus: ‘I will not cling to forms... I will not cling to sounds... I will not cling to odours... I will not cling to flavours... I will not cling to tangibles... I will not cling to mind-objects, and my consciousness will not be dependent on mind-objects.’ Thus you should train.

“Householder, you should train thus: ‘I will not cling to eye-consciousness... I will not cling to ear-consciousness... I will not cling to nose-consciousness... I will not cling to tongue-consciousness... I will not cling to body-consciousness... I will not cling to mind-consciousness, and my consciousness will not be dependent on mind-consciousness.’ Thus you should train.

“Householder, you should train thus: ‘I will not cling to eye-contact... I will not cling to ear-contact... I will not cling to nose-contact... I will not cling to tongue-contact... I will not cling to body-contact... I will not cling to mind-contact, and my consciousness will not be dependent on mind-contact.’ Thus you should train.

“Householder, you should train thus: ‘I will not cling to feeling born of eye-contact... I will not cling to feeling born of ear-contact... I will not cling to feeling born of nose-contact... I will not cling to feeling born of tongue-contact... I will not cling to feeling born of body-contact... I will not cling to feeling born of mind-contact, and my consciousness will not be dependent on feeling born of mind-contact.’ Thus you should train.

“Householder, you should train thus: ‘I will not cling to the earth element... I will not cling to the water element... I will not cling to the fire element... I will not cling to the air element... I will not cling to the space element... I will not cling to the consciousness element, and my consciousness will not be dependent on the consciousness element.’ Thus you should train.

“Householder, you should train thus: ‘I will not cling to material form... I will not cling to feeling... I will not cling to perception... I will not cling to formations... I will not cling to consciousness, and my consciousness will not be dependent on consciousness.’ Thus you should train.

“Householder, you should train thus: ‘I will not cling to the base of infinite space... I will not cling to the base of infinite consciousness... I will not cling to the base of nothingness... I will not cling to the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, and my consciousness will not be dependent on the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.’ Thus you should train.

“Householder, you should train thus: ‘I will not cling to this world, and my consciousness will not be dependent on this world. I will not cling to the world beyond, and my consciousness will not be dependent on the world beyond.’ Thus you should train.

“Householder, you should train thus: ‘I will not cling to what is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, encountered, sought after, and examined by the mind, and my consciousness will not be dependent on that.’ Thus you should train.”

When this was said, the householder Anāthapiṇḍika wept and shed tears. Then the venerable Ānanda asked him: “Are you foundering, householder, are you sinking?”

*“I am not foundering, venerable Ānanda, I am not sinking. But **although I have long waited upon the Teacher and bhikkhus worthy of esteem, never before have I heard such a talk on the Dhamma.**”*

“Such talk on the Dhamma, householder, is not given to lay people clothed in white. Such talk on the Dhamma is given to those who have gone forth.”

“Well then, venerable Sāriputta, let such talk on the Dhamma be given to lay people clothed in white. There are clansmen with little dust in their eyes who are wasting away through not hearing [such talk on] the Dhamma. There will be those who will understand the Dhamma.”

Then, after giving the householder Anāthapiṇḍika this advice, the venerable Sāriputta and the venerable Ānanda rose from their seats and departed. Soon after they had left, [262] the householder Anāthapiṇḍika died and reappeared in the Tusita heaven...

Anāthapiṇḍika was known to be the main supporter of our Buddha Gotama and his large community of monk disciples. So he associated closely with them for many years, up to his dying day. Yet in spite of that we learn from this discourse (sutta) that he did not get the chance to hear deep discourses. This shows that lay persons during the Buddha’s time hardly ever get to hear the deep discourses given by the Buddha or his Arahant disciples. Lay persons only got to hear the introductory basic explanation of the four Ariyan Truths concerning suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation. But even then we find that many tens of thousands of lay persons attained Stream-entry (First Path Ariyahood) upon hearing this basic Dhamma for the first time. This is evident in the Suttas and Vinaya books.

For example, in the Vinaya books, it is mentioned that after the Buddha converted one thousand matted-hair ascetics (Jatilas, who practised the jhanas, states of meditative absorption) to become monks, he preached to them the Aditta-Pariyaya Sutta. Hearing the Dhamma for the first time, all one thousand became Arahants. Then the Buddha brought them to Rajagaha where King Bimbisara threw a big lunch offering for them and called upon the Rajagaha residents to come to see the Arahants. After the meal the Buddha discoursed on the Four Ariyan Truths concerning suffering to them. It is said that one hundred and twenty thousand people attained Stream-entry upon hearing the Dhamma for the first time.

On another occasion the Vinaya books state that the Buddha preached the same discourse to eighty thousand newcomer lay persons, and all of them attained Stream-entry. The few lay persons who attained higher stages of Ariyahood were like the Anagamin Citta who discussed the higher Dhamma with monks every day when they came to his house to accept the meal offering.

In the Vinaya books and DN 14 (Mahapadama Sutta) the Buddha said he recollected the past ninety-one world cycles, and only found six Buddhas willing to teach the Dhamma to the people. On the other hand, sometimes five hundred Pacceka Buddhas (who do not teach) can be found at one time, as shown in the Isigili Sutta (MN 116). This shows that the vast majority of Buddhas do not want to teach and spread the Dhamma. In other words, it is extremely rare to encounter the True Dhamma, the discourses given by a Samma Sambuddha.

In the Pasadika Sutta (DN 29) the Buddha said that the holy life that he taught is “perfect, with nothing lack and nothing superfluous (i.e. complete), well proclaimed in the perfection of its purity”. In other words, we cannot find the teaching of any other Buddha more complete or perfect than that of our Buddha Gotama. Our Buddha Gotama is among the topmost, most perfect Buddhas.

Nowadays we are extremely fortunate to be able to investigate all the discourses of the Buddha which have been transmitted down to us over two millennia in the five Nikaya (collections of sutta). Furthermore, we can choose either to read them in book form or listen to recorded talks (with explanations) by various monastics, instead of having to memorise every sutta as in the Buddha’s time. So it looks like we are even more fortunate than those born in India during the time of the Buddha. Now everyone can learn the Dhamma! :-) Learning the Buddha Word is like having the Buddha personally teaching us.

For all the above reasons, it would be absolutely foolish not to grab this rare opportunity to investigate the discourses of our Buddha Gotama with whole-hearted effort in order to attain Stream-entry. Otherwise eternal rebirths await us. And in the eternity of rebirths, there will be countless rebirths in the ghost realm, animal realm, and hell – entailing indescribable suffering.