

Somanassa Sutta

The Discourse on Mental Ease

[Samvega and its benefit]
(Iti,vuttaka 2.1.10/29 f) = SD 9 (7f)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2005

1 Khujj'uttarā

The **Iti,vuttaka** (Thus-said) is a collection of teachings collected by the laywoman **Khujj'uttarā** (Uttarā the hunchback) that she heard from the Buddha at Kosambī. Sāmāvātī, chief queen of Udena, had instructed her to listen to the Buddha's teaching and repeat them before her (Sāmāvātī) and her 500 women attendants at the palace. Under her instruction, they all became stream-winners.¹

Khujj'uttarā is born of a nurse into the family of the banker Ghosita,² and later becomes an attendant of queen Sāmāvātī. The queen daily gives her eight pieces of money (being an allowance by the rajah) for buying flowers. Khujj'uttarā, using only four pieces of money, buys flowers from the garland-maker Sumana, and keeps the remaining four for herself.

Once when, when the Buddha visits Sumana, Khujj'uttarā hears the Dharma from him. That day, she spends all the money on flowers. When the queen questions her how she procured so much flowers, she tells her the whole story. From then on, Sāmāvātī honours Khujj'uttarā and, treating her as a mother, listens to the Dharma from her. When Sāmāvātī wishes to see the Buddha for herself, and the rajah disallows her to appear in public, Khujj'uttarā proposes that she should have holes made in the palace walls so that she could gaze on the Buddha as he walks on the street below.

After Sāmāvātī and her five hundred attendants die in a tragic fire, Khujj'uttarā apparently spends all her time in spiritual life, listening to the Dharma. The Buddha declares her as the foremost amongst lay women who have great learning (*bahu-s,sutānam*).³

2 Samvega

A concept closely connected with the “seeing” of the Buddha and holy persons is that of *samvega*,⁴ “sense of urgency”⁵ or “spiritual emotion,” and which the *Pali-English Dictionary* defines as “agitation, fear, anxiety, thrill, religious emotion (caused by contemplation of the miseries of the world).” It is “a sense of urgency” by way of being an overpowering experience of awe and inspiration, or a profound religious experience that induces one to question life itself and to seek its answers. It is called “spiritual emotion” in the sense that it moves one to seek a deeper level of self-understanding or one is profoundly moved by a direct vision of reality.

Samvega, one of the most powerful of Buddhist terms, refers to a sort of spiritual crisis that results from directly perceiving reality. For a lay person, this usually results in disillusionment with worldly life, often leading to renunciation, whereas in the case of a monastic, it urges him to exert more energy in spiritual practice until the goal is attained. **The Somanassa Sutta** (It 2.1.10) declares that samvega is able to bring a practitioner “great mental ease” (*somanassa bahulo*), thus:

¹ ItA 24 ff; AA 1:418-445; J 3:168, 4:314, 5:192, 312; DhA 2.1/1:208-210; UA 384; CA 209; PmA 3:673-676. On the uncertainty of the authorship of It, see Oskar von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, 1996: II.2.5.4 (§§92 f).

² AA 1:418 f.

³ A 1:26.

⁴ Like the growing number of Buddhist terms that are being anglicized (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, nirvana, karma, sramana, samsara, etc), it is practical to use “samvega” as the English borrowing from the Pali/Sanskrit.

⁵ See **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16) = SD 9.1(5.7) & (7f).

Samvejanīyesu ṭhānesu samvejanena samvegassa ca yoniso padhānena.

By feeling samvega [spiritual emotion] in those things that evoke samvega, and by rightly rousing effort in feeling samvega. [1-2]

Here we see the Somanassa Sutta analyzing samvega into two aspects:

1. Samvega as situations or things (places, object, etc) that are sources of samvega.
2. Samvega as a personal feeling that should be cultivated as a spiritual practice.

3 Sources of samvega

Examples of the first aspect of samvega—situations or things (places, object, etc) that are sources of samvega—are found in **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16)⁶ and **the Samvega Sutta** (A 4.118),⁷ which list the four things or places (*ṭhāna*) that arouse feelings of urgency (*samvejanīya-ṭ, ṭhānā*), namely:

1. the place of the Nativity (Lumbini Park, modern Rummidei);
2. the place of the Great Awakening (Uruvela on the Nerañjarā river, modern Uveli on the Lilanja river);
3. the place of the First Discourse (the Deer Park at Isipatana, modern Sahet-Mahet); and
4. the place of the Mahā Parinirvana (Kusināra, modern Kashgar).

(D 16.5.8/2:140; A 4.118/2:120 f)

Buddhaghosa mentions the eight occasions invoking samvega [urgency] (*aṭṭha samvega, vatthu*), as follows:

1. birth (*jāti*),
2. decay (*jarā*),
3. illness (*vyādhi*),
4. death (*maraṇa*),
5. suffering of loss (*apāya, dukkha*),
6. suffering of the past rooted in the round of rebirth (*atīte vaṭṭa, mūlaka dukkha*),
7. suffering of the future rooted in the round of rebirth (*anāgate vaṭṭa, mūlaka dukkha*), and
8. suffering of the present rooted in the search for food (*paccuppanne āhāra, pariyetṭhi, mūlaka dukkha*).

(Vism 4.63/135)

It should be understood that these places, events and situations, are not in themselves charged, as it were, with samvega. Rather, it is the attitude and perception of the person that they become sources of samvega. As such, the first kind of samvega—that which is felt in those things that evoke samvega—does not refer to external situations but to one’s internal responses. In other words, it is better to understand the two types of samvega as follows:

1. passive samvega: feeling samvega [spiritual emotion] in those things that evoke samvega, and
2. active samvega: by rightly rousing effort in feeling samvega.

4 The four sights

The *Buddhist Dictionary* defines *samvega* as “‘the sources of emotions’ or, of a sense of urgency” of which there are eight: “birth; old age; death; the suffering in the lower states of existence; the misery of the past rooted in the cycle of rebirth; the misery of the future rooted in the cycle of rebirth; and the misery of the present rooted in the search for food.”⁸ As such, samvega would be the kind of experience that the Bodhisattva Siddhattha had when he saw the four sights.⁹

⁶ D 16.5.8/2:140; A 4.118/2:120 f. See also SD 9 = SD 9.7f.

⁷ A 4.118/2:120 f.

⁸ Vism 4.63 = KhA 235; D 3:124; S 1:197; A 1:43; It 30; J 1:138; Nm 406.

⁹ On the 4 sights, see **Deva, dūta S** (M 130/3:178-187) = SD 2.23 (2003), and **Ariya, pariyesanā S** (M 26.14/1:163) = SD 1.11 (2003). See also Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, 2004:2.3.

In the well known Buddha legend, when the Bodhisattva as a young prince saw the four sights, he was overcome by a powerful spiritual experience termed *samvega*. A possible English rendition of the term would be “fear and awe” although this expression is more applicable to a theistic belief-system than to a non-theistic one like Buddhism. The closest, albeit awkward, translation is perhaps “sense of urgency” or spiritual urgency. **Torkel Brekke**, in his book, *Religious Motivation and the Origins of Buddhism*, explains that

what makes this realization [the inherent suffering of life] so powerful in the case of the prince is the dissonance between his original cognition of his own life and this new knowledge that he himself must grow old, suffer and die...

This cognitive dissonance gives the prince a strong feeling of discomfort, which motivates him to equalize the discrepancy. Obviously the facts of life cannot be changed, and the only solution is to bring his own life into some sort of harmony with these facts. (Brekke, 2002:63)

The spiritual urgency experienced by the young Siddhattha was by no means unique. Many others in his time have left their homes in search of a higher liberating truth. These were the recluses or *śramaṇā* (Pali *samaṇā*) who, at the same time, found no affinity with the established priestly religion of the *brāhmaṇā* or brahmins.

5 Samvega as a personal feeling

The Pali Canon provides a number of examples of samvega as a *personal experience*. **The Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 37) records how Moggallāna rouses a sense of urgency (for spiritual development) in Sakka, Vessavaṇa and the Gods of the Thirty-three by making the celestial Vejayanta Palace quake and tremble through his psychic powers.¹⁰ **The Brahma,deva Sutta** (S 6.3) relates how Brahmā Sahampati arouses samvega in Brahma,deva’s mother, by appearing before her and instructing her the proper way of making religious offerings.¹¹ **The Vana Saṃyutta** (ch 9 of the Saṃyutta Nikaya) consists of 14 suttas all dealing with the rousing of a sense of urgency for spiritual development.¹² In **the Mahā Hatthi,padōpama Sutta** (M 28), Sāriputta speaks of samvega in this manner:

Friends, when that monk thus recollects the Buddha, thus recollects the Dharma, thus recollects the Sangha, if equanimity supported by the wholesome is not established in him, then he rouses a feeling of urgency thus:

‘It is a loss for me, it is no gain for me, it is bad for me, it is not good for me, that when I thus recollect the Buddha, thus recollect the Dharma, thus recollect the Sangha,¹³ equanimity supported by the wholesome¹⁴ is not established in me.’¹⁵

Friends, just as when a daughter-in-law sees a father-in-law, she rouses a sense of urgency (to please him), even so, when that monk thus recollects the Buddha, thus recollects the Dharma, thus recollects the Sangha, if equanimity supported by the wholesome is not established in him, then he rouses a feeling of urgency.

¹⁰ M 37.11/1:254 f.

¹¹ S 6.3/1:140-142 = SD 12.4.

¹² S 9/1:197-205.

¹³ For the stock passages on these three recollections, see **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16.2.9/2:93) & **Dhaj’agga S** (S 11.3/1:219 f).

¹⁴ “Equanimity supported by the wholesome” (*upekkhā kusala,nissitā*) is the equanimity of insight, the sixfold equanimity of neither attraction nor aversion towards agreeable and disagreeable objects that appear at the six sense-doors (MA 2:227). “Strictly speaking, the sixfold equanimity pertains only to the arahant, but is here ascribed to the monk in training because his insight approximates to the perfect equanimity of the arahant” (M:ÑB 1222 n337).

¹⁵ Comy: The recollection of the Buddha is undertaken here by recalling that the Blessed One spoke this simile of the saw, and the recollection of the Dharma by recalling the advice given in the simile of the saw, and the recollection of the Sangha by the virtues of the monks who can endure such abuse without giving rise to a mind of hate. (MA 2:227). See *Buddhānussati* = SD 15.7; *Dhammānussati* = SD 159; *Saṅghānussati* = SD 15.10a respectively.

But, friends, if when he thus recollects the Buddha, thus recollects the Dharma, thus recollects the Sangha, equanimity supported by the wholesome *is* established in him, then he joyfully approves of it. At that point, friends, much has been done by the monk.

(M 28.10/1:186 f = SD 6.16)

We here see *samvega* expressed as a self-acknowledgement of spiritual lack and the inspiration to work towards spiritual liberation.

7 Recent commentaries on *samvega*

AK Coomaraswamy's brief but instructive article on *samvega*,¹⁶ is probably the first on the subject. He says that there are two aspects or phases of *samvega*: (1) the emotional “shock” that we have just noted, often through realizing the transient nature of things, and (2) a subsequent experience of peace transcending such emotions as fear or love, an experience related to the apprehension of truth. He defines *samvega* as follows:

a state of shock, agitation, fear, awe, wonder, or delight induced by some physically or mentally poignant experience. The shock is a consequence of the aesthetic surfaces of phenomena that may be liked or disliked as such. The complete experience transcends this condition of ‘irritability’. ...[M]ore than a merely physical shock is involved; the blow has a *meaning* for us, and the realization of that meaning, in which nothing of the physical sensation survives, is still a part of the shock. These two phases of the shock are, indeed, normally felt together as parts of an instant experience; but they can be logically distinguished... In the first phase, there is really a disturbance, in the second there is the experience of a peace that cannot be described as an emotion in the sense that fear and love or hate are emotions. (Coomaraswamy in Lipsey I 1977:182-184)

As an example of *samvega*, Coomaraswamy cites the story of **the elder Vakkali** who, on first meeting the Buddha, is captivated by the Buddha’s physical “beauty,” joins the order and spend his days gazing at the Buddha’s person. The Buddha, however, helps Vakkali overcome the “idolatrous experience” so that he does not become “attached” to the visual image—thus Vakkali makes the transition from shock to delight, and from delight to understanding.¹⁷

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, in his otherwise inspiring paper on *samvega*,¹⁸ unfortunately gives it rather narrow definition as “the oppressive sense of shock, dismay, and alienation.” This definition would be part of the first connotation—that of “emotional shock—in Coomaraswamy’s definition. Ṭhānissaro, however, insightfully points out that the young Siddhattha experiences “*samvega*” (he proposes we adopt this into the English vocabulary) when, according to popular Buddhist legend, Siddhattha sees the first three sights (an old man, a sick man, a dead man),¹⁹ but on seeing the fourth sight (the recluse), experiences *pasāda* [7h here], “clarity and serene confidence” (Ṭhānissaro) or “calm and clear heart of faith” (Piya Tan)—this is what “keeps *samvega* from turning into despair” (Ṭhānissaro 1998:3).²⁰

¹⁶ “*Samvega*, ‘Aesthetic shock,’” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 7 1942-43:174-179.

¹⁷ See Roger Lipsey, ed. *Coomaraswamy. Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (Bollingen Series 89), 1977:181.

¹⁸ Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, “Affirming the truths of the heart: The Buddhist teachings on *samvega* and *pasada*” [1997]. High View, WV: Bhavana Society, 1998.

¹⁹ See Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, 2004:2.3.

²⁰ On the advantages of the life of renunciation, Ṭhānissaro writes: “For people whose sense of *samvega* is so strong that they want to abandon any social ties that prevent them from following the path to the end of suffering, Buddhism offers both a long-proven body of wisdom for them to draw from, as well as a safety net: the monastic sangha, an institution that enables them to leave lay society without having to waste time worrying about basic survival. For those who can’t leave their social ties, Buddhist teaching offers a way to live in the world without being overcome by the world, following a life of generosity, virtue, and meditation to strengthen the noble qualities of the mind that will lead to the end of suffering.” (1998:4).

In noting the usage of *samvega* in the Mahā,paribbāna Sutta in connection with the four holy places, Coomaraswamy explains that such an experience suggests “the shock of conviction that only an intellectual art can deliver, the body-blow that is delivered by any perfect and therefore convincing statement of truth” (1942-43:179). In other words, notes Trainor,

they draw attention to the visual and emotional aspect of the experience of *samvega*, and they link it with the apprehension of truth, thus tying together the experience of seeing and knowing.

(Trainor 1997:176)

Trainor (1997:176) goes on to show this close connection between “seeing” and “knowing” in the Buddhist tradition, as in such canonical terms (quoted by Coomaraswamy) like

ehi,passika, “come and see” for oneself (D 2:93 = M 1:37; S 4:339; A 1:158; B 25.50);
ñāṇa,dassana, “knowledge and vision, knowing and seeing” that is used to describe the experience of fulling understanding the “nature of things as they really are” (*yathā,bhūtam*).²¹

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²¹ V 4:26, 195; S 5:423; A 3:19, 200; 4:99, 336, 5:2 f, 311 f; Pm 1:33, 43 f, 2:244; full discussion at DA 1:220.

The Discourse on Mental Ease

(It 2.1.10/29 f) = SD 9 (7f)

1 This was indeed spoken by the Blessed One, spoken by the Arhat [worthy one], thus have I heard.²²

“Bhikshus, possessed of two things, [30] even here and now, a monk lives with great mental ease, wise in rousing effort,²³ for the destruction of the mental influxes.²⁴

2 What are the two things?

By feeling samvega [spiritual emotion] in those things that evoke samvega, and by rightly rousing effort in feeling samvega.²⁵

Bhikshus, possessed of two things, even here and now, a monk lives with great mental ease, wise in rousing effort, for the destruction of the mental influxes.”

3 This is the meaning of what the Blessed One said. The meaning here is spoken thus:²⁶

In what evokes samvega, the wise feel samvega,
The exertive, masterful monk should consider²⁷ it wisely.

Thus he dwells exerting himself, habitually at peace, not restless.
Yoked to mental calm, he would attain to suffering’s destruction.

This matter [meaning] too was spoken by the Blessed One. Thus I have heard.²⁸

— evaṃ —

²² *Vuttam h’etaṃ bhagavatā. Vuttam arahatā’ ti me sutam.* This is said to be spoken by the laywoman **Khujj’-uttarā**: see SD 16.14 Intro (1).

²³ *Yoniso āradhho.* Later, *yoniso padhānena* (see below in sutta).

²⁴ “**Mental influxes,**” *āsava*. The term *āsava* (lit “influxes”) comes from *ā-savati* “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as taints (“deadly taints”, RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists 4 *āsavas*: the influx of (1) sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) wrong views (*diṭṭh’-āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*) (D 16.1.12/2:82, 16.2.4/2:91, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These four are also known as “floods” (*ogha*) and “yokes” (*yoga*). The list of three influxes (omitting the influx of views) [43] is probably older and is found more frequently in the suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these *āsavas* is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict: *āsava*.

²⁵ *Samvejanīyesu thānesu samvejanena samvegassa ca yoniso padhānena.*

²⁶ *Samvejanīyesu thānesu, samvijjethēva paṇḍito | ātāpī nipako bhikkhu, paññāya samavekkhiya || Evaṃ vihārī ātāppī, santa, vutti anuddhato | ceto, samatham amuyutto, khayam dukkhassa pāpuṇe ti ||*

²⁷ *Samavekkhiya*, fr *samavekkhati*, “he considers” = *sam* (prefix denoting focus) + *ava* (down) + √*IKṢ*, to see; also *apekkhati*, he looks down up, ie, looks on (with equanimity). *Samavekkhati* here connotes both a constant mindfulness of the 3 characteristics (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self) and the practice of meditation.

²⁸ *Ayam pi attho vutto bhagavatā. Iti me sutan ti.*

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