

## Mūla Sutta

### The Discourse on the Roots

[The roots of moral actions]  
(Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.69/1:201-205)  
Translated by Piya Tan ©2007

#### 1 Quality of actions

It appears as if that our actions—what we do, say or think—simply arise and then disappear without any trace except for their visible or physical impact on other people and the environment. However, according to the Buddha, all motivated actions, done knowingly or unknowingly,<sup>1</sup> create potential results that correspond to the moral quality of those actions. This potential of our deeds to produce morally appropriate results is known as *karma*.

Karmic potentiality brings fruits, good and bad, corresponding to the deeds previously done and one's latent tendencies. Such fruits may occur *immediately* after the act is done, that is, in this life itself, or *in the next life*, or *in some subsequent life*,<sup>2</sup> that is, as long as one remains unawakened from the sleep of karmic life. As long as we remain in samsara, our accumulated karma will be capable of producing and reproducing fruits whenever the conditions are right, and keep on transmogrifying itself into more complicated karmic forms.

In terms of moral quality, the Suttas—such as **the Mūla Sutta** (A 3.69)—distinguish karma into two major categories: the unwholesome (*akusala*) and the wholesome (*kusala*). Unwholesome karma is “action that is spiritually detrimental to the agent, morally reprehensible, and potentially productive of an unfortunate rebirth and painful results” (Bodhi 2005:146). Their unwholesomeness comes from their roots, that is, *greed, hate and delusion*, from which arise secondary defilements such as selfishness, gluttony, envy, anger, pride, arrogance, laziness, prejudice, and forgetfulness, and from which more defiled actions arise.

Wholesome karma, on the other hand, is “action that is spiritually beneficial and morally commendable; it is action that ripens in happiness and good fortune” (id). Their wholesomeness comes from their roots, that is, non-greed, non-hate and non-delusion, or in positive terms, charity, lovingkindness and wisdom, respectively.

Actions motivated by unwholesome roots necessarily bind one to the suffering cycle of rebirth and redeath. Actions motivated from wholesome roots, however, may be of two kinds, mundane and supramundane (or, more simply, worldly and spiritual). Mundane (*lokiya*) wholesome actions have the potential of producing happy rebirths and pleasant results in any rebirth. Supramundane (*lokuttara*) wholesome actions are those cultivated by walking the eightfold path that leads to awakening and liberation. This is the karma that ends all karma.<sup>3</sup>

#### 2 Uprooting the unwholesome

**The Attha,sālinī**, Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī, gives this useful summary of the relationship between the three wholesome roots and the three universal characteristics:

Through non-greed one sees *impermanence*. For, the greedy, inclined to enjoyment, will not see the impermanence of formations as impermanent.

<sup>1</sup> On how karma can be done unknowingly, see **The Unconscious Mind** = SD 17.8b.

<sup>2</sup> **Nibbedhika (Pariyāya) S** (A 6.63.12c/3:415) = SD 6.11; MA 3:339 f; AA 2:274. Bodhi makes a note here that, “The distinction seems to be lightly drawn in the sutta literature, but in the commentaries it becomes hardened into a precise delimitation between the three types of results any kamma may produce.” (*In the Buddha's Words*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005:434 n2). Cf §4b here.

<sup>3</sup> See (**Vitthāra**) **Kamma Nidāna S** (A 4.232/2:230-232) = SD 4.13.

Through non-hate one sees *suffering*. For, one inclined to non-hate, in understanding the grounds of the ill will discarded by him, sees formations as suffering.

Through non-delusion one sees *not-self*. For, the undeluded is skilled in grasping the nature of reality, and he understands the controller-free five aggregates to be without a controller.

Just as the seeing of impermanence and so on, is effected by non-greed and so on, so too are non-greed and so on, produced by the seeing of impermanence and so on.

Through the seeing of impermanence arises *non-greed*;  
through the seeing of suffering arises *non-hatred*;  
through the seeing of not-self arises *non-delusion*.

For who would allow attachment to arise for something which he rightly knows is *impermanent*?

And, knowing formations to be *suffering*, who would produce more of the absolutely pungent suffering of anger?

And, having understood formations as being *void of self*, who would again plunge into confusion?  
(DhsA 129)

We tend to be victims of circumstances, that is, events around us, especially when they habitually recur, have a powerful and profound effect upon us. Very often, such influences are negative and often build up into more negative habits and reactions. This is because the three unwholesome roots are constantly fed in a negative way.

Basic Buddhist mental training deals with the cultivating and maintaining of wholesome environments. First, through the precepts, we cultivate and maintain a wholesome *external* environment so that there is social harmony. This harmonious ambience helps us to cultivate a wholesome *internal* environment for ready mindfulness and mental focus.

From the Buddha's teachings, we can say that human nature is naturally good, or that human beings generally are able to show moral concern.<sup>4</sup> In **the Pabhassara Sutta** (A 1.6), for example, the Buddha declares:

1 Bhikkhus, this mind is radiant, but it is defiled by adventitious impurities [impurities that "arrive" through the sense-doors].

The uninstructed [ignorant] ordinary person does not understand things as they really are.

Therefore there is no mental development for the uninstructed ordinary person, I say!<sup>5</sup>

2 Bhikkhus, this mind is radiant, and it is freed from adventitious impurities [impurities that "arrive" through the sense-doors].

The instructed [wise] noble disciple understands things as they really are.

Therefore there is mental development for the instructed noble disciple, I say!<sup>6</sup>

(A 1.6.1-2/1:10; also 1.5.9-10/1:10) = SD 8.3

The Āṅguttara Commentary says that "the mind" (*citta*) here refers to the *bhavaṅga, citta*, the life-continuum or underlying stream of consciousness, that takes over whenever active consciousness lapses, most notably in deep dreamless sleep. The "adventitious impurities" (*āgantukā upakkilesā*) are greed, hate and delusion,<sup>7</sup> which appear at the stage of the cognitive process which, in later Buddhism, is called "impulsion" (*javana*). The Commentary says that the impurities do not arise with the life-continuum, but

<sup>4</sup> For an interesting contemporary ethical application of this point, see Ethan Mills 2004:31-34 & **Virtue Ethics** = SD 18.11.

<sup>5</sup> *Pabhassaram idam bhikkhave cittam tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭham. Tam assutavā puthujano yathā, bhūtam n'appajānati. Tasmā assutavato puthujjanassa citta, bhāvanā n'atthi ti vadāmi ti.* Qu at MA 1:167; DhA 1:23; NmA 1:22; PmA 1:242; DhsA 68.

<sup>6</sup> *Pabhassaram idam bhikkhave cittam tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi vipamuttam. Tam sutavā ariya, sāvako yathā, bhūtam pajānati. Tasmā sutavato ariya, sāvakassa citta, bhāvanā atthi ti vadāmi ti.*

<sup>7</sup> For other examples of impurities (*upakkilesa*), see **(Anuruddha) Upakkilesa S** (M 128) = SD 8.2. See also Harvey 1995:167 f.

“arrive” later, at the impulsion phase (AA 1:63). In other words, on the deepest level of our mental process—the *subconscious level*—our “thoughts” are generally capable of the wholesome.

One way of understanding the human mind is that its natural goodness is often covered up by negative influences from outside and our reactions to them, that is, the workings of greed, hate and delusion tend to prevent our natural tendency to do good. The proper way to remove these unwholesome roots (at least temporarily) is to carefully keep track of our mind. This mental tracking is done in two ways that are mutually complementary: by calming the mind and by insight. *By calming the mind*, we clear away the unwholesome roots,<sup>8</sup> and *through insight*, we see directly into it, thus allowing their opposites, generosity, lovingkindness and wisdom, to arise.<sup>9</sup>

For some, it is easier to cultivate insight first; for others, calmness first. Either way, one helps to strengthen the other, so that they work together like the two wings of a bird, lifting us above unwholesome mental states. In this way, we begin to have a right view of life, and are able to understand and deal with suffering, so that we are in due course totally free from it.

The roots of the unwholesome and of the wholesome are also mentioned in the following Suttas, with which this Sutta should be studied, that is, to say:

- **Sammā Diṭṭhi Sutta** (M 9.3-8/1:46 f);
- **Mahā Vaccha,gotta** (M 73.4-5/1:489 f).

For more details on the nature of the unwholesome roots, see (**Akusala,mūla**) **Añña,titthiyā Sutta** (A 3.68).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The mind is *calmed* by way of such practices as watching the breath: see **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118/3:77-88) = SD 7.13.

<sup>9</sup> The *insight* practice is best cultivated by the perception of impermanence: see (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1/-3:225) = SD 16.7.

<sup>10</sup> A 3.68/1:199-201 = SD 16.4.

## The Discourse on the Roots

(A 3.69/1:201-205)

### THE 3 UNWHOLESOME ROOTS

- 1a** Bhikshus, there are these three unwholesome roots. What are the three?
- (1) **The unwholesome root that is greed;**
  - (2) **The unwholesome root that is hate;**
  - (3) **The unwholesome root that is delusion.**

#### Unwholesome thoughts lead to unwholesome actions

**1b** (1) **Greed** is unwholesome, bhikshus.<sup>11</sup> Whatever **the greedy** (*luddha*) constructs<sup>12</sup> through the body, through speech, through the mind, that, too, is unwholesome.

**1c** The greedy person—his mind overcome and consumed by greed—wrongly inflicts suffering on another by killing, or by holding [binding and confining], or by incurring losses, or by blaming, or by banishing, thinking, “I’m powerful! This is for the sake of power!”<sup>13</sup>—that, too, is unwholesome.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, these many evil, unwholesome states, born of greed, caused by greed, arising from greed, conditioned by greed, are born.

**2** (2) **Hate** is unwholesome, bhikshus. Whatever **the hateful** (*duṭṭha*) constructs through the body, through speech, through the mind, that, too, is unwholesome.

The hateful person—his mind overcome and consumed by hate—wrongly inflicts suffering on another by killing, or by holding [binding and confining], or by incurring losses, or by blaming, or by banishing, thinking, “I’m powerful! [202] This is for the sake of power!”—that, too, is unwholesome.

Thus, these many evil, unwholesome states, born of hate, caused by hate, arising from hate, conditioned by hate, are born.

**3** (3) **Delusion** is unwholesome, bhikshus. Whatever **the deluded** (*mulha*) constructs through the body, through speech, through the mind, that, too, is unwholesome.

The deluded person—his mind overcome and consumed by delusion—wrongly inflicts suffering on another by killing, or by holding [binding and confining], or by incurring losses, or by blaming, or by banishing, thinking, “I’m powerful! This is for the sake of power!”—that, too, is unwholesome.

Thus, these many evil, unwholesome states, born of delusion, caused by delusion, arising from delusion, conditioned by delusion, are born.

#### Unwholesome thoughts lead to unwholesome speech

- 4a** And, bhikshus, such a person is called one who speaks at the wrong time (*akāla, vādī*), who speaks what is false (*abhūta, vādī*), who speaks what is useless [not connected with the spiritual goal] (*anatta, vādī*), who speaks against the Dharma [against reality] (*adhamma, vādī*), who speaks against the Vinaya [against moral discipline] (*avinaya, vādī*).

And why, bhikshus, is such a person is called one who speaks at the wrong time, who speaks what is false, who speaks what is useless, who speaks what is not-Dharma, who speaks against the Vinaya?

Because, bhikshus, this person wrongly inflicts suffering on another by killing, or by holding, or by incurring losses, or by blaming, or by banishing, thinking, “I’m powerful! This is for the sake of power!”

<sup>11</sup> *Yad api bhikkhave lobho tad api akusalam*, lit “bhikshus, whichever is greed, that is unwholesome.”

<sup>12</sup> *Abhisankharoti*.

<sup>13</sup> *Balav’amhi bala’ttho iti*.

<sup>14</sup> *Yad api luddho lobhena abhibhūto pariyādinna, citto parassa asatā dukkham upadahati vadhena vā bandhena vā jāniyā vā garahāya vā pabbājanāya vā balav’amhi bala’ttho iti pi tad api akusalam*.

But on being told the truth, he denies it, he does not acknowledge it. When told a lie, he makes no effort to reject [undo] it by saying, “This is untrue,” or “This is false.”

This is the reason why such a person is called the untimely speaker, who speaks what is false, speaks what is useless, speaks against the Dhamma, speaks against the Vinaya.

### Destiny of those with unwholesome karma

**4b** Such a person, bhikshus, his mind, overcome and consumed by evil, unwholesome states born of greed, dwells in suffering *right here and now* [in this life itself], with troubles, with despair, with feverish pains, and *after death* with the body’s breaking up, he is destined for a suffering state.

Such a person, bhikshus, his mind, overcome and consumed by evil, unwholesome states born of hate, dwells in suffering *right here and now*, with troubles, with despair, with feverish pains, and *after death* with the body’s breaking up, he is destined for a suffering state.

Such a person, bhikshus, his mind, overcome and consumed by evil, unwholesome states born of delusion, dwells in suffering *right here and now*, with troubles, with despair, with feverish pains, and *after death* with the body’s breaking up, he is destined for a suffering state.

### Suffocated by the roots

**5** Just as a sal, or a dhava, or a spandana, when enveloped and smothered by three creeper vines,<sup>15</sup> meets with disaster, with destruction, with utter destruction,<sup>16</sup> even so, bhikshus,

such a person, his mind overcome and consumed by evil, unwholesome states born of greed, [203] dwells in suffering right here and now [in this life itself], with troubles, with despair, with feverish pains, and after death with the body’s breaking up, he is destined for a suffering state;

such a person, bhikshus, his mind overcome and consumed by evil, unwholesome states born of hate, dwells in suffering right here and now, with troubles, with despair, with feverish pains, and after death with the body’s breaking up, he is destined for a suffering state;

such a person, bhikshus, his mind overcome and consumed by evil, unwholesome states born of delusion, dwells in suffering right here and now, with troubles, with despair, with feverish pains, and after death with the body’s breaking up, he is destined for a suffering state.

These, bhikshus, are the three unwholesome roots.

## THE 3 WHOLESOME ROOTS

**6a** Bhikshus, there are these three wholesome roots. What are the three?

- (1) **The wholesome root that is *non-greed* [generosity];**
- (2) **The wholesome root that is *non-hate* [lovingkindness];**
- (3) **The wholesome root that is *non-delusion* [wisdom].**

### Wholesome thoughts lead to wholesome actions

**6b** (1) **Non-greed** is wholesome, bhikshus. Whatever **the non-greedy** [the generous] (*alobha*) constructs through the body, through speech, through the mind, that, too, is wholesome.

**6c** The non-greedy person—his mind not overcome, not consumed, by greed—does *not* inflict suffering on another by killing, or by holding [binding and confining], or by incurring losses, or by blaming, or by banishing, thinking, “I’m powerful! This is for the sake of power!”—that, too, is wholesome.

<sup>15</sup> *Tīhi māluvā, latāhi*, a simile for greed, hate and delusion (AA 2:319).

<sup>16</sup> *Seyyathāpi bhikkhave sālo vā dhavo vā phandano vā tīhi māluvā, latāhi uddhasetā pariyonaddho, anayam āpajjati vyananam āpajjati anaya, vyananam āpajjati*. The 3 kinds of tree mentioned are the sal or Shorea robusta (*sāla*, Skt *śāla*), dhava (*dhava*, ts; Halayudha’s *Abhidhāna*, ratna, *mālā* glosses as *madhura, tvaca*), a firewood tree (*Grislea tomentosa*), and the spandana (*phandana*, “trembler,” Skt *spandana* or *syandana*, *Dalbergia onegeinensis*, *Bignonia indica*, *Ougeinia dalbergiodes*) used in making images.

Thus, these many good, wholesome states, born of non-greed, caused by non-greed, arising from non-greed, conditioned by non-greed, are born.

7 (2) **Non-hate** is wholesome, bhikshus. Whatever **the non-hateful** [the loving] (*aduṭṭha*) constructs through the body, through speech, through the mind, that, too, is wholesome.

The non-hateful person—his mind not overcome, not consumed, by hate—does *not* inflict suffering on another by killing, or by holding [binding and confining], or by incurring losses, or by blaming, or by banishing, thinking, “I’m powerful! This is for the sake of power!”—that, too, is wholesome.

Thus, these many good, wholesome states, born of non-hate, caused by non-hate, arising from non-hate, conditioned by non-hate, are born.

8 (3) **Non-delusion** is wholesome, bhikshus. Whatever **the non-deluded** [the wise] (*amuḷha*) constructs through the body, through speech, through the mind, that, too, is wholesome.

The non-deluded person—his mind not overcome, not consumed, by delusion—does *not* inflict suffering on another by killing, or by holding [binding and confining], or by incurring losses, or by blaming, or by banishing, thinking, “I’m powerful! This is for the sake of power!”—that, too, is wholesome.

Thus, these many good, wholesome states, born of non-delusion, [204] caused by non-delusion, arising from non-delusion, conditioned by non-delusion, are born.

### Wholesome thoughts lead to wholesome speech

- 9 And, bhikshus, such a person is called one  
 who speaks at the right time (*kāla, vādī*),  
 who speaks what is true (*abhūta, vādī*),  
 who speaks what is useful [connected with the spiritual goal] (*attha, vādī*),  
 who speaks the Dharma [the True Teaching] (*dhamma, vādī*),  
 who speaks the Vinaya [the moral discipline] (*vinaya, vādī*).

And why, bhikshus, is such a person is called one who speaks at the right time, who speaks what is true, who speaks what is useful, who speaks the Dharma, who speaks the Vinaya?

Because, bhikshus, this person does not inflict suffering on another, by killing, or by holding [binding and confining], or by incurring losses, or by blaming, or by banishing, thinking, “I’m powerful! This is for the sake of power!”

But on being told the truth, he accepts it, he acknowledges it. When told a lie, he makes an effort to reject [undo] it by saying, “This is untrue,” or “This is false.”

This is the reason why such a person is called the timely speaker, who speaks what is true, speaks what is useful, speaks the Dharma, speaks the Vinaya.

### Destiny of those with wholesome karma

10 Such a person, bhikshus, who has abandoned evil, unwholesome states born of greed, making it non-existent like a palm tree cut off at its root, of a nature never to arise again,<sup>17</sup> dwells happily *right here and now*, without troubles, without despair, without feverish pains, and right here and now he attains nirvana.

Such a person, bhikshus, who has abandoned evil, unwholesome states born of hate, making it non-existent like a palm tree cut off at its root, of a nature never to arise again, dwells happily *right here and now*, without troubles, without despair, without feverish pains, and right here and now he attains nirvana.

Such a person, bhikshus, who has abandoned evil, unwholesome states born of delusion, making it non-existent like a palm tree cut off at its root, of a nature never to arise again, dwells happily *right here and now*, without troubles, without despair, without feverish pains, and right here and now he attains nirvana.

<sup>17</sup> “Making it non-existent... never to arise again,” *ucchinna, mūlā tālāvatthu, katā anabhāva, katā āyatim anup-pāda, dhammā*.

### Destroying the roots

**11a** Just as there is a sal, or a dhava, or a spandana, enveloped and smothered by three creeper vines, and a person would come along, carrying a spade and a basket.

He would cut the vines at their roots and, having cut them at the roots, would dig around them. Having dug around them, he would pull out the roots, even down to those as tiny as usheera roots.<sup>18</sup>

He would then cut the vines up into small pieces.

Having cut them up, he would slice them into little splinters.

Having sliced them into little splinters, he would pound them into tiny bits.

Having pounded them into tiny bits, he would dry them in the wind and sun.

Having dried them in the wind and sun, he would burn them in a fire.

Having burned them in a fire, [205] he would reduce them to ashes.

Having reduced them to ashes, he would winnow them in a strong wind or let them be washed away in the swift currents of a stream.

Thus, the vines would have their roots destroyed, and made non-existent like a palm tree cut off at its root, of a nature never to arise again, not destined for further arising.<sup>19</sup>

**11b** In the same way, in such a person, evil, unwholesome states born of greed have been abandoned, making them non-existent like a palm tree cut off at its root, of a nature never to arise again, dwells happily right here and now, without troubles, without despair, without feverish pains, and right here and now he attains nirvana.

In such a person evil, unwholesome states born of hate have been abandoned, making them non-existent like a palm tree cut off at its root, of a nature never to arise again, dwells happily right here and now, without troubles, without despair, without feverish pains, and right here and now he attains nirvana.

In such a person evil, unwholesome states born of delusion have been abandoned, making them non-existent like a palm tree cut off at its root, of a nature never to arise again, dwells happily right here and now, without troubles, without despair, without feverish pains, and right here and now he attains nirvana.

These, bhikkhus, are the three wholesome roots.

— evaṃ —

<sup>18</sup> *Seyyathāpi bhikkhave sālo vā dhavo vā phandano vā tīhi māluvā, latāhi uddhassetā pariyonaddho. Ato puriso āgaccheyya kuddāla, piṭakani va ādāya. So taṃ māluvā, lataṃ mūle chindeyya mūle chetvā palikkhaṇeyya palikkaṇi-tvā mūlāni uddhareyya antamaso usīra, nāla, mattāni pi.* The **usīra** (Skt *usīra*) is the fragrant grass, *Andropogon muricatus* (CPD qu KM Nadkarni, *Indian Materia Medica* I, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, Bombay, 1954:109 f). NA Jayawickrama says that “this aromatic root (called *sāvanna/sāvāndara* in Sinhalese) has medicinal properties and is also used as an insect repellent” (*Journal of the Centre for Buddhist Studies Sri Lanka*, 2003:114) Grass roots are obviously very fine.

<sup>19</sup> On the seed-like nature of karma, see (**Vitthāra**) **Kamma S** (A 4.232/2:230-232) = SD 4.13 Intro (2.4).

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