

## Amba,laṭṭhikā Rāhul'ovāda Sutta

### Advice to Rāhula at Amba,laṭṭhikā

[Dangers of lying and need for constant self-reflection]

(Majjhima Nikāya 61/1:414-420)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003

#### Introduction

Rāhula was the Buddha's only son, born (according to tradition) on the day his father renounced the world to seek awakening. When the Buddha first returned to Kapila.vatthu after his awakening—some say, it was the second year of the ministry; others say it was the sixth or even the twelfth year<sup>1</sup>—Rāhula approached him and asked for his “inheritance.” So, at the age of seven, he was initiated into the Order as a novice (*sāmaṇera*) by Sāriputta.

The Commentaries say that the Amba,laṭṭhikā Rāhul'ovāda Sutta (and the **Kumāra,pañha**, Khp 1) was taught to Rāhula when he was a seven-year-old novice (*satta,vassika,sāmaṇera,kāle*) (MA 3:126; AA 1:258). Once, when the 18-year-old Rāhula was following the Buddha on alms-round, he harboured carnal thoughts through being fascinated by the beauty of his body and that of the Buddha. The Buddha, noticing his unwholesome thoughts, gave him the teachings of **the Mahā Rāhul'ovāda Sutta** (M 62).

There are some five **Rāhula Suttas**. One is in the Aṅguttara (A 4.177/2:164 f)—**the (Dhātu) Rāhula Sutta**, a brief teaching on the emptiness of the four elements that is elaborated in the Mahā Rāhul'ovāda Sutta (M 62.8-17/1:422-424). The Khandha Vagga of the Saṃyutta contain a famous pair of Rāhula Suttas: **the (Anusaya) Rāhula Sutta** (or Rāhula Sutta I) and **the (Apagata) Rāhula Sutta** (or Rāhula Sutta II) (S 22.91-92/3:135-137), both on overcoming the notions of “I” and “mine”, which are repeated in the Nidāna Vagga respectively as **the Anusaya Sutta** and **the Apagata Sutta** (S 18.21-22/2:252 f).

The short (**Kalyāṇa,mitta**) **Rāhula Sutta** of the Sutta Nipāta (Sn 2.11/p58 f) is on spiritual friendship. The 18<sup>th</sup> section of the Saṃyutta is called the **Rāhula Saṃyutta** (S 2:244-256), containing teachings on impermanence given to Rāhula by the Buddha on various occasions from the time Rāhula joined to the Order until his attainment of arhathood (MA 2:126).

**The Cūḷa Rāhul'ovāda Sutta** (M 147 = S 35.121/4:105-107), given shortly after Rāhula's higher ordination (probably 20 years old), recounts how he attained arhathood after listening to a discourse by the Buddha on the development of insight. The Buddha declared Rāhula as the foremost amongst those monks desirous of training (*sikkhā,kāma*) (A 1:24). The Commentaries say that Rāhula would rise early in the morning, and taking a handful of sand in his hand, would say, “May I today receive just as much advice from the Buddha, and my preceptor and teachers!” (MA 3:134; AA 1:258). His Elder's Verses are found at Thera,gāthā 295-298.

The Apadāna and the Commentaries say that although Rāhula was the Buddha's own son, the Buddha showed the same lovingkindness to his murderous cousin Devadatta, the bandit Aṅgulimāla, and the intoxicated elephant Dhanapāla (sent out by Devadatta to kill him) (Ap 6.145/p47; MA 2:387; Dh 1:146; Miln 410).

The Ambalaṭṭhikā Rāhul'ovāda Sutta is mentioned in **the Bhābrū Rock Edict** of Asoka as among those that all monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen should often listen to and reflect upon. This sutta is a

<sup>1</sup> It is not certain when exactly the Buddha first returned to Kapilavatthu. The Jātaka **Nidāna Kathā**, however says that the Buddha spends the first rains at Isi.patana (Sarnath). Then he goes to Uruvelā, staying there for 3 months, after which he stays in Rāja.gaha for 2 months. Then he leaves for Kapila.vatthu, arriving there after a 2-month journey, teaching along the way (J 1:82, 85). The Chinese text, 方廣大莊嚴經 (Fāng guāngdà zhuāngyán jīng), fasc 7, says that after spending 6 years in ascetic practices, the Buddha attains awakening (T3.187.582a18). 方廣大莊嚴經卷 (Fāng guāngdà zhuāngyán jīng), adds that 6 years later, he meets his father again: “Twelve years after his renunciation, they met again.” (T3.614a, 616a). 佛說十二遊經 (Fó shuō shí'èr yóu jīng) says that the Buddha leaves home at 29, gains awakening at 35, and meets his father again after 12 more years (T4.195.146c29-14a1). (Nakamura 2000:327, 479 n50, with corrections.) See also Mv 1.53.1 = V 1:82 f; J 1:85-94.

good example of using an “object lesson” in teaching Dharma to the young. The sutta structure is very simple and systematic. The admonition begins with three parables—the water-pot, the royal elephant and the mirror—with which the Buddha impresses on Rāhula the importance of not lying, even in jest [§§3-8]. From the use of imagery, the Buddha goes on to teach in terms of ideas (*dhamma*) regarding the three doors of action and how one should wisely attend to each before, during and after the deed [§§9-17]. The admonition significantly closes with a statement of the universality of the moral virtue of such actions.

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## The Discourse on The Advice to Rāhula at Amba,laṭṭhikā (M 61/1:414-420)

**1 [414]** Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying in the Squirrels' Feeding-ground in the Bamboo Grove near Rājagaha.

**2** At that time the venerable Rāhula was staying at Amba,laṭṭhikā.<sup>2</sup> Then the Blessed One, emerging from his evening retreat,<sup>3</sup> went to where the venerable Rāhula was staying at Amba,laṭṭhikā. The venerable Rāhula saw him coming from afar and, on seeing him, prepared a seat and water for washing the feet. The Blessed One sat down on the prepared seat and, while seated, washed his feet. The venerable Rāhula, then bowed down to the Blessed One and sat down to one side.

### Simile of the water in a pot

**3** Then the Blessed One, having left a little bit of the water in the water-vessel, said to the venerable Rāhula,

“Rāhula, do you see this little bit of water remaining in the water vessel?”

“Yes, venerable sir.”

“Rāhula, that's how little recluship<sup>4</sup> there is in anyone who has no shame in telling a deliberate lie.”

**4** Having thrown away the little bit of remaining water, the Blessed One said to the venerable Rāhula,

“Rāhula, do you see how this little bit of remaining water is thrown away?”

“Yes, venerable sir.”

“Rāhula, the recluship of anyone who has no shame in telling a deliberate lie is thrown away in the same way.”

**5** Having turned the water vessel upside down, the Blessed One said to the venerable Rāhula,

“Rāhula, do you see how this water vessel is turned upside down?”

“Yes, venerable sir.”

“Rāhula, the recluship of anyone who has no shame in telling a deliberate lie is turned upside down in the same way.”

<sup>2</sup> Amba,laṭṭhikā: *amba* is “mango”; *laṭṭhikā* or *laṭṭhi* means “sapling, a plant sprout”, but *laṭṭhi* can also mean “a stick of sugarcane” (PvA 257), and is found in place-names, eg Laṭṭhi,vana (J 1:83). As such, *amba,laṭṭhikā* tr as “the grove of mango saplings (or sprouts)” (DA 1:41). Vinaya Comy explains it as “palmyra or talipot-palm pleasure” (*tāl'uyyāna*, VA 972). It was a royal park on the highway between Rājagaha and Nālandā. From this account, it appears that the Squirrels' Feeding Ground (*Kalandaka,nivāpa*) was within walking distance of Amba,laṭṭhikā.

<sup>3</sup> “Retreat,” *paṭisallānā*, alt tr “seclusion”.

<sup>4</sup> “Recluship,” *samaññam*; cf *samaṇa* (n), “recluse”.

6 Having turned the water vessel right side up, the Blessed One said to the venerable Rāhula, “Rāhula, do you see how empty and hollow this water vessel is?”

“Yes, venerable sir.”

“Rāhula, the recluseship of anyone who has no shame in telling a deliberate lie is empty and hollow in the same way.”

### Simile of the royal elephant

7 Suppose, Rāhula, there is this royal elephant:<sup>5</sup> its tusks (long) like chariot poles, fully grown [fit to carry a burden], of good pedigree, accustomed to battles, and in battle, it uses its forefeet and hind feet, its forequarters and hindquarters, its head and ears, and its tusks and tail, [415] but protects its trunk.<sup>6</sup> Noticing this, the elephant rider thinks,

‘This royal elephant...protects its trunk: it has not given up its life.’

But, Rāhula, when the royal elephant...in battle uses its forefeet and hind feet, its forequarters and hindquarters, its head and ears, and its tusks and tail—and uses its trunk, too—noticing this, the elephant rider thinks,

‘This royal elephant...uses its trunk, too: it has given up its life. Now there is nothing it will not do.’

Rāhula, it is the same with anyone who has no shame in telling a deliberate lie: there is no evil, I say, he will not do.

Thus, Rāhula, you should train yourself: ‘I will not tell a deliberate lie even in jest.’<sup>7</sup>

### Simile of the mirror

8 What do you think, Rāhula, what is a mirror for?”

“For reflection, venerable sir.”

“In the same way, Rāhula,

action with the body should be done only after repeated reflection [constant review],

action with speech should be done only after repeated reflection [constant review],

action with the mind should be done only after repeated reflection [constant review].<sup>8</sup>

## THE THREE DOORS

### Reflecting on bodily action

9 (1a) CONSIDER WISELY BEFORE DOING. Rāhula, whenever you want to do an action with the body, you should reflect on it thus:

‘This action I want to do with the body—will it harm me, or harm others, or harm both?<sup>9</sup> Is it an unwholesome bodily action with painful outcome, painful result?’

<sup>5</sup> *Raṇṇo nāgo*, alt tr “royal tusker”.

<sup>6</sup> By putting it in its mouth (MA 3:128). This obviously alludes to not speaking falsehood and being mindful of one’s speech.

<sup>7</sup> Comy: The Buddha thinks that young boys say things both proper and improper, and are called *piya, musā, vādā* (“lovable fibs”; “fond of lying”); for they would say that they saw something when they did not, or would say they did not when they did (MA 3:125).

<sup>8</sup> “Repeated reflection,” *paccavekkhitvā paccavekkhitvā* is an example of a reduplicative (a verb repeating itself to show repeated or continuous action). Although the verb *paccavekkhati* usually means “he reviews” in the sense of an examination of conscience after the fact, here it is used as a synonym for *yoniso manasikāroti*, “he considers mindfully”, that is, before the deed, during the deed and after the deed as clearly evident from the three phases of each of the three doors of action: “when you want to do an action” [9, 12, 15], “while you are doing an action” [10, 13, 16] and “after you have done an action” [11,14,16].

<sup>9</sup> “Will it harm me, or harm others, or harm both?” *atta, vyābādhāya pi...para, vyābādhāya pi...ubhaya, vyābādhāya pi samvatteyya*. The common key word here, *vyābādha*, means “distress, pain, affliction”. This phrase constitutes the golden rule: see **Veḷu, dvāreyya S** (S 55.7) for a broader application, where a wholesome action should be

If, Rāhula, on reflection, you know, 'It *will* harm me, or harm others, or harm both, it will be an unwholesome bodily action with painful outcome, painful result,' then certainly<sup>10</sup> you should not do such an action with the body. [416]

But, Rāhula, if on reflection you know, 'It will *not* harm me, nor harm others, nor harm both, it will be a wholesome bodily action with pleasant outcome, pleasant result,' then you should do such an action with the body.

**10 (1b) CONSIDER WISELY WHILE DOING.** Rāhula, while you are doing an action with the body, you should reflect on it:

'This action I am doing with the body—is it harming me, or harming others, or harming both? Is it an unwholesome body action with painful outcome, painful results?'

If, Rāhula, on reflection, you know, 'It *is* harming me, or harming others, or harming both: it is an unwholesome bodily action with painful outcome, painful results,' then you should give it up.

But, Rāhula, if on reflection you know, 'It is *not* harming me, nor harming others, nor harming both: it will be a wholesome bodily action with pleasant outcome, pleasant results,' then you should pursue<sup>11</sup> it.

**11 (1c) CONSIDER WISELY AFTER DOING.** Rāhula, having done an action with the body, you should reflect on it:

'This action I have done with the body—did it harm me, nor harm others, nor harm both? Was it an unwholesome bodily action with painful outcome, painful results?'

CONFESSION & CONTRITION. If, Rāhula, on reflection, you know, 'It *did* harm me, or harmed others, or harmed both, it was an unwholesome bodily action with painful outcome, painful results,' then **you should confess it**, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to wise companions in the holy life.<sup>12</sup>

Having confessed it..., [417] you should show restraint in the future.<sup>13</sup>

But, Rāhula, if on reflection you know, 'It did *not* harm me, nor harmed others, nor harmed both: it was a wholesome bodily action with pleasant outcome, pleasant results,' then you should, with zest and joy,<sup>14</sup> train night and day in wholesome things.

### Reflecting on verbal action

**12 (2a) CONSIDER WISELY BEFORE SPEAKING.** Rāhula, whenever you want to do an action with speech, you should reflect on it:

'This action I want to do with speech—will it harm me, or harm others, or harm both? Is it an unwholesome verbal action with painful outcome, painful results?'

If, Rāhula, on reflection, you know, 'It *will harm*...', [418] then certainly you should not do such an action with speech.

But, Rāhula, if on reflection you know, 'It *will not harm*...', then you should do such an action with speech.

**13 (2b) CONSIDER WISELY WHILE SPEAKING.** Rāhula, while you are doing an action with speech, you should reflect on it:

'This action I am doing with speech—is it harming me, or harming others, or harming both? Is it an unwholesome verbal action with painful outcome, painful results?'

"purified" in three ways, ie by observing them oneself, by exhorting others to observe them, and by praising such deeds (S 55.7.6-12/5:354 f).

<sup>10</sup> "Certainly," *sasakkaṃ* (also at M 1:514). Comy glosses with *ekamsena*, "surely, definitely, certainly" (MA 3:128). If taken as *sa,sakkaṃ*, it means "with ability" or perhaps "to the best of one's ability".

<sup>11</sup> "Pursue," *anupadajjeyyāsi*, alt tr "should continue (with an action)". Comy: *upatthambheyyāsi punappunam kareyyāsi*, "should support and do it often" (MA 3:128).

<sup>12</sup> "Wise companions in the holy life," *viññū sa,brahma,cārī*, that is, spiritual friends (*kalyāna,mittā*).

<sup>13</sup> To acknowledge a wrong deed with contrition, confess it, and observe restraint in it leads to growth in the noble disciple. Cf the cases of king Ajāta,sattu (D 2.99-100/1:85), the monk Bhaddalī (M 65.13/1:440) and the wanderer Nigrodha (D 25.22/3:55).

<sup>14</sup> "With zest and joy," *pīti,pāmujjena*, ie with bodily joyful energy and mental joy.

If, Rāhula, on reflection, you know, ‘*It is harming...*,’ then, certainly, you should give up such an action with speech.

But, Rāhula, if on reflection you know, ‘*It is not harming...*,’ then you should pursue such an action with speech.

**14** (2c) CONSIDER WISELY AFTER SPEAKING. Rāhula, having done an action with speech, you should reflect on it:

‘This action I have done with speech—did it harm me, or harm others, or harm both? Was it an unwholesome verbal action with painful outcome, painful results?’

APOLOGY & CONTRITION. If, Rāhula, on reflection, you know, ‘*It did harm...*’ then **you should confess it**, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to wise companions in the holy life.

Having confessed it...you should show restraint in the future.

But, Rāhula, if on reflection you know, ‘*It did not harm...*: it was a wholesome action of speech with happy consequences, happy results,’ then you should, with zest and joy, train night and day in wholesome things.

### Reflecting on mental action

**15** (3a) CONSIDER WISELY BEFORE THINKING. Rāhula, whenever you want to do an action with the mind, you should reflect on it:

‘This action I want to do with the mind—will it harm me, or harm others, or harm both? Is it an unwholesome mental action with painful outcome, painful results?’

If, Rāhula, on reflection, you know, ‘*It will harm...*,’ then certainly you should not do such an action with the mind.

But, Rāhula, if on reflection you know, ‘*It will not harm...*’: it will be a wholesome action with the mind with pleasant **[419]** outcome, pleasant results, then you should do such an action with the mind.

**16** (3b) CONSIDER WISELY WHILE THINKING. Rāhula, while you are doing an action with the mind, you should reflect on it:

‘This action I am doing with the mind—is it harming me, or harming others, or harming both? Is it an unwholesome mental action with painful outcome, painful results?’

If, Rāhula, on reflection, you know, ‘*It is harming...*,’ then you should give it up.

But, Rāhula, if on reflection you know, ‘*It is not harming...*,’ then you should pursue such an action with the mind.

**17** (3c) CONSIDER WISELY AFTER THINKING. Rāhula, having done an action with the mind, you should reflect on it:

‘This action I have done with the mind—did it harm me, or harm others, or harm both? Is it an unwholesome mental action with painful outcome, painful results?’

DISOWNING THE PAIN. If, Rāhula, on reflection, you know, ‘*It did harm...*,’ it was an unwholesome mental act with painful outcome, painful results, then **you should be concerned, ashamed, disgusted**<sup>15</sup> regarding that mental action.<sup>16</sup>

Rāhula, feeling concerned, ashamed, disgusted..., you should show restraint in the future.

But, Rāhula, if on reflection you know, ‘*It did not harm...*,’ it was a wholesome mental action with pleasant outcome, pleasant results, then you should, with zest and joy, train night and day in wholesome things. **[420]**

<sup>15</sup> “Should be concerned, ashamed, disgusted,” *aṭṭiyitabbam harāyitabbam jigucchitabbam*. MA glosses *aṭṭiyitabbam* as *aṭṭena pīlītena bhavitabbam*, “one should be distressed, (feel) harrassed”; *harāyitabbam* = *lajjitabbam*, “one should be ashamed”; *jigucchitabbam* = *gūtham disvā viya jigucchā uppādetabbā*, “one should arouse disgust (in oneself) as if looking at excrement” (MA 3:129). See **Kevaddha S** (D 11): *aṭṭiyāmi harāyāmi jigucchāmi*, “I feel concerned, ashamed, disgusted” (D 11.5/1:213).

<sup>16</sup> This sentence differs from both the preceding pericopes (stock repetitions) in connection with actions of the body and of speech. This is because unwholesome thoughts, unlike bodily and verbal transgressions, do not entail confession as a means of expiation. Both Horner (M:H 2:90) and Ñānamoli (Ms) missed this variation.

Purity of the three doors<sup>17</sup>

**18** Rāhula, all those brahmins and recluses in the past who purified their actions of the body,... actions of speech,... actions of the mind, did so through repeated reflection on their *actions*.

Rāhula, all those brahmins and recluses of the future who will purify their actions of the body,... actions of speech,... actions of the mind, will do so through repeated reflection on their *actions*.

Rāhula, all those brahmins and recluses of the present who are purifying their actions of the body,... actions of speech,... actions of the mind, are doing so through repeated reflection on their *actions*.

Therefore, Rāhula, you should train yourself:

‘I will purify my actions of      the body      through repeated reflection.

I will purify my actions of      speech      through repeated reflection.

I will purify my actions of      the mind      through repeated reflection.’

That is how, Rāhula, you should train yourself.”

The venerable Rāhula joyfully approved of the Blessed One’s word.

—evam—

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<sup>17</sup> This conclusion impresses on Rāhula the universality of the virtue taught to him.