

(Mahānāma) Gilayāna Sutta¹

The Discourse on the Ill (to Mahānāma)

[How to die as a saint]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 55.54/5:408-410)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

1 Introduction

Mahānāma was a Sakya rajah, the son of Amit'odana, a brother of Suddh'odana (the Buddha's father). As such, he was the Buddha's cousin, and also Anuruddha's older brother. He is declared by the Buddha to be "the chief of those who give choice almsfood" (A 1:26). His life is given in the Aṅguttara Commentary (AA 1:393), where he is said to have fed the Order at Kapilavatthu (his home town) for a whole year.

In the (Upāsaka) Mahānāma Sutta 1 (A 8.25), the Buddha teaches Mahānāma on the qualities of a true lay follower. A number of other teachings on lay practice given to Mahānāma are found mostly in the Sotāpatti Saṃyutta (book 55 of the Saṃyutta Nikāya):

- the Kaṅkheyya (or Sakambhiya) Sutta (S 54.12/5:327 f) on the difference between the trainee (*sekha*) and the Buddha, and on the benefits of breath meditation;
- the Mahānāma Suttas 1-2, the Godha Sutta, and Sarakāni Suttas 1-2 of the Sarakāni chapter in the Sotāpatti Saṃyutta (S 55.21-25/5:369-380)—all concerning streamwinning;
- the (Upāsaka) Mahānāma Sutta 2 (S 55.37/5:395) on the qualities of a lay followers;
- the (Sotāpanna) Mahānāma Sutta (S 55.49/5:403) on the qualities of a streamwinner;
- the Gilāyana Sutta (S 55.54/5:408-410) on how to die as a saint (this sutta).

In the Cūḷa Dukkha-k,khandha Sutta (M 14/1:91-95), the Buddha explains to Mahānāma, why the latter, although a Once-returned, still feels sensual lust.

As in the Dīgh'āvu Sutta (S 55.3), where the dying Dīgh'āvu thinks of his father, in the case of Mahānāma, too, the Buddha advises both of them in turn to let go of worldly thoughts.²

2 Death studies

In the Dhānañjāni Sutta (M 97),³ Sāriputta guides the dying brahmin, Dhānañjāni, through a similar sequence of reflections as those of the Gilāyana Sutta, but stops on having directed him to the Brahmā world, and was later reproached by the Buddha for having done so. The Saṅkhār'upapatti Sutta (M 120/3:99-103) similarly deals with choosing a good rebirth and makes an interesting comparative study with the Gilāyana Sutta. Such suttas are important Buddhist texts in Buddhist Psychology, especially Death Studies. Both these suttas clearly show that a dying person may be guided by a skillful person to be reborn in a higher plane or even attain liberation itself.

The (Nakula,pitā) Roga Sutta (A 4.157),⁴ declares that there the two kinds of illness: illness of body and illness of mind, and that no one, except the arhats, could claim to be mentally healthy for even a moment. This (Mahānāma) Gilayāna Sutta should be studied with the (Gati) Mahānāma Suttas 1-2 (S 55.21-22), wherein Mahānāma, concerned with how he would die, is reassured by the Buddha.⁵

¹ Also called (Mahānāma) Roga Sutta.

² S 55.3/5:344-347 = SD 23.16.

³ M 97/2:193-195 = SD 4.9.

⁴ A 4.157.1/2:142 f.

⁵ S 55.21/5:369-371 = SD 23.1a & S 55.22/5:371 = SD 23.1b.

3 Layman arhats

The Gilāyana Sutta closes with a very significant remark that the dying wise layman has “directed [his mind] to the cessation of self-identity”—then, Mahānāma, there is no difference between a lay follower who is thus liberated in mind and a monk who has been liberated in mind for a hundred years, that is, there is no difference between the one liberation and the other” [§19]. This means that the layman dies an arhat. There only two canonical cases of layman arhats are Yasa (who later ordained, V 1:17) and Bāhiya Dārucīriya (who died shortly).⁶

An interesting feature of the Gilāyana Sutta is that the dying layman is addressed as “Venerable” (*āyasmā*), usually translated as “Venerable” when referring to monastics. Similarly, in **the Dhānañjāni Sutta** (M 97), the dying brahmin Dhānañjāni, is addressed by his servant as “bhante” or “venerable sir” (*bhante*), which is usually translated as “venerable sir” when used for addressing monks (M 97.27a/2:191 f). In Thailand, even today, the word *ajahn* (from Skt *ācārya*, P *ācariya*), meaning “teacher”, is used as a respectful way of addressed either a monk or a lay person (male or female) who is a teacher (both secular or religious). This mode of address is very similar to the Chinese *sifu* and the Japanese *sensei*.⁷

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The Discourse on the Ill (to Mahānāma) (S 55.54/5:408-410)

[408]

1 At one time the Blessed One was dwelling amongst the Sakyas in Nigrodha’s Park near Kapilavatthu.

Mahānāma

2 At that time, some monks were making a robe for the Blessed One, thinking, “At the end of three months, with the completion of this robe, the Blessed One will go on a walking tour.”⁸

3 Mahānāma the Sakya heard, “It is said that some monks are making a robe for the Blessed One, thinking that at the end of three months, with the completion of this robe, the Blessed One will go on a walking tour.”

Then Mahānāma the Sakya approached the Blessed One and having saluted him, sat down at one side. Sitting thus at one side, Mahānāma the Sakya said this to the Blessed One:

4 “Bhante, I heard it was said that⁹ some monks are making a robe for the Blessed One, thinking that at the end of three months, with the completion of the robe, the Blessed One will go on a walking tour.

⁶ Bāhiya Dārū,īriya, U 1.10/6-9; Ap 2:475 ff; AA 1:282; DhA 2:209 ff; UA 77 ff. The **Kathā,vatthu** (Kvu 4.1/267) mentions Yasa, Uttiya the householder and Setu the brahmin youth as examples of layman arhats. The **Milinda,pañha** (Miln 264-266; cf 242 ff, 246 ff), too, states that a lay person can become an arhat, but adds that a layman who attains arhathood either renounces the world that day or passes away into final nirvana (Miln 266). MA mentions Santati the privy councillor, Uggasena the seth’s son, and the boy Vīta,soka as examples of layman arhats (MA 3:196). [“Seth” is the modern Indian cognate for *sethī*, and is found in the OED.] In **Tevijja Vaccha,gotta S** (M 71), when Vacchagotta asks, “Master Gotama, is there any householder who, without abandoning the household-er’s fetters, when the body has broken up, makes an end of suffering?” the Buddha answers there is none (M 71.11/-1:483). Cf Dh 142.

⁷ For more details, see **Dhānañjāni S** (M 97) = SD 4.9 Intro (4).

⁸ “Walking tour,” *cārika*, ie on a Dharma teaching peregrination.

⁹ “I heard it was said that,” *sutam etam...kira*, lit “It is heard thus...it is said that...”

But, bhante, I have neither heard nor learned it before the Blessed One himself how a wise lay follower¹⁰ who is sick, in pain, seriously ill, should be admonished by another wise lay follower?¹¹

Limbs of streamwinning

5 “A wise lay follower, Mahānāma, who is sick, in pain, seriously ill, should be admonished by a wise lay follower with **the four assurances**:¹¹

(1) RECOLLECTION OF THE BUDDHA. ‘Let the venerable one¹² be assured. Venerable, you have wise confidence¹³ in the Buddha thus:

So too, is he the Blessed One: ¹⁴ for, he is	<i>Iti pi so bhagavā</i>
arhat [worthy]	<i>arahaṃ</i>
the fully self-awakened one,	<i>sammā,sambuddho</i>
accomplished in knowledge and conduct,	<i>vijjā,caraṇa,sampanno</i>
well-gone,	<i>sugato</i>
knower of the worlds,	<i>loka,vidū</i>
unexcelled trainer of tamable people,	<i>anuttaro purisa,damma,sārathī</i>
teacher of beings human and heavenly,	<i>sathā deva,manussānaṃ</i>
awakened,	<i>buddho</i>
blessed. ¹⁵	<i>bhagavā ti.</i>

(2) RECOLLECTION OF THE DHARMA. Venerable, you have wise confidence in the Dharma, thus:

Well-taught	<i>Svākkhāto</i>
is the True Teaching of the Blessed One,	<i>bhagavatā dhammo</i>
to be self-realized,	<i>sandiṭṭhiko</i>
timeless,	<i>akāliko</i>
for one to come and see,	<i>ehi,passiko</i>
leading onward,	<i>opanayiko</i>
to be personally known by the wise.	<i>pacattam veditabbo viññūhi ti.</i>

(3) RECOLLECTION OF THE SANGHA. Venerable, you have wise confidence in the community of holy disciples [Sangha], thus:

of good conduct	<i>Supaṭipanno</i>
is the Blessed One’s Community of Holy Disciples;	<i>bhagavato sāvaka,saṅgho</i>
of upright conduct	<i>uju,paṭipanno</i>
is the Blessed One’s Community of Holy Disciples;	<i>bhagavato sāvaka,saṅgho</i>
of right conduct	<i>ñāya,paṭipanno</i>
is the Blessed One’s Community of Holy Disciples;	<i>bhagavato sāvaka,saṅgho</i>

¹⁰ “A wise lay follower,” *sapañño upāsako*, here refers to a streamwinner (SA 3:291).

¹¹ “Assurances,” *assāsaniyā dhammā*, things that bring solace or comfort (*assāsa*), a word that also tr as (1) inhalation, breathing; (2) ease, relief; (3) self-confidence, assurance. Here, it refers to 4 limbs of streamwinning (*sotā-patti-y-aṅga*, S 12.4110-14/2:69 f): see “**Entering the Stream**,” SD 3.3. Cf the 4 self-assurances of **Kesaputtiya S** (A 1:192 f) and **Apaṇṇaka S** (M 60). The verses on the Three Jewels are also found at S 1:219 = A 3:312 (qu by Vism 198).

¹² “The venerable one,” *āyasmā*, like *bhante* (venerable sir), is usu used in addressing monks but is here used for lay followers. The Buddha’s instruction is given in the 3rd person, using *āyasmā* for the dying “wise lay followers.” Once the instructions to the dying layman reach that of heavenly rebirth, the mode of address changes to “Friend” (*āvuso*). See below §9b. On *āyasmā*, *bhante* and *āvuso*, see **Dhānañjāni S** (M 97) = SD 4.9(5).

¹³ “Wise faith,” *avecca-p.pasāda* = *ākāravati,saddhā*, faith with a good cause. See **Sarakāṇi S 1** = SD 3.6 Intro n on faith.

¹⁴ Alt tr: “For the following reasons, too, he is the Blessed One [the Lord]...” On the meaning of *iti pi so*, see **Buddhānussati** = SD 15.7 (2.2).

¹⁵ PTS text abridges the Virtues of the Three Jewels with *peyyālā*, but here given in full.

of proper conduct	<i>sāmīci, paṭipanno</i>
is the Blessed One's Community of Holy Disciples.	<i>bhagavato sāvaka, saṅgho.</i>
These four pairs of Persons,	<i>yad idaṃ cattāri purisa, yugāni</i>
the eight Individuals	<i>aṭṭha, purisa, puggalā</i>
are this Blessed One's Community of Holy Disciples:	<i>esa bhagavato sāvaka, saṅgho</i>
worthy of offerings,	<i>āhuneyyo</i>
worthy of hospitality,	<i>pāhuneyyo</i>
worthy of gifts,	<i>dakkhineyyo</i>
worthy of salutation with the lotus-palms,	<i>añjalī, karaṇīyo</i>
an incomparable field of merit for the world.	<i>anuttaram puñña-k, khettaṃ lokassā ti.</i>

(4) MORAL VIRTUE. Venerable, you have virtues dear to the noble ones,¹⁶ unbroken, untorn, unmixed, spotless, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, giving rise to concentration.¹⁷ [409]

Letting go of the world

6 After the wise lay follower who is sick, in pain, seriously ill, has been admonished by a wise lay follower with the four assurances, he should be asked,

7a 'Venerable, are you thinking of¹⁸ your mother or father?'

If he says thus, 'I am thinking of my mother and father,' then he should be told:

7b 'But, venerable, you, good sir, are subject to death. Whether or not, venerable, you think of your mother and father, you will die all the same. So let go of thinking of your mother and father.'

8a If he says thus, 'I have let go of thinking about my mother and father,' he should be asked, 'Venerable, are you thinking of your wife and children?'

If he says, 'I am thinking of my wife and children,' then he should be told:

8b 'But, venerable, you, good sir, are subject to death. Whether or not, venerable, you think of your wife and children, you will die all the same. So let go of thinking of your wife and children.'

9a If he says thus, 'I have let go of thinking of my wife and children,' he should be asked, 'Venerable, are you thinking of the five cords of human sense-pleasure?¹⁹

If he says, 'I am thinking of the five cords of human sense-pleasure,' then he should be told:

9b 'But, avuso,²⁰ heavenly sense-pleasures are more excellent and more sublime than human sense-pleasures. Venerable, it would be good if your mind let go of human sense-pleasures, and you set your mind on²¹ the heaven of the four great kings [Cātum, mahārājika].'

10a If he says thus, 'My mind has let go human sense-pleasures and it is set on the heaven of the four great kings,' then he should be told: [410]

10b 'But, avuso, the devas of the heaven of the thirty-three are more excellent and more sublime than those of the heaven of the four great kings. Venerable, it would be good if your mind let go of the heaven of the four great kings, and you set your mind on the heaven of the devas of the thirty-three [Tāvātimsa].

11 If he says thus, 'My mind has let go of the heaven of the devas of the four great kings and it is set on the heaven of the devas of the thirty-three,' then he should be told:

¹⁶ "Virtues dear to the noble ones," *ariya, kantāni sīlāni*. The virtues of the noble one are explained at Vism 221 f. SA says that the noble ones do not violate the five precepts; hence, these virtues are dear to them (SA 2:74).

¹⁷ "Unbroken, ... giving rise to concentration," *akhaṇḍehi acchiddehi asabalehi akammāsehi bhujissehi viññūpasatthehi aparāmaṭṭhehi samādhi, samvattanikehi*. See UA 268.

¹⁸ "Thinking of," *apekhā*, also tr as "longing for, anxious about."

¹⁹ *Mānūsaka pañca kāma, guṇa*. Cf **Jāpussoṇī S** (A 10.177.7fg/5:273 f). See also It 94.

²⁰ *Avuso* ("Friend"), a vocative of *āyasmā*. Before this, the dying layman is addressed as "venerable" (*āyasmā*): see §5 n.

²¹ "You set your mind on," *adhimocehi*, caus pr 3 sg of *adhimuccati*, "inclines to; concentrates on."

12 ‘But, avuso, the heaven of the Yāma devas is more excellent and more sublime than the heaven of the devas of the thirty-three. Venerable, it would be good if your mind let go of the heaven of the devas of the thirty-three, and you set your mind on the heaven of the Yāma devas.²²

13 Venerable, it would be good if...you set your mind on the Tusita [Contented] devas.

14 Venerable, it would be good if...you set your mind on the Nimmāna,rati devas [who delight in creating].

15 Venerable, it would be good if...you set your mind on the Para.nimmita,vasavatti devas [who lord over the creation of others].

16 If he says thus, ‘My mind has let go of the Nimmāṇa,rati devas and it is set on the Para.nimmita,-vasavatti devas,’ then he should be told:

17 ‘But, avuso, the Brahmā world is more excellent and more sublime than the Para.nimmita,vasavatti devas. Venerable, it is good your mind let go of the Para.nimmita,vasavatti devas, and you set your mind on the Brahmā world.’

Letting go of self-identity

18a If he says thus, ‘My mind has let go of the Para.nimmita,vasavatti devas and it is set on the Brahmā world,’ then he should be told:

18b ‘But, avuso, even the Brahmā world is impermanent, uncertain,²³ trapped in self-identity.’²⁴ Venerable, it would be good if your mind let go of the Brahmā world and you direct²⁵ your mind to the cessation of self-identity.’²⁶

19 If he says thus, ‘My mind has turned away from the Brahmā world and is directed to the cessation of self-identity,’—then, Mahānāma, there is no difference between a lay follower who is thus liberated in mind and a monk who has been liberated in mind for a hundred years,²⁷ that is, there is no difference between the one liberation and the other.’²⁸

— evaṃ —

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²²“Yāma,” the heavenly world, not to be confused by the hell realm, lorded over by Yama.

²³“Uncertain,” *adhuva*, more usu *addhuva*, “not fixed, not permanent, uncertain, doubtful” (CPD).

²⁴“Trapped in self-identity,” *sakkāya pariyāpanno*, lit “included in self-identity”; alt tr “enmeshed in self-identity.” Childers (DPL): “included, contained, belonging to.” As in **Sīha S** (S 22.78) where the devas who regard themselves as permanent, stable and eternal are really “impermanent, unstable, not eternal, trapped in self-identity” (S 3:85). The Comy there explains the expression as “included within the five aggregates.” Thus when the Buddha teaches them the Dharma sealed with the three characteristics [impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, not-self], exposing the faults in the round of existence, the fear of knowledge enters them. (SA 2:288).

²⁵“Direct,” *upsamharāhi*, ie “draw or collect (your mind) towards.”

²⁶“Cessation of self-identity,” *sakkāya,nirodha*, a syn of the 3rd noble truth = nirvana: D 3:216 (*antā*), 3:240; M 1:299; S 3:159, 5:410; A 2:33, 2:165, 3:246, 3:401; see also DA 3:992, AA 3:153; *sakkāya* = *te,bhūmaka,vaṭṭa* (“cycles of the three worlds,” ie sense, form, and formless worlds) (AA 3:404). This instruction is direct the dying person’s mind away from rebirth in the Brahmā world towards the attainment of Nirvana. On a simple level, the overcoming of *sakkāya,ditṭhi* (“self-identity view”) leads to streamwinning: see **Entering the Stream** = SD 3.3-(5.1).

²⁷I follow the Thai Pali here. See S:B 1961 n371.

²⁸“Between the one liberation and the other,” *vimuttiyā vimuttiṃ*, as at A 3:34 in ref to arhathood. Comy says that when one liberation is compared to the other, there is no difference to be found (SA 3:292). In effect, this is a statement that the dying layman has become an arhat. See Intro.