

Kim Mūlaka Sutta

The Discourse on “What is the Root?” | A 8.83/4:338

Theme: The nature of all things in brief

Translated by Piya Tan ©2010

1 Key teaching and related suttas

1.1 KEY TEACHING. The Kim Mūlaka Sutta (A 8.83) is a short straightforward Sutta. The discourse open with the Buddha asking the monks a question, that is, whether they know how to answer eight questions that sectarian wanderers like to ask [§1]. The monks reply no [§2]. The Buddha begins teaching by re-stating the questions [§3], and then answers them [§4], thus:

THE SECTARIANS’ 10 QUESTIONS:¹

(1) In what are all things rooted?	<i>kiṃ mūlakā, āvuso,</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(2) In what are all things born?	<i>kiṃ sambhavā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(3) In what do all things arise?	<i>kiṃ samudayā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(4) In what do all things converge?	<i>kiṃ samosaraṇā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(5) What is the leader of all things?	<i>kiṃ pamukhā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(6) What is the supreme lord of all things?	<i>kiṃ adhipateyyā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(7) What is the highest of all things?	<i>kiṃ uttarā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(8) What is the essence of all things?	<i>kiṃ sārā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(9) What is the firm footing for all things?	<i>kiṃ ogadhā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(10) What is the complete ending for all things?	<i>kiṃ pariyosānā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā ti,</i>

THE BUDDHA’S 10 ANSWERS (TO THE SECTARIANS’ QUESTIONS):

(1) Rooted in <u>desire</u>	are all things,	<i>chanda, mūlakā, āvuso,</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(2) Born in <u>attention</u>	are all things,	<i>manasikāra, sambhavā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(3) Arisen through <u>contact</u>	are all things,	<i>phassa, samudayā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(4) Converging in <u>feeling</u>	are all things,	<i>vedanā, samosaraṇā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(5) <u>Concentration</u> is the leader	of all things,	<i>samādhi-p, pamukhā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(6) <u>Mindfulness</u> is the lord	of all things,	<i>sat’adhipateyyā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(7) <u>Wisdom</u> is the highest	of all things,	<i>paññ’uttarā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(8) <u>Liberation</u> is its essence	of all things,	<i>vimutti, sārā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā.</i>
(9) All things find a firm footing in <u>the death-free</u> ,		<i>amat’ogadhā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(10) All things have <u>nirvana</u> as their complete ending.		<i>nibbāna, pariyosānā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā ti.</i>

Characteristically, the answers here are unelaborated, but explanations or instructive contexts are found elsewhere, such as in the Majjhima and the Saṃyutta. We shall examine a few key suttas related to the Kim Mūlaka Sutta below.

1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KIM MŪLAKA SUTTA TEACHING. The well known Sinhala monk teacher, **Katukurunde Ñāṇananda**, in the second volume of his *Nibbāna-The mind stilled*, insightfully discusses the significance of this Sutta (2004:76-92), and his insights have been summarized here and inspired further thought. Firstly, Ñāṇananda says that the Kim Mūlaka Sutta preserves a list of questions that relate to common views of the non-Buddhists, especially the brahmins.

Such sectarian ideas relate to philosophical and religious theory, such as ontology (the eternal soul view and “thinghood” or the essence of things, thingness), and cosmology (that everything came from Brahmā, and self is the essence of everything). As such questions are highly speculative, it is difficult for the monks, especially the unawakened ones, to answer them. The Sutta teaches these monks on how to answer such questions.

¹ **Kim Mūlaka S** (A 8.83) has only the first 8 questions; the full list of 10 questions appears in **Bhagavā Mūlaka S** (A 10.58/5:106 f) = SD 67.4.

Ñāṇananda adds that the early commentators have missed out on such deep dimensions and vital developments, and have merely “narrowed down the meaning of the set of answers recommended by the Buddha by limiting its application to wholesome mental states,” such as in Dīgha Porāṇa Ṭīkā (ancient sub-commentary² (2004:77). [2.3]

Ñāṇananda’s discussion raises another interesting and important aspect of early Buddhism, that is, its use of non-technical language, which we shall examine below [2].

1.3 RELATED SUTTAS.

1.3.1 Bhagavā Mūlaka Sutta (A 10.58). As we have already noted, while the Kim Mūlaka Sutta (A 8.83) lists only eight questions, **the Bhagavā Mūlaka Sutta (A 10.58)** gives ten questions [1.1]. The last two questions found only in the latter are as follows:

- (9) What is the footing for all things? (*kiṃ ogadhā sabbe dhammā*),
 (10) What is the ending for all things? (*kiṃ pariyoṣāṇā sabbe dhammā ti*),

and their answers:

- (9) All things find a footing in the death-free, (*amat’ogadhā sabbe dhammā*),
 (10) All things have nirvana as their ending, (*nibbāna, pariyoṣāṇā sabbe dhammā ti*).³

1.3.2 The (Kim Ārammaṇa) Samiddhi Sutta (A 9.14) records how Sāriputta asks the monk Samiddhi a list of nine questions regarding “purposive thinking” (*saṅkappa vitakka*), and Samiddhi answers them correctly, winning Sāriputta’s endorsement and praise, as follows:

THE PURPOSE OF THINKING (ABRIDGED)

(1) What is the conditional basis (<i>ārammaṇa</i>) of purposive thoughts that arise in a person? ⁴	Name-and-form	(<i>nāma, rūpa</i>).
(2) From what does their variety (<i>nānatta</i>) arise?	In the elements	(<i>dhātūsu</i>).
(3) What is their origin [arising] (<i>samudaya</i>)?	Contact	(<i>phassa</i>).
(4) In what do they converge (<i>samosaraṇa</i>)?	Feeling	(<i>vedanā</i>).
(5) What is their leader (<i>pamukha</i>)?	Concentration	(<i>samādhi</i>).
(6) What is their lord (<i>ādhipateyya</i>)?	Mindfulness	(<i>satī</i>).
(7) What is their highest (<i>uttara</i>)?	Wisdom	(<i>paññā</i>).
(8) What is their essence (<i>sāra</i>)?	Liberation	(<i>vimutti</i>).
(9) Where do they find a firm footing (<i>sāra</i>)?	In the death-free	(<i>amata</i>).
	(A 9.14/4:385) = SD 74.8; see AA 4:176	

From the above list, it is clear that questions (3)–(9) and their answers have close parallels in the Kim Mūlaka Sutta. One thing is clear: it shows that the list of questions is not merely about wholesome and unwholesome states (as construed by the Commentaries), but covers a wider perspective. [2.3]

2 A grammar of spirituality

2.1 SIMPLICITY OF EARLY BUDDHIST TEXTS. The language and ideas of the early Buddhist texts, like all true teachings of the heart, are remarkably simple. Only rarely do we find technical terms, like those that appear in the Commentaries and later writings. This is not to say that the teachings are simplistic; on the contrary, underlying the surface simplicity of the early teachings lie profound yet practical wisdom vital for our personal and spiritual growth.

Although the sutta structure is often that of a ring composition, and where it is repetitive, it is very much like a computer programme, the sutta content itself—the story, the teaching, or both—is rich in its own way. It is always that a word has a fixed sense in the early texts. Often there are metaphors, word-

² Ñāṇananda quotes only DAT 1:138; but see also AA 4:158 (which glosses *sabbe dhammā* as the 5 aggregates), AA 5:41 (which says that the Sutta relates to the final attaining of remainderless nirvana).

³ A 10.58/5:106 f = SD 67.4.

⁴ *Kim ārammaṇā...purisassa saṅkappa, vitakkā uppajjantī ti.*

plays, humour and other images, whose sense we need to tease out. Sometimes, a word is used in one sense at the beginning of the discourse, but takes on a different one at the end of it.

In short, we need to comprehend the discourse's context: how the words, expressions, images or teachings are used, or their import. And when we comprehend how these various contexts are linked, we have a better taste of the essence of the Buddha Dharma.

2.2 WORDS IN CONTEXT. Andrew Olendzki, a Buddhist scholar and practitioner of our times, remind us with these sobering words:

As words become more widely used, and especially as they become fashionable, they may often become more difficult to understand. One might think it would be the other way around, but this obfuscation of meaning has generally been the rule with the popularization of Buddhist vocabulary. While each had a precise technical meaning in its original context, terms like zen, yoga, karma, and nirvana can mean almost anything the modern writer wants them to mean. A similar trend may well be underway with *mindfulness*, and perhaps even with the more general word *meditation*. Understanding the sense in which these words are used in their original setting should prove to be a worthwhile undertaking as we see them applied in the current creative encounter between psychology and Buddhist thought. (Andrew Olendzki 2009:37)⁵

Olendzki's remark that, in early Buddhism, words have each "a precise technical meaning in its original context" reflects a similar awareness Nāṇarama is admonished us to cultivate. But let us take a step back, and find out what is it that prompted Nāṇarama's remark in the first place.

As already stated, the Kim Mūlaka Sutta records the Buddha's statement against the views of an abiding soul and essence of things prevalent in his times, especially amongst the brahmins. But sadly, Nāṇananda notes of the Sutta,

its traditional commentators seem to have ignored the deeper philosophical dimensions of the above questions. They have narrowed down the meaning of the set of answers recommended by the Buddha by limiting its application to wholesome states.⁶ The occurrence of such terms as *chanda*, *sati*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*, had probably led them to believe that the entire questionnaire is on the subject of wholesome mental states. But this is a serious underestimation of the import of the entire discourse. It actually does far deeper in laying bare a basic principle governing both skillful and unskillful mental states. (Nāṇananda 2004:77)

Even the very first two verses of the Dhammapada reminds us that there are two sides to a situation or idea, that is to say, unwholesome and wholesome can be said of it. For, the mind precedes mental states; the mind is their chief, mind-made are they (*mano, pubbaṅgamā dhammā, mano, setthā mano, mayā*) (Dh 1+2). If we act with an evil mind, evil will follow; if we act with a good heart, good will follow.

If we examine the eight answers given by the Buddha [§4], we will see them in the same light—that is, they refer to both the unwholesome and the wholesome aspects; or at least they do not refer only to one aspect, as the commentarial tradition would have it.

2.3 COMMENTARIAL NARROWNESS. The later works, such as **the Attha, sālinī** (the Dhamma, saṅgaṇī commentary), for example, always takes *chanda* in an exclusively wholesome sense, that is, as *kusala chanda*, "wholesome desire" or "desire in the wholesome," or *kattu, kamyatā chanda*, "desire to act."⁷ *Sati* (mindfulness), wherever it occurs, is taken as *sammā, sati* (right mindfulness).⁸ But, as we shall see, this is only half the story at best.

⁵ Andrew Olendzki, "Mindfulness and meditation," in F Didonna (ed) *Clinical Handbook of Mindfulness*, New York, 2009: 37-44.

⁶ Nāṇananda quotes only DAṬ 1:138; but see also AA 4:158 (which glosses *sabbe dhammā* as the 5 aggregates); AA 5:41 (which says that the Sutta relates to the final attaining of remainderless nirvana).

⁷ Dhs 269/56, 529/108; DhsA 250. Dhs 1097/195, however, mentioned *kāma-c, chada* (desire for sense-pleasure), which is unwholesome. See Dhs:R 4 n2.

⁸ VbhA 289. VbhA:Ñ 1991:1 even translates *chanda* as "zeal."

The Buddha's answer to the first question, "In what are all things rooted?" is that they are "rooted in desire" (*chanda, mūlaka*). The tone of *chanda* here is clearly neutral or multivalent, that is, it can refer to either wholesome desire or unwholesome lust, depending on its context. *Chanda* is clearly negative when it is connected with craving and suffering, such as follows:⁹

- *kāma-c, chanda* "desire for sense-pleasures" (a mental hindrance) (M 10.36/1:60),¹⁰
- *chanda, rāga* "lustful desire" (DA 3:988; MA 3:146) or "lust and desire" (S 35.232/4:163),
- *chanda, ja agha* "misery born of desire" (S 1.34/1:22).

Furthermore, *chanda* arises as a negative mental state with regards to what we see as desirable and cling to, for example,

- the body (*kāyasmim chando*) S 47.37/5:181;
- sense-objects (*rūpesu chando...*) S 35.246/4:195;
- sexuality (*methunasmim chando*) Sn 835;
- the world we live in (*lokasmim chando*) Sn 866; and
- our continued existence (*bhave chandam*) Thī 14.

However, when *chanda* is rooted in any of the three wholesome roots (non-greed, non-hate, non-delusion), it said to be motivated by a wholesome mind (*kusala, citta*). Once moved by such a wholesome state, we have the desire (*chanda*) to arouse and direct our efforts to letting go of the evil we have been doing, to keep on avoiding it, to cultivate good, and maintain it.¹¹ Here, *chanda* is clearly a word for right effort (*sammā vāyāma*). The Commentaries regard this as a wholesome desire (*kusala-c, chanda*),¹² a spiritual desire (or Dharma-moved desire, *dhmma-c, chanda*),¹³ the desire (or will) to create wholesome states.¹⁴

On a more intense level, *chanda* (as enthusiasm or the desire to act), together with energy (*virīya*), mind (*citta*, that is, mental concentration), and investigation (*vīmaṃsā*), are the predominant support (*ādhipateyya paccaya*)¹⁵ in the cultivation of good (*kusala*) in the mundane sphere, culminating in the bases of spiritual power (*iddhi, pāda*)¹⁶ in the supramundane sphere.

2.4 THE (KOSAMBĪ) UṆṆĀBHA SUTTA (S 51.15) is an important study in the right understanding of the term *chanda* (desire).¹⁷ The discourse opens with the brahmin UṆṆābha asking Ānanda, "What, master Ānanda, is the purpose of holy life lived under the recluse Gotama?" Ānanda answers that "It is for the sake of abandoning desire (*chanda-p, pahān'attham*)."

Then the brahmin asks again on how to abandon this desire. Ānanda replies that desire is abandoned by cultivating the "basis of success that possesses concentration due to desire (*chanda*) and volitional formations of striving."¹⁸ Ānanda is, of course, referring to the first of the four paths of spiritual power or bases for true success (*iddhi, pāda*), which he goes on to list.

This however only puzzles the brahmin, who thinks that "the situation without an end," that desire can end desire. UṆṆābha thinks that this is *a circular argument* (we are assuming what we are trying to

⁹ On *chanda*, see *Kāma-c, chanda* = SD 32.2 (1.1).

¹⁰ See *Kāma-c, chanda* = SD 32.2 (1.2.3).

¹¹ These are the 4 right efforts: see *Mahā Sakul'udāyī S* (M 77.16/2:11; A 9.82/4:462).

¹² We find *kusale dhamme chando* (Be We) or *kusala, dhamma-c, chando* (Ce Ee Se) in *Pātubhāva S* (A 6.96/-3:441) = SD 63.9. See PmA 1:168; VvA 116; DhsA 289, 370.

¹³ *Dhamma-c, chanda* is a canonical term: see *Saññā Nānatta S* (S 14.7) where it means "desire for mental state(s)" (S 14.7/2:143) = SD 17.5. See also PmA 1:168; VvA 116; DhsA 289, 370.

¹⁴ *Kusala dhammesu kattu, kamyatā dhamma-c, chando*, NmA 1:17). Such a process is the 12-step learning process described in *Caṅkī S* (M 95), where the 9th step is where "desire for mindfulness arises" (*sati chando jāyati*) (M 95.20/2:173 f) & SD 21.15 (5). See also MA 3:14.

¹⁵ Vbh 288; DhsA 359.

¹⁶ *Cakka, vatti Sīha, nāda S* (D 26.28/3:77) = SD 36.10; *Mahā Sakul'udāyī S* (M 77.17/2:11) = SD 49.5; *Iddhi, pāda Vibhaṅga S* (S 51.20/5:276-281) = SD 28.14.

¹⁷ S 51.15/5:271-273 = SD 10.10.

¹⁸ "Volitional formations of striving" (*padhāna, saṅkhāra*), according to Comy, is a name for energy that accomplishes the fourfold function of right striving (SA 3:255; PmA 4:343 f; VbhA 306 f).

prove) where one desire overcomes another, but a desire would still remain. Of course, this would be the problem, if both occurrences of *chanda* have the same sense, that is, connote the same idea. However, a close study of Ānanda's reply shows that the sense of *chanda* depends on the context.

To clarify this vital point—that *chanda* (desire) must be understood in its right context—Ānanda uses a simple analogy: “What do you think, brahmin, did you earlier have a desire, ‘I will go to the park,’ and after you have gone to the park, did the said desire subside?” The brahmin answers yes.¹⁹ It is then that Uṇṇābha sees that *chanda* he has in mind refers to “unwholesome desire,” while the *chanda* of the *iddhi-pāda*, which Ānanda speaks of, is a type of *chanda* whose purpose is for the abandoning craving. In other words, when we say, “I desire to remove desire,” the former is positive insofar as its purpose is to remove the latter, which is negative desire.

2.5 WHEN DELIGHT IS GOOD

2.5.1 Desiring the good. A similar theme occurs in **the (Taṇhā) Bhikkhuṇī Sutta** (A 4.159), where Ānanda admonishes a love-struck nun (she had fallen in lust for Ānanda) on how “craving should be abandoned by craving” (*taṇham nissāya taṇhā pahātabbā*). That is to say, by our craving for nirvana, we overcome the craving for sense-pleasure. Ānanda explains that on hearing that someone has attained arhathood, we would also be inspired to do so.²⁰ Such a desire is of course wholesome.

Indeed, even nirvana itself is sometimes referred to as “desirable” (*rata*), the adjective of *ratī*, “delight.” The Dhammapada declares that “the disciple of the fully self-awakened | delights in the destruction of craving” (*taṇha-k,khaya,rato hoti | sammā,sambuddha,sāvako*) (Dh 187cd). Although *ratī* usually has a negative sense, here it is used in a positive way.

2.5.2 When killing is good. **The Chetva Sutta** (S 11.21) records a similar case where a negative word is taken in a positive way. It is said that Shakra, the leader of the 33 Devas, asks the Buddha this question, followed by the answer:

939	<i>Kimsu chetvā sukham seti kimsu chetvā na socati kissassu eka,dhammassa vadham rocesi gotamā ti.</i>	Having killed what does one sleep well? Having killed what does one not sorrow? Of which one thing, Gotama, that you approve of killing?
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940	<i>[The Blessed One:] Kodham chetvā sukham seti kodham chetvā na socati kodhassa visa,mūlassa, madhur'aggassa vāsava vadham ariyā pasāmsanti</i>	Having killed anger, one sleeps well. Having killed anger, one does not sorrow. Of anger with its venomous root and honeyed tip, O Vāsava, the killing the noble ones praise.
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(S 11.21/1:237) = SD 68.3

Here, the word *chetvā* (having killed, slain) is the absolutive of *chindati* (he kills, slains).²¹ The figurative sense here is clear enough. Evil should be removed, and in doing so, it is a wholesome act, as it brings about happiness and liberation.

2.5.3 Spiritual restlessness. Another negative term which is sometimes used in a positive sense is *uddhacca*, “restlessness,” one of the five mental hindrances.²² More specifically, it appears as *dhamm'-uddhacca*, “Dharma-moved restlessness” or “spiritual restlessness.” It makes a significant appearance in **the (Yuganaddha) Paṭipadā Sutta** (A 4.170), where it refers to *restlessness* in its description of one of the ways to attain final liberation.²³ According to this discourse, we can reach the path that leads to final

¹⁹ For the detailed argument, see **(Kosambi) Uṇṇābha S** (S 51.15.7-10/5:272 f) = SD 10.10.

²⁰ A 4.159/2:144-146 = SD 10.14.

²¹ Cf Dh 46c. More commonly, *chindati* has the sense of “he cuts off” (Dh 283c, 346c, 347c, 369c, 397a, 398a).

²² See *Uddhacca,kukkucca* = SD 32.7 (2.1.4).

²³ A 4.170.5/2:157 = SD 41.5.

liberation when the mind is under the influence of *dhamm'uddhacca*, that is, restlessness related to the Dharma. Once the mind settles down and becomes focussed, the path is attained.

The commentary on this passage and the Paṭisambhidhā, magga explains that this description refers to the arising of radiance (*obhāsa*), one of the ten imperfections of insight.²⁴ Not understanding this to be an imperfection and failing to notice its impermanent nature then leads to the arising of restlessness. An alternative interpretation is to take *dhamm'uddhacca* as referring to “mental distress brought on by eagerness to realize the Dhamma, a state of spiritual anxiety that sometimes can precipitate an instantaneous enlightenment experience.”²⁵ An example of this is the case of Bāhiya Dāru, cīriya’s awakening (U 1.-10).²⁶

Interestingly, we can see *dhamm'uddhacca* in terms referring to spiritual evolution, such as *nekhammasita domanassa*, “pain [sorrow] of renunciation.” In the **Salāyatana Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 13), this kind of pain, a mental discomfort, allows the renunciant to overcome the “pain of household life,” that is, the vicissitudes of lay life.²⁷ This pain of renunciation, in turn, is the restlessness arising from the desire to attain nirvana. In a sense, negative as it may be, it is a sign of something good. With its subsidence, we go on to realize a higher spiritual level.

2.6 GOOD WORDS WITH BAD SENSE. Just as some words usually taken in a bad sense can be used to convey a positive way, the reverse, too, is true: a good word or expression can have a bad connotation, depending on the context. We are familiar with words like *sati* (mindfulness) and *samādhi* (concentration) being used in their good senses. Yet we do have many cases of *micchā sati* (wrong mindfulness) and *micchā samādhi* (wrong concentration).²⁸ Hence, we need to examine the context carefully to ensure we rightly understand its intention.

All this interesting discussions show how words in the early texts serve as the tools of spiritual change. Although early Buddhism has a huge scripture,²⁹ it is not a religion of the book. Seekers are often warned of not being trapped by words,³⁰ of seeing the forest despite the tree, and yet to cut down the forest, but not the tree.³¹ For our present purposes, we should understand the meaning of *chanda* in this spirit, and this spirit should similarly prevail in our understanding of the other key terms of the Kim Mūlaka Sutta, which we shall now turn to.

3 The way of all things

Now that we have a better picture of the nature of language, text and context in early Buddhism, we are ready to examine the message of the Kim Mūlaka Sutta more closely and thoroughly. The Buddha begins his answer by stating “**Rooted in desire, avuso, are all thing**” [§4]. Nāṇananda makes use of an

²⁴ *Vipassanūpakkilesa*, viz (1) (radiance *obhāsa*), knowledge (*ñāṇa*), zest (*pīti*), tranquility (*passaddhi*), joy (*sukha*), resolution (*adhimokkha*), exertion (*paggaha*), assurance (*upaṭṭhāna*), equanimity (*upekkhā*), and attachment (*nikanti*). These imperfections arise only in a beginner to meditation, not a saint who has attained the truth. For explanations, see Vism 20.105-130/633-638; also AA 3:143; Pm 2:100.

²⁵ Nyanaponika & Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 1999:294 n69.

²⁶ U 1.10/8 = 33.7. See also *Uddhacca, kukkucā* = SD 32.7 (2.2.2).

²⁷ See **Salāyatana Vibhaṅga S** (M 137.12+13/3:218 f = SD 29.5).

²⁸ **Pāyāsi S** (D 23.31/2:353), **Saṅgīti S** (D 33.3.1(1)/3:254), **Das’uttara S** (D 34.2.1(4)/3:286, 34.2.3(4)/3:290, 34.2.3(9)/3:291); **Dvedha Vitakka S** (M 19.26/1:118), **Vammika S** (M 23.4/1:144), **Mahā Cattārīsaka S** (M 117.-35/3:77), **Bhūmija S** (M 126.9/3:140); **Aṭṭh’aṅgika S** (S 14.28/2:168), **Das’aṅga S** (S 14.29/2:168), **(Thīna, mid-dhā) Tissa S** (S 22.84/3:109), **Avijjā S** (S 45.1/5:1), **(Pubb’aṅgamā) Avijjā S** (S 45.11/5:12), **Vihāra S 2** (S 45.12/5:13), **Kukkuṭ’ārāma S 1** (S 45.18/5:16 f), **Micchatta S** (S 45.21/5:17 f), **Akusala Dhamma S** (S 45.22/5:18), **Paṭipadā S 1** (S 45.23/5:18), **Paṭipadā S 2** (S 45.24/5:18 f), **Asappurisa S 1** (S 45.25/5:19 f), **Asappurisa S 2** (S 45.26/5:20), **Paṭipatti S 1** (S 45.31/5:23), **Anātha, piṇḍika S 1** (S 55.26/5:383); 8 suttas (A 4.204-211/2:220-225), **Micchā Vācā S** (A 5.119/3:141), **Khetta S** (A 8.34.3/4:237), 51 suttas (A 10.104-154/5:212-248).

²⁹ The Pali Canon itself is estimated to be over 11 times the Christian Bible in size.

³⁰ See the parable of the raft in **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22.13-14/1:134 f) & SD 3.13 Intro (2).

³¹ “Cut down the forest, but the tree. | From the forest arises fear. | Having cut down the forest and growths, | O bhikkhus, you are forest-free! (Dh 283).

instructive figure—the parable of the gem in the rubbish heap (but I have given it a slightly different interpretation).

A man approaches a rubbish heap (a unitary notion) to dispose of it. Suddenly, he sees a gem: it becomes his object of desire and interest. The gem has emerged from what is earlier taken to be a rubbish heap, but his focus is now the gem, which becomes everything, “all things,” to him at that moment. *Rooted in desire are all things.*³²

The man’s desire forces him to direct his attention totally to the gem. Now what is “attention” (*manasikāra*) here? The texts often define attention as the directing of the mind to “a sign and its details” (*nimitta anuvyañjana*).³³ The Commentaries say that “**sign**” (*nimitta*) here refers to a grasping arising through one’s sensual lust (*chanda, rāga, vasena*) or on account of merely one’s view (*diṭṭhi, matta, vasena*); “**detail**” (*anuvyañjana*) here refers to finding delight by grasping at another’s limb or body part (eyes, arms, legs, etc).³⁴

In this case, the man examines the gem carefully and notices its shape, hardness, lustre, etc, and thinks about its value, and the wealth and pleasures it would bring. And so the gem is born. Thus, the Buddha says: “**Born in attention are all things.**” An ignorant child or an animal would not know that it is a gem. The man has some concept of “gem” beforehand, a foreknowledge with which perceives the gem. However, whether the gem is genuine or not is another matter.

A mind filled with desire (*chanda*) is always looking for a sense-object to cling to—like a monkey rapidly swinging from tree to tree, clinging to one branch after another.³⁵ Then, it might be added, when the monkey notice a bright object, it is at once captivated to examine it more closely, and to consume it if it is a sweet ripe fruit. This is how attention works: it draws us to a sense-object. Here the gem-finder is consumed by the gem, as it were.

How does the gem really come to the man’s attention? His eyes see a bright object: it catches his eye. If he had ignored it, and were to go on clearing the rubbish, he would not have bothered about the gem. Hence, it is said, “**Arisen through contact are all things.**” The “contact” (*phassa*) here is of course. “eye contact,” or the visual impact of the gem on the man.

Contact (*phassa*) is the sense-stimulus associated with the element-related thoughts already mentioned.³⁶ The converge on **feeling** (*vedanā*), the affective response to the contact or experience, with the tones of pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, which holds together the various aspects of the conscious moment.

When the man sees the gem, he feels excited and bright-eyed: this is a pleasurable feeling. All his attention now focusses on the gem. Hence, it is said, “**converging in feeling are all things.**” In fact, the man has all but forgotten about the rubbish at that moment. He is fully concentrated on the gem. Hence, “**concentration is the leader of all things,**” in the sense of playing the key role in building the mind up to its peak. Here, of course, it is clearly *wrong* concentration [2.6].

Further, it is said, “**Mindfulness is the lord of all things,**” to stress its dominant role in controlling the mind. But this is clearly *wrong* mindfulness [2.6], because it is rooted in desire (*chanda*). And it is a very powerful thought; it overwhelms him totally.

The Buddha then says, “**Wisdom is the highest in all things.**” How does wisdom fit into our parable here? Having got over his initial excitement, the man (assuming he has some wisdom), would, for example, consider carefully how to protect his new found treasure, or how to make use of it. If he is careful and wise in making use of the gem, then he would be rich and live comfortably with his family. His wisdom has brought him wealth and happiness, the highest things in life for an erstwhile rubbish disposer. But this is a *worldly* consideration.

³² For a similar but more elaborate idea, see the parable of the heap of coins: Vism 14.4-5/437.

³³ For a more detailed discussion, see *Nimitta & Anuvyañjana* = SD 19.14.

³⁴ Nm 2:390; Nc 141, 141; DhsA 400, 402; cf MA 1:75, 4:195; SA 3:4, 394; Nc 1:55; DhA 1:74). On other meanings of *nimitta*, see SD 13 §3.1a.

³⁵ *Assutava S 1* (S 12.61.6-8/2:94 f) = SD 20.2

³⁶ As regards most of the remaining terms, we may be able to find some clarification from the brief Aṅguttara commentary on the (Kim Ārammaṇa) Samiddhi Sutta (AA 4:176).

The purpose of the parable is to point to higher things. The gem is the *wisdom* that the Three Jewels can give us. It is a *wealth* which, as it were, we could redeem ourselves from our samsaric debts, our karmic debts. This spiritual wealth is our best tool for rising above craving and ignorance, and leads to the attainment of the supramundane path, that is, true liberation.

4 The essence of all things

4.1 “LIBERATION IS THE ESSENCE OF ALL THINGS.” Finally, the Buddha declares, “**Liberation is its essence of all things,**” that is, the goal of the path (which the Commentary identifies as “the fruit of liberation,” *phala, vimutti*, AA 4:176). Finally, our consciousness, as it were, find a “firm footing” (*oga-dha*) only in nirvana, the death-free (*amata*), taking it as its object (in the path and fruition) and because they are “established” in nirvana. Outside of nirvana, as it were, we keep on roaming and wandering on, hindered by ignorance, fettered by craving.”³⁷

In nirvana, all “things” as we know it come to a complete end, transcending both being and non-being.³⁸ It is opposite of what we do and what happens in the “real” world. The name-and-form model is useful in show us how we habitually *reify* our experiences, we “thingify” what are really events and processes. What does this mean?

This has to do with how we make sense of things. When we see a *form*, say, something yellow, edible and tasty, our minds at once give it a *name*: “banana!” The mind, of course, works in a more complicated way than this. Immediately upon experiencing a banana, we will detect a sense of pleasure at the eye-door, since we like bananas. (This immediate reaction has been conditioned by our previous banana experiences, so that we perceive yellow bananas as being delicious.) Each time, we respond in this manner, we reinforce our liking for bananas. This is how we accumulate and strengthen our latent tendencies.³⁹

4.2 CONCEPTS ARE NOT THE ESSENCE OF ALL THINGS. In the course of our religious history, we have come with interesting, even persuasive, notions to explain how the universe and life began, on the meaning and purpose of our lives, and so on. Out of our habitual *fear of death*, we introduced the notion of some kind of abiding entity, an enduring soul. Out of our persistent *need for security* and to explain how “things” began or happened, we resort to a God idea. Religious history regularly records how the God idea lies at the root of colonialism, cultural domination and mental pathology. Such an idea or being can hardly be “essence of all existence.”

But what does “all things” (*sabbe dhammā*) here mean? The Commentaries seem to take this as referring to “wholesome states” (*kusala dhamma*).⁴⁰ I think **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23) gives a better explanation: all that we *have* to know with (the instruments or methods of knowing) are our six sense-faculties (the five physical senses and the mind), and all that we *can* know are the sense-objects.⁴¹ This is the *all* that we can ever truthfully and usefully claim.

Yet, this is enough. When we closely examine how our sense-faculties work, and the nature of the sense-objects, we *know*, or at least *sense*, that our life and world is completely a *sense-based* and *sense-made* world. In such a world, we sooner or later realize that how imperfect our senses may be, we are still capable of learning from such imperfections or suffering. The more we learn, the more we adapt, the more we evolve. In an important, we are working to *liberate* ourselves from the shortcomings of our senses.

As such, it makes better sense (indeed the best sense), to work with the notion that “liberation is the essence of all things” than any theistic speculation or dogma. Speculations keep us in a circular rut. Dogma stops us from thinking for ourselves. The notion of liberation, on the other hand, entails that we evolve into better beings. Just as *survival* of a species is the essence of biological evolution, the *liberation* of the individual is at the heart of spiritual evolution.

³⁷ (S 22.9.3/3:149 = SD 28.7a) = (S 22.100.3/3:151 = SD 28.7b).

³⁸ **Kiṃ Mūlaka S** (A 8.83) has only the first 8 questions; the full list of 10 questions appears in **Bhagavā Mūlaka S** (A 10.58/5:106 f) = SD 67.4. [1.1]

³⁹ See *Anusaya* = SD 31.3.

⁴⁰ ItA 1:155; DhA 69.

⁴¹ S 35.23/4:15 = SD 7.1.

Indeed, liberation is at the very heart of such discourses as **the Mahā Sārōpama Sutta** (M 29). The essence of all things is not the heaping up of concepts and dogmas, much less of proving them wrong or right, much less of attracting power, wealth, gain, honour or fame. Hence, the Mahā Sārōpama Sutta closes with these words:

So this holy life, bhikshus, does not have gain, honour, and renown as its benefit, or for the attainment of virtue as its benefit, or the attainment of concentration as its benefit, or knowledge and vision as its benefit.

But it is the unshakable liberation of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood, and its end. (M 29.7/1:197) = SD 53.8

The Discourse “What is the Root?”

A 8.83/4:338

1 “If, bhikshus, the wanderers of other sects were to ask you thus:

(1) In what are all things rooted?	<i>kiṃ mūlakā, āvuso,</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(2) In what are all things born?	<i>kiṃ sambhavā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(3) In what do all things arise?	<i>kiṃ samudayā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(4) In what do all things converge?	<i>kiṃ samosaraṇā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(5) What is the leader of all things?	<i>kiṃ pamukhā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(6) What is the supreme lord of all things?	<i>kiṃ adhipateyyā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(7) What is the highest of all things?	<i>kiṃ uttarā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(8) What is the essence of all things?	<i>kiṃ sārā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>

When you asked thus, bhikshus, by the wanderers of other sects, how should you answer?”

2 “Bhante, our teachings are rooted in the Blessed One, guided by the Blessed One, has the Blessed One as refuge. It would be good indeed if the Blessed One were to explain its meaning. Having heard the Blessed One, the monks would remember it.”⁴²

“In that case, bhikshus, listen, pay careful attention, I will speak.

“Yes, bhante,” the monks answered the Blessed One in assent.

3 The Blessed One said this:

“If, bhikshus, the wanderers of other sects were to ask you thus:

- In what are all things rooted?
- In what are all things born?
- In what do all things arise?
- In what do all things converge?
- What is the leader of all things?
- What is the supreme lord of all things?
- What is the highest of all things?
- What is the essence of all things?

⁴² *Bhagavam, mūlakā no bhante dhammā, bhagavam nettikā, bhagavam paṭisaraṇā. Sādhū vata bhante bhagavatañ-ñ’eva paṭibhātu etassa bhāsītassa attho. Bhagavato sutvā bhikkhū dhāressantī ti.* This is stock: **Mahā Dhamma, samādāna S** (M 46.2/1:309 f), **Vīmaṅsaka S** (M 47.3/1:317), **Naḷakapāna S** (M 68.8/1:465), **Mahā Suññata S** (M 122.19/3:115) = SD 11.4; **Bāleṇa Paṇḍita S** (S 2:24) = SD 21.1, **Parivīmaṅsanā S** (S 12.51/2:81) = SD 11.5, **Candūpama S** (S 16.3/2:199), **Sammāsambuddha S** (S 22.58/3:66), **Sall’atthena S** (S 36.6/4:208) = SD 5.5, **Ānanda S 2** (S 36.16/4:221); A 3.68/1:199, A 8.6/4:158, A 8.83/4:338, A 9.1/4:351, A 10.58/5:106, A 11.20/-5:355.

4 When you are asked thus, bhikshus, by the wanderers of other sects, you should answer them thus:

(1) Rooted in <u>desire</u> , avuso,	are all things,	<i>chanda,mūlakā, āvuso,</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(2) Born in <u>attention</u>	are all things,	<i>manasikāra,sambhavā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(3) Arisen through <u>contact</u>	are all things,	<i>phassa,samudayā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(4) Converging in <u>feeling</u>	are all things,	<i>vedanā,samosaraṇā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(5) <u>Concentration</u> is the leader	of all things,	<i>samādhi-p,pamukhā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(6) Mindfulness is the lord	of all things,	<i>sat'ādhipateyyā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(7) <u>Wisdom</u> is the highest	in all things,	<i>paññ'uttarā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>
(8) <u>Liberation</u> is the essence	of all things,	<i>vimutti,sārā</i>	<i>sabbe dhammā,</i>

When you are asked thus, bhikshus, by the wanderers of other sects, this is how you should answer them.

— evaṃ —

100405; 100409; 100422; 101117