

The Arahant and the Four Truths in Early Buddhist Discourse

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lecture 1

MĀ 21 – Discourse on an Even Mind

(Parallel to AN 2.4.5/ AN I 63)

"Venerable friends, there truly are two categories of people to be found in the world. Which two?

- 1) "There are those who are non-returners, who have internal fetters and who will not be reborn into this [human] realm;
- 2) and there are those who are not non-returners, who have external fetters, and who will be reborn into this [human] realm.

1a) "Suppose someone observes the training in the precepts without transgression or compromise, without blemish or defect. He practices in this way abundantly, overcomes impediments, and is praised by the worthy ones for being well-cultivated and well-endowed [in the training]

b) ... he further trains in disenchantment regarding sensual desires, in dispassion, and in abandoning sensual desires

c) ... he attains a peaceful liberation of the mind

"... with the breaking up of the body at death, he passes beyond the gods that feed on gross food and is reborn among the mind-made gods.

"... Such a person, venerable friends, is called a non-returner who has internal fetters and who will not be reborn into this [human] realm.

2) "Suppose someone observes the training in the precepts, guards [against breaking] the code of rules, and skillfully controls his comportment in accordance with proper conduct. He trains in the pre-

cepts in this way, seeing great danger in even the slightest transgression and being apprehensive of it.

"Such a person, venerable friends, is called one who is not a non-returner, who has external fetters, and who will still be reborn into this [human] realm."

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MĀ 21 main point

- morality alone is not enough, but as a basis for dispassion and the development of concentration it leads to non-return

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AN 2.4.5:

- 1) internally fettered:
moral conduct, reborn in heaven, returns to this world
- 2) externally fettered:
moral conduct, liberation of the mind, reborn in heaven,
does not return to this world
- 3) externally fettered:
morality, dispassion, reborn in heaven, does not return to
this world

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MĀ 21 & AN 2.4.5

Both versions continue with some gods informing the Buddha about the teaching given by Sāriputta. The Buddha then comes to see Sāriputta and approves of the exposition

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MĀ 21

The Buddha then tells Sāriputta:

"Sāriputta, those gods of even mind are able to stand together on the tip of an awl – ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, or sixty of them – without obstructing one another.

"Sāriputta, it was not after being born into their heavenly realm ... it was while still in the human realm [in a former life] that those gods of even mind cultivated a good mind, extensively and greatly, and thereby acquired the ability to stand together on the tip of an awl – ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, or sixty of them – without obstructing one another.

"Therefore, Sāriputta, one should cultivate tranquility — tranquility of the sense-faculties, tranquility of the mind, and tranquility in one's physical, verbal, and mental actions."

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main points:

- morality is the very foundation of the practice and it should certainly never be underestimated,
- nevertheless, only morality is not enough, it should lead on to dispassion
- dispassion then leads to mental tranquility and concentration,
- such tranquility is something that can be developed at all levels, from everyday bodily and verbal activities all the way up to the peaceful liberations of the mind

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The Arahant, Arahant

I. Etymology

1. Sutta explanation

“He is far away (*āraṅka*) from bad unwholesome qualities that are defiling, lead to renewed existence, troublesome, result in suffering, and are connected to future birth, old age, and death. In this way a monk is an arahant.” (MN 39; I 280)

(*Ārakāssa honti pāpakā akusalā dhammā, saṅkilesikā, ponobbhavikā, sadarā, dukkhavipākā, āyatim jātijarāmarañiyā. Evaṃ bhikkhave bhikkhu araham hoti.*)

2. Visuddhimagga (VII.4–25) & Other Commentaries

(1) **ārakattā --> araham: “One is an arahant because of being far away.”**

“Because of being far away from all defilements” (*ārakā hi so sabbakilesehi*).

(2) **Arīnaṃ hatattā --> araham: “One is an arahant because one has destroyed the enemies.” Enemies (*ari*) = the defilements.**

(3) **Arānaṃ hatattā --> araham: “One is an arahant because one has destroyed the spokes.”**

That is, *the spokes (arā)* of the beginningless wheel of saṃsāra.

(4) **Paccayādīnaṃ arahattā --> araham: “One is an arahant because one is worthy of the requisites, and so forth.”**

3. Modern etymological derivation (A Dictionary of Pali, PTS)

From verb *arahati*: “is worthy of, deserves, is entitled to” (p. 234).

Definition of arahant: “One who has realised nibbāna; one in whom the *āsavas* are destroyed and who is no longer liable to rebirth” (p. 233).

4. Conclusions on significance of arahant

(1) realizer of nibbāna, the unborn, unconditioned, deathless state

- (2) a destroyer of all defilements
- (3) one no longer bound to the round of repeated birth and death
- (4) sociological dimension: the world-renouncer as a receiver of offerings and veneration.

II. The role of the arahant in early Buddhism

1. The pre-Buddhist landscape: followers of other sects also upheld the arahant as the perfected individual, in each case as understood within their own system.
Examples: MN 91: Brahmin Brahmāyu asks Buddha how one is an arahant; Udāna 1:10: Bāhiya, at the time a non-Buddhist ascetic, imagines he is an arahant, even before he has heard of the Buddha; Vinaya Mahāvagga: the matted-hair ascetic Uruvela Kassapa imagines himself an arahant when he first meets the Buddha, until the Buddha subdues his pride. The Jains call their saints arahants, even today.
2. The Buddha as the first arahant, as seen in the salutation “*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa,*” and in the verse of recollection: “*Iti pi so bhagavā araham sammā sambuddho ...*,” etc.
3. The relationship between Buddha and arahant disciples
 - (1) Similarity: MN 108, SN 22.58: The Buddha is the one who discovers the path, realizes the goal first; the disciples follow him and realize the goal under his guidance.
 - (2) Disparity: Buddha has unique powers and modes of knowledge that qualify him to “set in motion the wheel of Dhamma”: e.g., ten Tathāgata powers and four grounds of self-confidence (MN 10). Buddha is “supreme trainer of people to be tamed, teacher of devas and human beings.”
3. The state of arahantship integrated into the stages of liberation as the fourth of the four stages. The stages are differentiated by way of: (1) defilements eliminated; (2) the number of rebirths that remain. I will deal with these later; for now it suffices to say that the arahant is the one who has *eliminated all defilements*, and therefore has *no further rebirths* remaining.

III. The arahant formula

“A monk is an arahant, one whose *āsavas* are destroyed, who has lived the spiritual life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached his own goal, utterly destroyed the fetters of existence, one completely liberated through final knowledge.” (*Bhikkhu araham khīṇāsavo vusitavā katakaraṇīyo ohitabhāro anuppattasadattho parikkhīṇabhavasamyojano sammadaññā vimutto.*)

1. *Khīṇāsavo*. “One with *āsavas* destroyed.” *Āsavas*: “taints, pollutants, contaminants; drives, influxes, effluents.” Three *āsavas*: sensual desire, desire for existence, ignorance.
2. *Vusitavā* = *vusitam brahmacariyam*, “who has lived the spiritual life,” who has fully practiced the noble eightfold path. The ten factors of an arahant (see e.g. MN 78, MN 117).
3. *Katakaraṇīyo*: “Done what had to be done.” Fulfilled the four tasks imposed by the four noble truths: fully understood the truth of suffering; eradicated the truth of the origin (craving and other defilements); realized the truth of cessation (*nibbāna*), and cultivated the way to cessation (the eightfold path).
4. *Ohitabhāro*: “Laid down the burden,” that is, of the five clinging aggregates.
5. *Anuppattasadattho*: “Reached his own goal.”
6. *Parikkhīṇabhavasamyojano*: “Utterly destroyed the fetters of existence.”

What binds us to repeated existence are mental defilements called fetters (*samyojana*).

Excursion: The four stages of realization and the fetters eliminated:

- (1) *Stream-enterer (sotāpanna)* eradicates the first three fetters (view of self, doubt, wrong grasp of precepts and observances); free from lower realms; seven births at most in fortunate realms.
- (2) *Once-returner (sakadāgāmi)* has eradicated the first three fetters, and further weakens greed, hatred, and delusion. One more birth as a human or celestial being (*deva*).
- (3) *Non-returner (anāgāmi)*, in addition to three fetters, eradicates next two fetters of sensual desire and ill will. No more rebirth in sensual realm; reborn in higher realms (form realm, usually in “pure abodes”) and there realizes final *nibbāna*.

(4) *Arahant*: eradicates the five higher fetters: attachment to form, attachment to the formless, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance. No more rebirth in any realm.

6. *Sammadaññā vimutto*: “Completely liberated through final knowledge.” Points to two aspects of the arahant’s achievement: *right knowledge* and *right liberation*. The first can be seen to signify the removal of ignorance, florescence of wisdom; the second freedom from all defilements and from future births.

IV. Kinds of arahants

1. The basic distinction

(1) *Arahants liberated in both respects (ubhatobhāgavimutta)*

“Here some person contacts with the body and dwells in those liberations that are peaceful and formless, transcending forms, and his pollutants (*āsava*) are destroyed by his seeing with wisdom.”

They are liberated from “form” by the formless meditations; liberated from all defilements and from *samsāra* by wisdom.

(2) *Arahants liberated by wisdom (paññāvimutta)*

“Here some person does not contact with the body and dwell in those liberations that are peaceful and formless, transcending forms, but his pollutants (*āsava*) are destroyed by his seeing with wisdom.”

They are liberated from all defilements and from *samsāra* by wisdom, but do not attain (or do not master) the formless meditations.

2. Other grades of arahants often mentioned in Nikāyas

(1) *Tevijja*: These arahants possess the “three higher knowledges”: recollection of past lives, knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings, knowledge of the destruction of the *āsavas*. Note that the former two do not presuppose arahantship.

(2) *Chalabhiñña*: These possess the “six super-knowledges”: psychic powers, the divine ear, reading the minds of others, plus the three higher knowledges. Note that the former five do not presuppose arahantship.

3. Question: Can a layperson become an arahant?

Controversial passage (AN 6.119–31; III 450–51):

“Bhikkhus, possessing six qualities, the householder Tapussa [and twenty others, among them Anāthapiṇḍika] has reached certainty about the Tathāgata and become a seer of the deathless, one who lives having realized the deathless. What six? Unwavering confidence in the Buddha, unwavering confidence in the Dhamma, unwavering confidence in the Sangha, noble virtuous behavior, noble knowledge, and noble liberation. Possessing these six qualities, the householder Tapussa has reached certainty about the Tathāgata and become a seer of the deathless, one who lives having realized the deathless.”