

MN 87: Piyajātika Sutta (Annotated)

Born from Affection

Translated and Annotated by Suddhāso Bhikkhu

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Sāvatti, in Jeta's Grove, at Anāthapiṇḍika's park. On this occasion, there was a certain householder whose only son, who was loved by him and pleasing to him, had died. Because of that death, he did not work or eat. He would go to the cemetery and cry, "My only son, where are you? My only son, where are you?"

Then that householder approached the Blessed One, paid respects to him, and sat to one side. When the householder was seated to one side, the Blessed One said to him, "Householder, you do not appear to have a stable mind. You appear to be deranged."

People would come to the Buddha with all manner of questions, scenarios, or difficulties. In this case, a bereaved father grieving the loss of his son goes to the Buddha, most likely seeking solace. The Buddha immediately notices that something was wrong, and comments rather bluntly on that apparent fact.

"Bhante, how could I not be deranged? Bhante, my only son, who I loved and was pleased by, has died. Because of that death, I do not work or eat. I go to the cemetery and cry, 'My only son, where are you? My only son, where are you?'"

"That's how it is, householder, that's how it is! Householder, sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection¹; they come from affection."

The Buddha's reply is notable, in that he makes no effort to console the man's frayed emotional state, but instead takes the opportunity to expound a universal principle of Dhamma: attachment leads to suffering. When we invest ourselves in external conditions, we are setting ourselves up for disappointment and pain. Every single person, object, and experience in our lives is subject to change; this is normal. However, if we latch on to any particular thing (such as a person), then when that thing changes - as it inevitably will! - we experience a sense of loss. If instead we continually remind ourselves of the impermanent nature of all phenomena, then by carefully avoiding attachment to such ephemeral things, we also avoid the emotional backlash of loss.

This does not mean we cannot care about people; rather it means that we do not invest ourselves in unrealistic expectations. So we can still care very deeply about people, but we remain aware that no matter how much we care we cannot control their circumstances (or our own!). There is no need to experience anguish on account of that which is natural and inevitable - such as the loss of a loved one.

1 Piyajātika. Lit. "that which is born (jātika) from affection (piya)."

The anguish that comes from that kind of situation is the result of our clinging to a fantasy; when we experience conditions that shatter our dreamworld, we become distraught.

Yet most of us are still immersed in attachment, and as a result will probably experience the pain of loss. So what can we do when that happens?

First off, be clearly aware of your emotional experience. Don't pretend it isn't happening. Acknowledge the grief that's present; examine it closely. See what it feels like. However, be careful not to exacerbate the situation: try not to make the pain worse. Instead try to cultivate acceptance, equanimity, and non-attachment; try to let go of whoever or whatever you were attached to, and move on. Also recall that the pain you're experiencing is a direct result of attachment and unrealistic expectations; this is a chance to remind ourselves of the importance of maintaining non-attachment and a realistic perspective.

And what is that realistic perspective which the Buddha encourages us to reflect on every single day? It is these five truths (see AN 5.57):

- 1. We are getting old.*
- 2. We are not immune to illness.*
- 3. We are going to die.*
- 4. Everything we like will change and be separated from us.*
- 5. We are responsible for every choice we make.*

This might initially appear a bit pessimistic; however, it is simply a realistic evaluation of the conditions we face. Refusing to acknowledge the truth of these conditions is one of the main reasons we suffer, as reality will continue to assert itself regardless of whether or not we're willing to accept it - and that disjunct between our distorted perspective and our actual experience causes an enormous amount of inner torment.

On the other hand, continually recalling these five truths helps us build up an immunity to such torment, by preparing ourselves to courageously face the unpleasant facts of life without being overwhelmed.

“Bhante, how can you think that sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection and come from affection? Bhante, delight and elation are born from affection; they come from affection.” That householder did not delight in the Blessed One's speech; he condemned it, rose from his seat, and left.

The layman was having none of it, however. He rejects the Buddha's statement, asserts the exact opposite, and leaves - apparently without making any effort to understand why the Buddha said what he said. This is particularly ironic in that his own experience directly confirms the truth of the Buddha's words. However, when we are caught up in powerful emotional experiences, we often have difficulty

seeing our experience objectively; we tend to fall back on pre-existing notions and tendencies. It takes a genuine effort of will to overcome our habitual perceptions and see what's going on without getting swept up in it.

On this occasion, several gamblers were playing with dice not far from the Blessed One. Then the householder approached those gamblers and said to them, "Sirs, here I approached the contemplative Gotama, paid respects to him, and sat to one side. When I was seated to one side, the Blessed One said to me, 'Householder, you do not appear to have a stable mind. You appear to be deranged.' Sirs, when this was said, I said to the contemplative Gotama, 'Bhante, how could I not be deranged? Bhante, my only son, who I loved and was pleased by, has died. Because of that death, I do not work or eat. I go to the cemetery and cry, "My only son, where are you? My only son, where are you?"' 'That's how it is, householder, that's how it is! Householder, sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection; they come from affection.' 'Bhante, how can you think that sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection and come from affection? Bhante, delight and elation are born from affection; they come from affection.' Then, sirs, I did not delight in the contemplative Gotama's speech; I condemned it, rose from my seat, and left."

"That's how it is, householder, that's how it is! Householder, delight and elation are born from affection; they come from affection."

Then that householder left, thinking "The gamblers agree with me."

Dissatisfied with the answer given by a fully enlightened spiritual teacher, the layman instead decides to consult with a group of gamblers. While this seems absurd, it reflects a common human tendency. When we encounter truths that we find distasteful, we are often unwilling to face up to them and look for excuses to reject them. To this end, we may seek out people who agree with our previous beliefs. This is counter-productive; in order to make progress in our understanding of the universe, we need to be willing to explore ideas different from or even contrary to our own. We don't necessarily need to accept every unusual idea we encounter; however, it is worth considering them instead of dismissing them out of hand.

An account of this conversation eventually entered the royal palace. Then King Pasenadi of Kosala said to Queen Mallikā², "Mallikā, this was said by the contemplative Gotama: 'Sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection; they come from affection.'"

"Great King, if that is what the Blessed One said, then that's how it is."

2 Her name means "Jasmine."

“No matter what the contemplative Gotama says, Mallikā approves of it in this way: 'Great King, if that is what the Blessed One said, then that's how it is.' It is just like when a teacher says something to a student, the student always approves of it [by saying] 'That's how it is, teacher! That's how it is, teacher!' In the same way, Mallikā, no matter what the contemplative Gotama says, you approve of it in this way: 'Great King, if that is what the Blessed One said, then that's how it is.' Bah! Mallikā, get lost!”

Queen Mallikā was a devoted disciple of the Buddha. King Pasenadi was as well, so it is a bit odd that he reacted so harshly to Queen Mallikā's approval of the Buddha's statement. It is possible that King Pasenadi, like the layman who lost his son, was initially unwilling to accept the Buddha's statement.

Then Queen Mallikā addressed the brahmin Nālijangha, “Brahmin, go to the Blessed One, and with your head at his feet, revere him with my words: 'Bhante, Queen Mallikā reveres you with her head at your feet, and asks if you are unafflicted, healthy, unburdened, strong, and comfortable.' Then say, 'Bhante, did the Blessed One make the statement “Sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection; they come from affection”?’ As the Blessed One explains, carefully learn [what he says] and report it to me. Tathāgatas do not speak what is not true.”

There is a wordplay in the original text here which cannot be easily reproduced in English: “Tathāgatas” do not speak what is not “tathā” (true).

“Tathāgata” is a term designating a fully enlightened being, and it is the word the Buddha most often used to indicate himself. There are several ways to translate this term, which is composed of two words: “Tathā” (as it is; truth), and either “āgata” (come) or “gata” (gone). Thus “Tathāgata” can mean “One who has arrived at the way things are” or “One who has gone by the way things are.” Or, more succinctly, “Truth-finder” and “Truth-speaker.”

In Itivuttaka 4.13, the Buddha gives four definitions for the word “Tathāgata”:

- 1. Anything in the world that is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, and mentally examined, has been completely awakened to by the Tathāgata; therefore he is called the Tathāgata.*
- 2. From the time the Tathāgata attains enlightenment until the time he dies, everything he says is that way (tathā) and not otherwise; therefore he is called the Tathāgata.*
- 3. Whatever the Tathāgata says, he acts in that way (tathā); whatever he does, he speaks in that way. He speaks as he acts and acts as he speaks; therefore he is called the Tathāgata.*
- 4. In this world, the Tathāgata is the unconquered master. He has authority over everything; therefore he is called the Tathāgata.*

“Yes, Madam,” the brahmin Nāḷijangha replied to Queen Mallikā. He approached the Blessed One and conversed with him. After engaging in the appropriate polite conversation, the brahmin Nāḷijangha sat to one side and said to the Blessed One, “Sir Gotama, Queen Mallikā reveres Sir Gotama with her head at your feet. She asks if you are unafflicted, healthy, unburdened, strong, and comfortable. She also says, 'Bhante, did the Blessed One make the statement “Sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection; they come from affection”?””

“That's how it is, Brahmin, that's how it is! Brahmin, sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection; they come from affection. Brahmin, there is a way that one can understand that sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection and come from affection.

“Brahmin, in the past there was a woman here in Sāvatti whose mother died. Because of that death, she was distraught and mentally disturbed; she would go from street to street, from intersection to intersection, saying 'Have you seen my mother? Have you seen my mother?' Brahmin, this is a way that one can understand that sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection and come from affection.

This is one practical example of the Buddha's point: when one is strongly attached to a particular person and is unwilling to let them go, then when that person dies one is likely to experience intense mental and emotional torment as a direct result of that attachment. In extreme cases, this can result in derangement and insanity.

“Brahmin, in the past there was a woman here in Sāvatti whose father... brother... sister... son... daughter... husband died. Because of that death, she was distraught and mentally disturbed; she would go from street to street, from intersection to intersection, saying 'Have you seen my husband? Have you seen my husband?' Brahmin, this is a way that one can understand that sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection and come from affection.

“Brahmin, in the past there was a man here in Sāvatti whose mother... father... brother... sister... son... daughter... wife died. Because of that death, he was distraught and mentally disturbed; he would go from street to street, from intersection to intersection, saying 'Have you seen my wife? Have you seen my wife?' Brahmin, this is a way that one can understand that sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection and come from affection.

“Brahmin, in the past there was a woman here in Sāvatti who went to visit her relatives. Her relatives separated her from her husband and wanted to give her to a different man. She did not want that. Then that woman said to her husband, 'Noble sir, my relatives have separated me from you and want to give me to a different man. I do not want that.' Then that man cut the woman in two and sliced himself open, saying 'We will be together after death.' Brahmin, this is a

way that one can understand that sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection and come from affection.”

These are all similar examples to the first, though the last is particularly dramatic.

Then the brahmin Nāḷijangha delighted in and approved of the Blessed One's speech. He rose from his seat, went to Queen Mallikā, and reported to her his entire conversation with the Blessed One.

Then Queen Mallikā went to King Pasenadi and said to him, “What do you think, Great King - do you feel affection for Princess Vajiri³?”

“Yes, Mallikā, I feel affection for Princess Vajiri.”

“What do you think, Great King - if there was a catastrophic change⁴ in Princess Vajiri, would you experience sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish?”

“Mallikā, if there was a catastrophic change in Princess Vajiri, it would seriously alter my life. How could I not experience sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish?”

“Great King, when the Blessed One, the One who Knows and Sees, the Worthy One, the Fully Enlightened One, said 'Sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection and come from affection,' this is what he was referring to.

Queen Mallikā drew upon the examples given by the Buddha and presented them in a form that was very personal to King Pasenadi: the death of his daughter, or a grave affliction affecting her. In such a case, he would likely experience severe emotional turmoil because of his attachment to his daughter. This indicates the basic truth of the Buddha's statement: attachments lead to suffering. So when we engage in relationships with other people - whether it's a friend, a lover, a relative, or any other kind of partner - it's valuable to constantly remind ourselves of the basic nature of the connection: namely, that it is temporary, and it can change at any time. When we keep this in mind, we are less likely to depend upon that relationship for our happiness and contentment. Instead we focus on developing a self-reliant happiness - the ability to be okay with our experience, no matter what it is.

“What do you think, Great King - do you feel affection for Lady Vāsabhā⁵?”

“Yes, Mallikā, I feel affection for Lady Vāsabhā.”

3 Her name can mean either “diamond” or “lightning bolt.”

4 *Vipariṇāma*. This is often used as a euphemism for serious illness, death, or a disaster of some kind.

5 She is not mentioned elsewhere in the Suttas. Apocryphal texts identify her as King Pasenadi's concubine. While this may be true, there is no evidence of it in the original discourses.

“What do you think, Great King - if there was a catastrophic change in Lady Vāsabhā, would you experience sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish?”

“Mallikā, if there was a catastrophic change in Lady Vāsabhā, it would seriously alter my life. How could I not experience sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish?”

“Great King, when the Blessed One, the One who Knows and Sees, the Worthy One, the Fully Enlightened One, said 'Sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection and come from affection,' this is what he was referring to.

“What do you think, Great King - do you feel affection for General Viḍūḍabha⁶?”

“Yes, Mallikā, I feel affection for General Viḍūḍabha.”

“What do you think, Great King - if there was a catastrophic change in General Viḍūḍabha, would you experience sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish?”

“Mallikā, if there was a catastrophic change in General Viḍūḍabha, it would seriously alter my life. How could I not experience sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish?”

“Great King, when the Blessed One, the One who Knows and Sees, the Worthy One, the Fully Enlightened One, said 'Sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection and come from affection,' this is what he was referring to.

“What do you think, Great King - do you feel affection for me?”

“Yes, Mallikā, I feel affection for you.”

“What do you think, Great King - if there was a catastrophic change in me, would you experience sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish?”

“Mallikā, if there was a catastrophic change in you, it would seriously alter my life. How could I not experience sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish?”

“Great King, when the Blessed One, the One who Knows and Sees, the Worthy One, the Fully Enlightened One, said 'Sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection and come from affection,' this is what he was referring to.

“What do you think, Great King - do you feel affection for the Kāsi district of Kosala?”

⁶ General Viḍūḍabha is identified as King Pasenadi's son in the Kaṇṇakatthala Sutta (MN90). Apocryphal texts say Lady Vāsabhā was his mother.

“Yes, Mallikā, I feel affection for the Kāsi district of Kosala. Mallikā, it is because of power over the Kāsi district of Kosala that we use sandalwood from Kāsi and wear jewelry, fragrances, and cosmetics.”

“What do you think, Great King - if there was a catastrophic change in the Kāsi district of Kosala, would you experience sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish?”

“Mallikā, if there was a catastrophic change in the Kāsi district of Kosala, it would seriously alter my life. How could I not experience sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish?”

“Great King, when the Blessed One, the One who Knows and Sees, the Worthy One, the Fully Enlightened One, said 'Sorrow, grief, pain, dejection, and anguish are born from affection and come from affection,' this is what he was referring to.”

This final example is notable in that it expands the domain of the examples given beyond personal relationships to include attachment to places and objects as well as people. Attachment is attachment, whether it's to a person, place, or thing; and attachment of any sort leads to unpleasant results.

“Wonderful, Mallikā! Marvelous, Mallikā! The Blessed One sees so much, with penetrative wisdom. Come, Mallikā, bathe me.”

Queen Mallikā's examples clearly had a strong impact on King Pasenadi, as he reacts much more positively than he did when he first heard the Buddha's truism. Often what makes a difference in our grasp of Dhamma is finding how it relates to concrete examples in our own lives; so rather than thinking of it merely in terms of abstract generalities, we can think of it in terms of specific details. This drives home the relevance of the Dhamma.

For example, thinking “Everyone dies” is a generality that may have little or no emotional impact. On the other hand, thinking “My friend will die” carries a much stronger emotional overtone, as its specificity helps us apply the underlying principle in examining and releasing our attachments.

As for King Pasenadi's interest in bathing: At that time in India, it was common to bathe prior to engaging in any religious or spiritual activities; the external action of cleansing the body was seen as correlative to the mental purification that comes from spiritual self-development.

Then King Pasenadi of Kosala rose from his seat, arranged his upper robe on one shoulder, extended his hands, with palms together, towards the Blessed One, and proclaimed three times: “Homage to the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Fully Enlightened One! Homage to the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Fully

Enlightened One! Homage to the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Fully Enlightened One!”

This statement (Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsbuddhassa), which is found in several places throughout the Suttas, continues to be used to this day as an exclamation of reverence for the Buddha, and can be heard at the beginning of almost every single ceremony in Theravāda Buddhism.