



This remarkable and powerful poem, found buried amid the rather dry linguistic commentary of the *Niddesa* (a canonical commentary on the *Atthakavagga* of the *Sutta Nipāta* attributed to Sāriputta), speaks to the dual themes of impermanence and selflessness. In the later systematic psychology called Abhidhamma, these themes are developed into the doctrine of momentariness and the thorough enumeration of impersonal phenomena.

All human experience is ever-changing, but is known in fleeting moments of perceptive and affected consciousness. Close awareness of these moments, using heightened attention which can be developed through concentration and insight meditation, reveal a plethora of non-personal mental factors (dhammas) arising and passing away in innumerable unique combinations.

Upon the Tip of a Needle

Mahā Niddesa 1.42

Guhatthaka-suttaniddeso

jīvitam attabhāvo ca
sukhadukkhā ca kevalā
ekacittasamāyuttā,
lahuso vattati kkhano.

Life, personhood, pleasure and pain
—This is all that's bound together
In a single mental event
—A moment that quickly takes place.

cullāsīti sahasāni kappā
tiṭṭhanti ye marū,
na tv eva te pi jīvanti
dvīhi cittehi samāhitā.

Even the spirits who endure
For eighty-four thousand aeons
—Even these do not live the same
For any two moments of mind.

ye niruddhā marantassa
tiṭṭhamānassa vā idha,
sabb' eva sadisā khandhā,
gatā appaṭisandhikā.

What ceases for one who is dead,
Or for one who's still standing here,
Are all just the same aggregates
—Gone, never to connect again.

anantarā ca ye bhaṅgā
ye ca bhaṅgā anāgatā,
tadantare niruddhānaṃ
vesammaṃ n'atthi lakkhaṇa.

The states which are vanishing now,
And those which will vanish some day,
Have characteristics no different
Than those which have vanished before.

anibbattena na jāto,
paccuppanna jīvati,
cittabhaṅgamato loko,
paññatti paramatthiyā.

With no production there's no birth;
With becoming present, one lives.
When grasped with the highest meaning,
The world is dead when the mind stops.

anidhānagatā baṅgā,
puñño n'atthi anāgate,
nibbattā yeva tiṭṭhanti
āragge sāsapūpamā.

There's no hoarding what has vanished,
No piling up for the future;
Those who have been born are standing
Like a seed upon a needle.

nibbattānaṃ ca dhammānaṃ
bhaṅgo nesam purekkhato,
palokadhammā tiṭṭhanti
purāṇehi amissitā.

The vanishing of all these states
That have become is not welcome,
Though dissolving phenomena stand
Uncombined from primordial time.

adassanato āyanti bhaṅgā,
gacchanti dassanaṃ,
vijjuppādo va ākāse
uppajjanti vayanāti cā ti.

From the unseen, [states] come and go,
Glimpsed only as they're passing by;
Like lightning flashing in the sky
—They arise and then pass away.

The poem captures something of this dance of dhammas, yet steers us away from identifying it as "ours." The elements out of which the mind so quickly constructs these glimpses of experience are universal—pleasure and pain, for example, are felt equally by all.

Every mental state is certainly unique, partly because each moment's sense data changes and partly because the causal matrix from which they arise, the personality, is so different for each person. But the characteristics of the basic aggregates that comprise all human experience—materiality, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness—have remained similar from time immemorial.

Our subjective world is created by these states emerging in a moment of mind's awareness, and when no longer aware—in deep sleep or death, for example—our world dies with us. (There is little place in the more profound levels of Buddhist thought for the notion of an "objectively real" world independent of experience).

The image of a tiny seed balancing on the point of a needle is striking—it so poignantly describes the exquisite precision of the human condition. With the past long gone and the future unmanifest, all we have access to is the present moment, and this is only as accessible as we are attentive to it. How much of our legacy we neglect when we fail to attend!

Meditation can train the mind to be as sharp as a needle point, to notice phenomena as fleeting as a flash of lightning. So whether we live 84,000 years or only a few dozen, each life can be as infinitely deep as our mindfulness can penetrate.

—A. Olendzki