

The Thorn in Your Heart

Selections from
the *Attadaṇḍa Sutta*
of the *Sutta Nipāta*

- 935 attadaṇḍā bhayaṃ jātaṃ,
janaṃ passatha medhakaṃ,
saṃvegaṃ kittayissāmi
yathā saṃvijitaṃ mayā. Fear is born from arming oneself.
Just see how many people fight!
I'll tell you about the dreadful fear
that caused me to shake all over:
- 936 phandamānaṃ pajaṃ disvā
macche appodake yathā
aññamaññehi vyāruddhe
disvā maṃ bhayaṃ āvisi. Seeing creatures flopping around,
Like fish in water too shallow,
So hostile to one another!
—Seeing this, I became afraid.
- 937 samantaṃ asaro loko,
disā sabbā sameritā,
icchaṃ bhavanam attano
nāddasāsiṃ anositaṃ, This world completely lacks essence;
It trembles in all directions.
I longed to find myself a place
Unscathed—but I could not see it.
- 938 osāne tv-eva vyāruddhe
disvā me aratī ahu,—
ath' ettha sallaṃ addakkhiṃ
duddasaṃ hadayanissitaṃ. Seeing people locked in conflict,
I became completely distraught.
But then I discerned here a thorn
—Hard to see—lodged deep in the heart.
- 939 yena sallena otiṇṇo
disā sabbā vidhāvati,
tam eva sallaṃ abbuyha
na dhāvati, nisīdati. It's only when pierced by this thorn
That one runs in all directions.
So if that thorn is taken out—
one does not run, and settles down.
- ...
- 948 yo 'dha kāme accatari
saṃgaṃ loke duraccayaṃ,
na so socati nājjheti
chinnasoto abandhano. Who here has crossed over desires,
the world's bond, so hard to get past,
he does not grieve, she does not mourn.
His stream is cut, she's all unbound.
- 949 yaṃ pubbe, taṃ visoschi,
pacchā te māhu kiñcanaṃ,
majjhe ce no gahessasi,
upaṣanto carissasi. What went before—let go of that!
All that's to come—have none of it!
Don't hold on to what's in between,
And you'll wander fully at peace.
- 950 sabbaso nāmarūpasmiṃ
yassa n' atthi mamāyitaṃ,
asatā ca na socati,
sa ve loke na jiyati. For whom there is no "I-making"
All throughout the body and mind,
And who grieves not for what is not
Is undefeated in the world.
- 951 yassa n' atthi 'idam me' ti
'paresaṃ' vā pi kiñcanaṃ,
mamattaṃ so asaṃvindaṃ
'n' atthi me' ti na socati. For whom there is no "this is mine"
Nor anything like "that is theirs"
Not even finding "self-ness," he
Does not grieve at "I have nothing."

The *Sutta Nipāta* is probably one of the most diverse collections of discourses to be found in the Pali Tipitaka, and the chapter from which this sutta is taken, the *Attakavagga*, may well be the oldest portion of the entire canon. It is composed mostly in verse, and includes some lovely poetry.

There is something particularly moving for me about this poem, perhaps because it is composed in the first person and appears to reveal the process through which the Buddha himself came to understanding; perhaps because of the vulnerability expressed in the opening stanzas, where he admits his fear and sense of dread over the the nature of the human condition. Or maybe it is just the utter simplicity of first, the problem (people hurting each other), and then its cause (basic human selfishness, driven by desire), and finally, its solution (letting go of the ego's attachments). How easy he can so often make it all sound!

The first line alone is a counter-intuitive show-stopper. Conventional wisdom suggests that arming oneself is a prudent response to fear of self-injury. Yet the Buddha's wisdom goes deeper to observe how this actually contributes to the generation of more fear. Do we really feel more safe when we lash out at our critics and adversaries? Our culture certainly assumes so; but the Buddha is offering an alternative response, emerging from his own experience.

The phrase translated here as "arming oneself," which serves as the title of the sutta, is elsewhere rendered "embracing violence" (Norman) or "violent conduct" (Saddhatissa). The basic image is of a person taking up a stick, (*daṇḍa*); the stick being a common symbol in Indian literature for both violence and punishment.

The reader can hardly help feeling swept up in the emotional turmoil of the author. The tension mounts as the fear and despair builds, and then breaks suddenly with the insight that, like an animal driven to madness by an injury, mankind is not evil by nature but is only driven to violence by the relentless pressure of desire.

The latter half of the poem describes how to cultivate a state of mind—a stance within unfolding experience—that avoids the dysfunctional move of creating and projecting oneself on every situation.

These few verses embrace the whole of the four noble truths: the suffering manifest as violence, its cause by the thorn in the heart, the "unbinding" or crossing over this, and the way to cultivate the selflessness that constitutes real freedom. —A. Olendzki