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## A STUDY OF NEKKHAMMA PĀRAMĪ (PERFECTION OF RENUNCIATION) IN THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

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### ABSTRACT

The Buddha renounced his life of comfort and self-indulgence as a result of discovering the hidden pain inherent in every pleasure. He realized that clinging to sensory pleasure is a hindrance to inner peace, which is true happiness. Nekkhamma means escaping from attachment. It is escaping to work not for one's own welfare, but to work for the welfare of Loka (world). Only such escaping is called Pāramī. Escaping to work for one's own welfare is not called Pāramī. Nekkhamma (renunciation) is a key aspect of the Buddhist spiritual practice that needs to be practised by a disciple who embarks on the Buddhist path of liberation from suffering. Lord Gautama Buddha practised renunciation as a perfection for a period of four *asaṅkheyyas* and one hundred thousand world cycles. Similarly, all the other Buddhas and enlightened Arahants had practised renunciation during their spiritual quest for liberation.



**KEYWORDS :** *Nekkhamma Pāramī, Vatthukāma and Kilesakāma.*

### INTRODUCTION

One who practises renunciation needs to work towards letting go of craving and attachment to objects that will bring only temporary pleasures as the objects of craving and attachment are impermanent in nature. The nature of sensual pleasures is such that one is never satisfied with them and has the tendency to go after more and more sensual pleasures. The temporary experiences of pleasure create the urge to seek even more pleasures and to try in vain to possess and protect those experiences. The happiness of human beings, *devas* and *brahmas* is just an intermediate happiness, not the ultimate happiness. One who goes for the ultimate happiness is bound to pass through the intermediate happiness. Only when one is not attached and can renounce the intermediate happiness, will one attain the ultimate happiness quickly.<sup>1</sup>

The teaching of the Buddha is mostly based on renunciation (*Nekkhamma*). The renunciation is the third perfection (*pāramī*) in the *Theravāda* traditions. As well, the *Jātakas* as a genre of Buddhist teaching is the accumulation of *Pāramī* by the Bodhisatta, or future Buddha, over countless incarnations. According to the *Jātakas* (the over five hundred 'birth stories' of the Buddha that recount

<sup>1</sup> U Shwe Aung. "The Buddha – Peerless Benefactor of Humanity", tr. U Hla Maung, First Published, Myawaddy Press, Yangon, 1995. P. 167.

his various spiritual perfections, or paramitas, over many lifetimes), the Buddha (or, more properly, the Bodhisatta) was a royal prince not only in his final rebirth, when he renounced the world in search of enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> The process of leaving behind one's worldly life (family, belongings, social position) to become a renouncer or ascetic, or monastic. Although the full monastic path is not available to characters in *Jātakas* that are set in times of no Buddhism, renunciation is still a prominent ideal.

### The Meaning of Nekkhamma (Renunciation)

In the Buddhist literature, the *Pāḷi* word '*Nekkhamma*' is translated in English as 'renunciation', meaning choosing to reject, disown or relinquish something based on a wholesome thought. This term derives from combination of the prefix '*ni*', the root '*kamu*' and suffix is '*ṇya*' and as a whole means 'renunciation'. The synonyms of *Nekkhamma* are *pabbajjā*, *upasampadā*, *brahmacariya*. *Nekkhamma* can be explained as follows:<sup>3</sup>

1. Regulation, reduction or rejection of sense gratification or *Kāma*. Etymologically this meaning is derived from the combination *ni* (= not) + *kāma* (= sense delights). We believe, this in itself, does not imply departure from household-life.
2. Renunciation of household pleasures or departure from the household and taking to a life homelessness. This is more appropriately derived from the combination prefix *nis* (away from) + root *kam/ kamati* (goes, departs, leaves behind).

We see from the above that both these meanings nearly point to the same. But the first has a special point of emphasis above the second in that its stress is on one's attitude to sensory gratification, even while being in the household, without serious departure therefrom. This polarized emphasis is seen in such *Pāḷi* references as "*kāmānaṃ ādīnavaṃ okāraṃ saṃkilesaṃ, nekkhamme ānisaṃsaṃ pakāsesi*,"<sup>4</sup> as well as "*kāmesvādīnavaṃ disvā, nekkhammaṃ daṭṭhu khemato*".<sup>5</sup>

In general, the word renunciation is used to describe the process of emancipation by giving up the worldly household life to follow the path of ascetic life in search of spiritual happiness. Renunciation can also be described as a commitment to liberate oneself from attachment to worldly sensual desires and cravings, the rationale being that attachment to worldly possessions and sensual pleasures leads to unsatisfactoriness and suffering and detachment from them will result in happiness. Renunciation can also be seen as a means of letting go of whatever keeps one bound to ignorance, suffering and continued existence in the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*). In addition to material things, one may consider relinquishing one's views, concepts and opinions that one would have held for long periods of time causing stress and suffering. Renunciation can be both external and internal. In external renunciation, one lets go of objects of sensual desire and worldly possessions that may include giving up the householder's life. Internal renunciation is letting go of craving and attachment to external sense objects and giving up the defilements of the mind.

### Nekkhamma Pāramī (Perfection of Renunciation)

*Nekkhamma* is also one of the ten *Pāramī* (perfections) that should be fulfilled by those who aspire to attain *Nibbāna*. The *Cariyāpīṭaka Atṭhakathā* state that fully attaining the perfection of renunciation means "having gone to the perfection, the supreme, and the highest in three-fold great renunciation."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> John Clifford Holt, "Theravada Traditions: Buddhist Ritual Cultures in Contemporary Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka", University of Hawai'i Press, USA, 2017. p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> G. P. Malalasekera. "Encyclopaedia of Buddhism". Vol, VII, Published by the Government of Sri Lanka, 2003. P. 149.

<sup>4</sup> D. I. p. 109.

<sup>5</sup> SnA. II. p. 385.

<sup>6</sup> CpA. p. 273: "*tividhepi mahābhikkhamane pāramiṃ paramukkaṃsaṃ gantvā*."

As each of the perfections can be divided into *Pāramī*, *Upapāramī*, and *Paramattha pāramī*, renouncing the world having cut off the craving, the internal limbs big and small is *Nekkhamma Pāramī*. Renouncing the world having cut off craving, the internal limbs big and small is *Nekkhamma upapāramī*. Renounced the world having cut off the craving, the life is *Nekkhamma paramattha pāramī*<sup>7</sup>.

The *Nekkhamma pāramī* has the characteristic of emancipation from the sense desire. It has the function of showing obviously the disadvantage of the life of *kāma*. The manifestation is the nature of leaving the life of *kāma*. The proximate cause is the agitation.<sup>8</sup> The contemplation of the two kinds of sense desire and the three states of existences as pleasant objects, and contemplation giving up sense desire as unpleasant are the defilements of the *Nekkhamma pāramī*.<sup>9</sup> The two kinds of *kāma* are pleasant objects of sense desire (*vatthukāma*) and desire for the pleasant objects (*kilesakāma*). The *Nekkhamma* wholesomeness is an abstinence from the sensuous happiness, harming others. Therefore, greed for sense pleasure (*lobha*), hurting others (*dosa*) and fortuning himself (*moha*) are the opposites of *Nekkhamma Pāramī*.<sup>10</sup>

In the fulfillment of *Nekkhamma Pāramī*, there are ten kinds of bonds to be abstained. The *Milindapañhapāṭi*<sup>11</sup> states the ten bonds, namely, (1) Mother, (2) Father, (3) Wife, (4) Children, (5) Relatives, (6) Friends, (7) Wealth, (8) Gain and honour, (9) Domain, and (10) Five sensual objects.

For the reflection on the *Nekkhamma Pāramī*, the future Buddha reflected in the fulfillment of *Nekkhamma Pāramī*. The life of a householder is the place of sense pleasures. It is very difficult to develop the wholesomeness having obstacles such as wife and children. As it is fixed with the earnings such as trading and farming that they are not the place in search of *Nekkhamma Pāramī*.<sup>12</sup> The life of hermit *Sumedhā* is mentioned in the *Buddhavaṃsa* in which the Bodhisatta fulfilled *Nekkhamma Pāramī* by going to the forest as a hermit. He contemplated that riches and wealth do not bring real peace and happiness. They give only worry and dukkha so he renounced the world getting out of all sensual pleasure. It is *Nekkhamma Pāramī*.

### Nekkhamma Pāramī through Jātakas

In the *Somanassa jātika*,<sup>13</sup> the Future Buddha was a famous prince named Somanassa in the city of *Indapattha*. The king had a hermit named Kuhakatāpasa who was not an honest man. Once the prince discovered the evil qualities of the hermit, the hermit was angry with the prince. When the king returned, the hermit told him to drive the prince away from the kingdom. The prince explained that the hermit was worthless and he did not own any good qualities. When the truth was revealed, the king gave the kingdom to the prince. But he renounced the world for the sake of *Sabbaññutañña*.

In the *Hatthipāla Jātaka*,<sup>14</sup> while the king Esukārī was reigning in the Benares, the Future Buddha was born as the eldest son of the king, named Hatthipāla. The King loved the four sons of the adviser like his sons. When he came of age, he was made king. But bent on renunciation, he left the kingship; and when he became ordained, many other followed him. His three brothers, his parents and the king and queen and their adviser ordained themselves.

In the *Cūḷasutasoma Jātaka*,<sup>15</sup> when Benares was famous by the name of Sudassana, Sutasoma was the king of that city. One day he was informed that a grey hair had appeared on his head. According

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 312.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 273.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 294. (*vatthu kāma, kilesa kāma*), (*kāma bhava, rupa bhava, arupa bhava*)

<sup>10</sup> CpA. p. 294.

<sup>11</sup> Miln. P. 278.

<sup>12</sup> CpA. p. 306.

<sup>13</sup> JA. IV. p. 444; CpA. p. 186.

<sup>14</sup> JA. IV. p. 473-490.

<sup>15</sup> JA. V. p. 177-191.

to his former decision, he announced that he would renounce the world. His parents, wives and sons tried to prevent him. He bestowed the throne upon his younger brother, Somadatta. He ascended the seventh floor of the palace and cut off his hair with the sword. Then he dressed the yellow robe and renounced the world.

### The Way to escape from Attachments

The attachment from which one should strive to escape are called *Vatthukāma* and *Kilesakāma*. *Vatthukāma*<sup>16</sup> comprises high offices and positions, honours, luxuries, riches, power, public acclamation, etc. *Kilesakāma* is attachment to sensual objects. Striving to escape from *Vatthukāma* and *Kilesakāma* is called '*Nikkhama Pāramī*'. In truth, the words 'escape from' imply that the *Vatthukāma* has been found because one can only escape from it when it has been found. Likewise, it should be taken that *kilesavatthu* also has already been found. Likewise, it should be taken that *kilesavatthu* also has already been found. So *Nekkhamma* means that though one has found *Vatthukāma* and *kilesakāma*, one does not stop there. One does not let oneself be captivated by them but one gets free of them. But only when one escapes, not for this own welfare but for the welfare of the *Loka*, will it amount to *Pāramī*.<sup>17</sup>

The fulfillment of *Nekkhamma Pāramī* means that when *lobha* arises, one has to strive not to give way and to get free from its influence (clutches). When *dosa* arises, one has to strive not to give way but to get free from its influence. When *moha* arises, one has to strive not to give way but to get free from its influence. When *māyā* (deception), *sātheyya* (treachery), *issā* (jealousy), *macchhariya* (meanness), etc. arises, one has to strive not to give way but free from their influence. It is not an easy task but to fulfill *Nekkhamma Pāramī* one has to make the required effort and to practice.

Making effort to get free of *kāma* primarily means that in whatever work one does one should do it faithfully as a duty, not longing for any kind of benefit out of it, but for the sake of *loka*. Then, as one does not primarily aim at self-welfare, *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha* or other *kilesas* will not arise. Only when one tries not to let them appear, will one be able to get free from *kilesa kāma* and the deed will amount to the *nekkhamma* nature. In truth, *nekkhamma parami* is the chief among the *pāramīs*. Therefore, only deed, which have the nature of *nekkhamma* are called *pāramīs*. The essence of *Nekkhamma pāramī* is that as one has not yet attained arahatship, one will naturally come across *kilesas* (defilements) but one should strive not to yield to them but to repulse them. For this reason, whatever *pāramī* one fulfils, the nature of *nekkhamma* has to be practiced.<sup>18</sup>

In reality, performing a deed as one's duty with a pure mind, not expecting any benefit out of it, is the essence of *Nekkhamma Pāramī*. When a deed involves the nature of *Nekkhamma Pāramī*, the other *Pāramīs* are automatically concerned. In order that the nature of *Nekkhamma Pāramī* is permeated in one's physical, verbal and mental actions, one should try to perform it step by step with the spirit of renunciation and at a sacrifice.<sup>19</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The Buddha had, beginning from his existence as Hermit Sumedha, four *asañkheyyas* and a hundred thousand worlds ago, worked for the good of the *loka* at the sacrifice of his own good. His deeds can be classified according to their nature into ten kinds called *Pāramīs* or perfection. Renunciation (*nekkhamma*) in *Theravāda* Buddhism is a positive and liberating act that teaches people to let go of the problems of life and of "the round of rebirth" (*samsāra*). The teaching of renunciation is

<sup>16</sup> DhsA. p. 104.

<sup>17</sup> U Shwe Aung. "The Buddha – Peerless Benefactor of Humanity", tr. U Hla Maung, First Published, Myawaddy Press, Yangon, 1995. P. 167-168.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 169.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 186-187.

the realization of the roots of suffering (*dukkha*), a realization followed by the intention of being liberated and finally followed by the very act of letting go of those roots.

What we are renouncing, what we want to leave behind and gain liberation from, are our various problems and limitations and their sources, the causes for them. After all, the central theme in the Buddhist teachings is to get rid of suffering. Everything that Buddha taught was intended to help people overcome the various problems they face in life – not only in this life, but from lifetime to lifetime. The life of renunciation is intrinsic to the quest for liberation and knowing all the clear paths and means necessary to “lead and guide sentient beings” to liberation and enlightenment. So, the renunciates play an extremely important role in Buddhism as the protector and maintainer of the *Dhamma*.

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