AN 3.70 — Uposatha Sutta (The Fortnightly Observances)

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Text

70. Uposatha Sutta (The Fortnightly Observances) I have personally heard this.

At one time The Blessed One was staying at the Pubba monastery, the palace of Migāra's mother in Sāvatthī. Then, on that full moon day, Visākhā, Migāra's mother, went and approached The Blessed One, and having paid homage to The Teacher, she sat down to one side.

Then, The Blessed One said this to her:

"Visākhā, why have you come during the daytime?"

And Visākhā replied by saying:

"Bhante, today being the full moon day, I am observing the eight precepts of the Uposatha."

"Visākhā, there are these three full moon Uposatha observances. What three?

"The Uposatha of the cattle herd; the Uposatha of the Nigaṇṭhas (Jains); and the Uposatha of the Noble Ones.

a. "Now, what Visākhā, is the Uposatha observance of the cattle herd?

"Visākhā, just like the cowherder who returns the cattle in the evening to their owner and reflects thus:

'Today the cattle grazed in such a place, drank water in such a place; tomorrow the cattle will graze in such a place, and drink water in such a place.'

"In the same manner, Visākhā, someone here having observed the eight precepts of the Uposatha reflects thus:

‘Today I ate such and such edibles and drank such and such nourishing drinks. Tomorrow, I will eat such and such edibles and drink such and such nourishing drinks.’

“Thus, he spends the day with a mind overcome with greed and covetousness.

“Therefore, Visākhā, this is the Uposatha observance of the cattle herd, which is not of great fruit or benefit, nor does it bring good results, as it lacks in permeating splendor.

b. “And what, Visākhā, is the Uposatha observance of the Nigaṇṭhas (Jains)?

“Visākhā, there are those ascetics called Nigaṇṭhas (the followers of Jainism), who instruct their disciples thus:

‘Come! Good man, do not punish living beings up to seven hundred miles in the eastern direction; do not punish living beings up to seven hundred miles in the western direction; do not punish living beings up to seven hundred miles in the northern direction; and do not punish living beings up to seven hundred miles in the southern direction!’

“Thus, their Uposatha observance is directed selectively with sympathy towards some but not others. Further, on the Uposatha observance day, a Nigaṇṭha gives the following instruction to his disciples:

‘Come! Good man. Take off all your clothes and declare: ‘By doing this and removing my clothes, nowhere do I belong to anyone, nor anyone belongs to me; I have no desires for any place or thing, and I have no attachments to any place or thing!’

“Meanwhile, however, his mother and father do know him and maintain their bond with him very well, while declaring: ‘this is our son,’ and he too knows them and maintains his bond with them very well, while declaring, ‘this is my mother and father.’ His wife and children also know and maintain their bond with him very well, while declaring: ‘this is my husband and this is our father,’ just as he also knows and maintains his bond with them very well, while declaring: ‘this is my wife and children.’

His slaves and workmen know him and maintain their bond with him very well, while declaring as well: ‘this is our master,’ just as he also knows and maintains his bond with them very well, while declaring: ‘these are my slaves and workmen.’

“Thus, at the time of Uposatha, when he is supposed to be engaged in observing the precepts, including refraining from telling lies, he speaks lies, I say. And at the end of that night, he goes back to his estate and home, while enjoying and partaking of his wealth and possessions, even before they are offered to him, and thus he takes what is not given.

“Visākhā, this is the Uposatha observance of the Nigaṇṭhas, which is not of great fruit or benefit at all, nor does it bring any good or meaningful results, as it lacks in permeating splendor.

c. “And what, Visākhā, is the Uposatha observance of The Noble Ones?

“Here, Visākhā, the Uposatha observance is seen as the methodical cleansing of the defiled heart through exertion.

“And how, Visākhā, can the Uposatha observance be a methodical cleansing of the defiled heart through exertion?

“Here, Visākhā, the Noble Disciple recollects The Tathāgata thus:

‘The Blessed One is an Arahant, Perfectly Awakened, endowed with Sublime Knowledge and Supremely Pure Conduct; He indeed is The Well-Gone, The Knower of existence, The Matchless and Incomparable Tamer of those to be tamed; The Teacher of Devas and humans; The Enlightened and Blessed.’

“And while recollecting The Tathāgata thus, the Noble Disciple’s mind brightens up, becoming tranquil, where joy arises and the defilements in the heart fade and are washed away, just like the dirty head hair that is methodically cleansed through careful exertion. In the same manner, Visākhā, the defiled mind gets a methodical cleansing through exertion.

“And how, Visākhā, is the dirty head hair methodically cleansed through careful exertion?

“With the help of a good brush, soap, water and the suitable and persistent efforts of a person to wash it, the dirty head hair gets a methodical cleansing. In the same manner, the defiled heart gets a methodical cleaning.

“So too, the Noble Disciple recollects The Tathāgata thus:

‘The Blessed One is an Arahant, Perfectly Awakened, endowed with Sublime Knowledge and Supremely Pure Conduct; He indeed is The Well-Gone, The Knower of existence, The Matchless and Incomparable Tamer of those to be tamed; The Teacher of Devas and humans; The Enlightened and Blessed.’

“Thus, while recollecting The Tathāgata, the Noble Disciple’s mind brightens up, becoming tranquil, where joy arises and the defilements in the heart fade and are washed away, just like the dirty head hair that is methodically cleansed through careful exertion.

“Visākhā, this is called the Noble Disciple observing the Brahmā’s observance, as one is seen to live with Brahmā. On account of this, his heart brightens up and becomes tranquil, while joy arises and the defilements in the heart fade and are washed away. In the same manner, Visākhā, the defiled heart gets a methodical cleansing through exertion.

“And what, Visākhā, is meant by ‘the methodical cleansing of the defiled heart through exertion’?

“Here Visākhā, the Noble Disciple recollects The Dhamma thus: ‘The Dhamma of The Blessed One is well expounded; it is directly visible here and now; immediately effective; inviting one to come and investigate for oneself; taking one straight forward, undeterred; to be understood and personally realized by the wise; each for oneself.’

“And when recollecting The Dhamma in this manner, the Noble Disciple’s mind brightens up and becomes tranquil, where joy arises and the defilements in the heart fade and are washed away, just like the dirt from the body that is methodically cleansed through careful exertion. In the same manner, Visākhā, the defiled heart gets a methodical cleansing through exertion.

“And how, Visākhā, is the dirty body methodically cleaned through exertion?

“With a brush, soap, water and the suitable and persistent efforts of a person washing it, the dirty body gets a methodical cleansing. In the same manner, Visākhā, the defiled heart gets a methodical cleansing.

“So too, the Noble Disciple recollects The Dhamma thus:

‘The Dhamma of The Blessed One is well expounded; it is directly visible here and now; immediately effective; inviting one to come and investigate for oneself; taking one straight forward, undeterred; to be understood and personally realized by the wise; each for oneself.’

“Thus, while recollecting The Dhamma in this manner, the Noble Disciple’s mind brightens up and becomes tranquil, where joy arises and the defilements in the heart fade and are washed away.

“Now, Visākhā, this is called the Noble Disciple who observes the Uposatha observance of The Dhamma, who lives and dwells with The Dhamma, because while reflecting on the qualities of The Dhamma, the defiled heart gets a methodical cleansing through exertion.

“Further, Visākhā, what is the methodical cleansing of the defiled heart through exertion?

“Here, Visākhā, the Noble Disciple recollects The Saṅgha of Bhikkhus thus:

‘The Saṅgha of the Disciples of The Blessed One is practicing well the Good Path, which is the Threefold Training of Sīla, Samādhi, Paññā (virtuous living, mental cultivation, and development of wisdom); the Disciples of The Blessed One are practicing the Straight Path of the Threefold Training, which is the Middle Path; the Disciples of The Blessed One are practicing wisely to realize Nibbāna, in a methodical way; the Disciples of The Blessed One are practicing The Dhamma in harmony; Such are the Four Pairs of Eight Great Beings, comprised of the Eight Noble Disciples of The Blessed One; the ones to be honored and respected, deserving of hospitality, worthy of offerings; to be venerated with reverential salutation, with one’s palms pressed together at the heart, for they are indeed the Incomparable Field of merit for the world.’

“When recollecting The Saṅgha of Bhikkhus thus, the Noble Disciple’s mind brightens up and becomes tranquil, where joy arises and the defilements in the heart fade and are washed away, just like the dirty cloth that is cleansed through exertion. In the same way, Visākhā, the defiled heart gets a methodical cleansing through exertion.

“And how, Visākhā, is the dirty cloth methodically cleansed through exertion?

“With water and clay, with cow dung and the suitable and persistent efforts of a person, the dirty cloth gets a methodical cleansing. In the same manner, Visākhā, the defiled mind gets a methodical cleansing.

“So too, the Noble Disciple recollects The Saṅgha of Bhikkhus thus:

‘The Saṅgha of the Disciples of The Blessed One is practicing well the Good Path, which is the Threefold Training of Sīla, Samādhi, Paññā (virtuous living, mental cultivation, and development of wisdom); the Disciples of The Blessed One are practicing the Straight Path of the Threefold Training, which is the Middle Path; the Disciples of The Blessed One are practicing wisely to realize Nibbāna, in a methodical way; the Disciples of The Blessed One are practicing The Dhamma in harmony; Such are the Four Pairs of Eight Great Beings, comprised of the Eight Noble Disciples of The Blessed One; the ones to be honored and respected, deserving of hospitality, worthy of offerings; to be venerated with reverential salutation with one’s palms pressed together at the heart, for they are indeed the Incomparable Field of merit for the world.’

“When recollecting The Saṅgha of Bhikkhus thus, the Noble Disciple’s mind brightens up and becomes tranquil, where joy arises and the defilements in the heart fade and are washed away.

“Visākhā, this is called the Noble Disciple who observes the Uposatha observance of The Saṅgha, who lives and dwells with The Noble Saṅgha, and in considering the qualities of The Noble and Pure Saṅgha, the defiled mind gets a methodical cleansing through exertion.

“Furthermore, Visākhā, how does the defiled mind get a methodical cleansing?

“Here, Visākhā, the Noble Disciple recollects his own virtuous behavior, which is unbroken, flawless, and spotless, for he lives a blameless life, one that is unblemished, free from greed,

with qualities that are praised by the wise as conducive to the deepening of collected stability of mind.

“And when recollecting his own pure conduct and virtues thus, the Noble Disciple’s mind brightens up and becomes tranquil, where joy arises and the defilements in the heart fade and are washed away, just like a dirty mirror is cleansed and polished through exertion. In the same manner, Visākhā, the defiled heart gets a methodical cleansing through exertion.

“And how, Visākhā, does the dirty mirror get a methodical cleansing, becoming well-polished?

“With oil, chalk, a tail brush and the suitable and persistent efforts of a person, the dirty mirror gets a methodical cleansing through exertion, becoming thus polished. In the same manner, Visākhā, the defiled heart gets a methodical cleansing through exertion.

“So too, the Noble Disciple recollects his own virtuous behavior, which is unbroken, flawless, and spotless, for he lives a blameless life, one that is unblemished, free from greed, with qualities that are praised by the wise as conducive to the deepening of collected stability of mind.

“And when recollecting his own pure conduct and virtues thus, the Noble Disciple’s mind brightens up and becomes tranquil, where joy arises and the defilements in the heart fade and are washed away.

“Therefore, Visākhā, this is called the Noble Disciple who observes the Uposatha observance of his own purity of conduct and virtue; who lives and dwells with virtuous behavior; and in considering his own true and virtuous behavior, the defiled heart gets a methodical cleansing through exertion.

“Further, Visākhā, how does the defiled mind get a methodical cleansing through exertion?

“Here, Visākhā, the Noble Disciple recollects the Devas thus:

‘There are the Devas ruled by the Four Guardian Kings, the Tāvatiṁsā Devas in the company of the Thirty-Three, ruled by Lord Sakka, King of the Devas; there are the Yāma Devas, the Tusita Devas, the Nimmānaratī Devas, who delight in creation, the Paranimmita Devas, who enjoy controlling the creation of other Devas; the Devas in the company of Brahmā Gods, and there are those Devas who are even higher than those.’

“Here, the Noble Disciple reflects further:

‘Just like those many Devas, I too possess strong faith, virtuous behavior, knowledge of The Dhamma, generosity, and wisdom that these heavenly beings once possessed while they were still human beings here, with the help and support of which, after death, on disappearing from here, they immediately reappeared there, in those higher realms of happiness and delight.’

“Thus, whenever the Noble Disciple recollects the faith, virtuous behavior, the knowledge of The Dhamma, along with the generosity and wisdom possessed by those Devas, and compares them

to his own, his heart immediately brightens up and becomes tranquil, where joy arises and the defilements in the heart fade and are washed away, much like impure gold or silver gets purified and cleansed. In the same manner, Visākhā, the defiled heart gets a

methodical cleansing through exertion.

“And how, Visākhā, does impure gold and silver get a methodical cleansing?

“With a red-hot burning and bellowing furnace, salt, a coating of red chalk, a tube or a pipe, pincers, and the persistent and suitable efforts of a man, the gold and silver have their dirt and impurities removed as they get purified through the methodical cleansing they receive. In the same manner, Visākhā, the defiled heart gets a methodical cleansing through exertion.

“So too, the Noble Disciple recollects the Devas thus:

‘There are the Devas ruled by the Four Guardian Kings, the Tāvatiṁsā Devas in the company of the Thirty-Three, ruled by Lord Sakka, King of the Devas; there are the Yāma Devas, the Tusita Devas, the Nimmānaratī Devas who delight in creation, the Paranimmita Devas who enjoy controlling the creation of other Devas; the Devas in the company of Brahmā Gods, and there are those Devas who are even higher than those.’

“Furthermore, the Noble Disciple reflects:

‘Just like those many Devas, I too possess strong faith, virtuous behavior, knowledge of The Dhamma, generosity, and wisdom that these heavenly beings once possessed while they were still human beings here, with the help and support of which, after death, on disappearing from here, they immediately reappeared there, in those higher realms of happiness and delight.’

“Thus, whenever the Noble Disciple recollects the faith, virtuous behavior, the knowledge of The Dhamma, along with the generosity and wisdom possessed by those Devas, and compares them to his own, his heart immediately brightens up and becomes tranquil, where joy arises and the defilements in the heart fade and are washed away, much like impure gold or silver gets purified and cleansed.

“This itself, Visākhā, is called the Noble Disciple who observes the Uposatha through the observance of the Devas, while he lives alongside and in the company of the Devas.

“In the same manner, Visākhā, the defiled heart gets a methodical cleansing through exertion.

“Further, Visākhā, the Noble Disciple reflects thus:

‘As long as life lasts, the Arahants refrain from taking the life of living beings, having thrown away rods, sticks and weapons; they go on living with consideration, behaving kindly towards all, with Universal Compassion for all living beings. Similarly, this day and night, I too will refrain from taking the life of living beings, while also having thrown away rods, sticks and weapons; I will go living with consideration while behaving kindly towards all, with Universal

Compassion for all living beings. By imitating the Arahants thus, may my Uposatha observance be complete.

‘As long as life lasts, the Arahants refrain from taking what is not given, taking only what is given and being satisfied with that, dwelling free from covetousness or greed for the possessions of others. Similarly, this day and night, I too will refrain from taking what is not given, taking only what is given and being satisfied with that, dwelling free from covetousness or greed for the possessions of others. By imitating the Arahants thus, may my Uposatha observance be complete.

‘As long as life lasts, the Arahants refrain from living the low life of engaging in sexual conduct, observing celibacy throughout, living the holy life by giving up sexual behavior completely. Similarly, this day and night, I too will refrain from living the low life of engaging in sexual conduct and will observe celibacy, living the holy life by giving up sexual behavior completely. By imitating the Arahants thus, may my Uposatha observance be complete.’

‘As long as life lasts, the Arahants refrain from telling lies and using false speech, speaking only what is truth, adhering to the truth, while being trustworthy and reliable, and not deceivers of the world. Similarly, this day and night, I too will refrain from telling lies or using false speech, speaking only what is truth, adhering to the truth, while being trustworthy and reliable, and not a deceiver of the world. By imitating the Arahants thus, may my Uposatha observance be complete.’

‘As long as life lasts, the Arahants refrain from taking intoxicants of any kind, whether liquor, wine, or any other mind-altering substance that causes heedlessness. Similarly, this day and night, I too will refrain from taking intoxicants of any kind, whether liquor, wine, or any other substance that causes heedlessness. By imitating the Arahants thus, may my Uposatha observance be complete.’

‘As long as life lasts, the Arahants live by eating only once a day, refraining from eating at night and from taking food outside the proper time. Similarly, this day and night, I too will eat only once, refraining from eating at night and from taking food outside the proper time. By imitating the Arahants thus, may my Uposatha observance be complete.

‘As long as life lasts, the Arahants refrain from dancing, singing, playing or listening to instrumental music, attending entertainments and shows, from beautifying the self with adornments, scents, anointments, bearing flowers and decorating the self with garlands. Similarly, this day and night, I too will refrain from dancing, singing, playing or listening to instrumental music, attending entertainments and shows, from beautifying the self with adornments, scents, anointments, bearing flowers and decorating the self with garlands. By imitating the Arahants thus, may my Uposatha observance be complete.’

‘As long as life lasts, the Arahants refrain from using high, luxurious, and lofty beds and seats, and instead use a low seat or a couch, or make a straw mat to lie down upon. Similarly, this day and night, I too will refrain from using high, luxurious, and lofty beds

and seats, and instead will use a low seat or a couch, or make a straw mat to lie down upon. By imitating the Arahants thus, may my Uposatha observance be complete.'

"Visākhā, this is the noble Uposatha observance of the full moon day, which when observed thus, it becomes of much fruit and benefit, as it brings extraordinarily good and wonderful results, with permeating splendor.

"And what, Visākhā, is the extent of the fruits, benefits, extraordinarily good and wonderful results, and the permeating splendor of such a noble Uposatha observance?

"Here, Visākhā, consider a ruler or a king presiding over these sixteen provincial states of Anga, Magadha, Kāsi, Kosala, Vajji, Malla, Ceti, Vanga, Kuru, Pancala, Maccha, Surasena, Assaka, Avanti, Gandhara, and Kamboja, with all their resources of wealth and abounding seven precious treasures. However, all this wealth would not make up even one-sixteenth part in comparison to thus fully observing the eight precepts during Uposatha.

"And what is the reason for this?

"Visākhā, it is because human kingship, with its pleasures and seeming magnitude, is truly but a poor trifling when compared to celestial pleasure and happiness.

a. "Thus, Visākhā, fifty years of a human's life is but a single night and a day for the Devas living in the realm of the Four Guardian Kings. Thirty of those days make up a month, and twelve of those months make up a year. Now, bear in mind that the lifespan of these Devas is made up of five hundred celestial years!

"So, it may very well happen, that a man or a woman who has fully observed the eight precepts on the full moon day of Uposatha, reappears after death into the company of the Four Guardian Devas.

"Visākhā, it was on account of this that it was said:

'Visākhā, it is because human kingship, with its pleasures and seeming magnitude, is truly but a poor trifling when compared to celestial pleasure and happiness.'

b. "Furthermore, Visākhā, a hundred years of human life is but a single night and a day for the Devas living in Tāvatiṁsā heaven, in the company of the Thirty-Three Devas in the realm of King Sakka, Ruler of the Gods. Now, thirty of those days equal a single month, and twelve of those months make up a year. A thousand of those celestial years makes up the life span of a Deva living in the company of the thirty-three Devas!

"So, it may very well happen, that a man or a woman who has fully observed the eight precepts on the full moon day of Uposatha, reappears after death into the Tāvatiṁsā heaven, with the company of the Thirty-Three Devas.

"Visākhā, it was on account of this that it was said:

‘Visākhā, it is because human kingship, with its pleasures and seeming magnitude, is truly but a poor trifling when compared to celestial pleasure and happiness.’

c. “Visākhā, two hundred years of a human life is but a single night and a day for the Yāma Devas. Thirty of those equal a month, and twelve of those months make up a single year. Two thousand of those celestial years make up the life span of the Yāma Devas.

“So, it may very well happen, that a man or a woman who has fully observed the eight precepts on the full moon day of Uposatha, reappears after death in the company of the Yāma Devas.

“Visākhā, it was on account of this that it was said:

‘Visākhā, it is because human kingship, with its pleasures and seeming magnitude, is truly but a poor trifling when compared to celestial pleasure and happiness.’

d. “Visākhā, four hundred years of human life is but a single night and a day for the Tusita Devas. Thirty of those full days make up a month, and twelve of those months make up a single year. Now, four thousand of those celestial years make up the life span of the Devas of the Tusita heaven.

“So, it may very well happen, that a man or a woman who has fully observed the eight precepts on the full moon day of Uposatha, reappears after death in the company of the Tusita Devas.

“Visākhā, it was on account of this that it was said:

‘Visākhā, it is because human kingship, with its pleasures and seeming magnitude, is truly but a poor trifling when compared to celestial pleasure and happiness.’

e. “Visākhā, eight hundred years of human life is but a single night and a day for the Nimmānaratī Devas, who delight in their creations. Thirty of those equal a month, and twelve of those months make up a year. Now, eight thousand of those celestial years make up the life span of the Nimmānaratī Devas, who delight in their creations.

“So, it may very well happen, that a man or a woman who has fully observed the eight precepts on the full moon day of Uposatha, reappears after death in the company of the Nimmānaratī Devas, who delight in their creations.

“Visākhā, it was on account of this that it was said:

‘Visākhā, it is because human kingship, with its pleasures and seeming magnitude, is truly but a poor trifling when compared to celestial pleasure and happiness.’

f. “Furthermore, Visākhā, sixteen hundred years of human life is but a single night and a day for the Paranimmita Devas, who delight in controlling the creations of other Devas.

Thirty of those equal a month, and twelve of those months make up a single year. Now, sixteen thousand of those celestial years make up the life span of the Paranimmita Devas, who delight in controlling the creations of other Devas.

“So, it may very well happen, that a man or a woman who has fully observed the eight precepts on the full moon day of Uposatha, reappears after death in the company of the Paranimmita Devas, who delight in controlling the creations of other Devas.

“Visākhā, it was on account of this that it was said:

‘Visākhā, it is because human kingship, with its pleasures and seeming magnitude, is truly but a poor trifling when compared to celestial pleasure and happiness.”’

‘Do not destroy life, nor take what is not given. Do not tell lies, nor take any mind-altering intoxicants. Lead the holy life in full, by abstaining entirely from sexual acts. Do not eat at night, nor at untimely hours. Do not wear flowers nor embellish yourself with fragrance or perfume. Make your bed the floor, covering it as you like.

These are the eight precepts For the full moon day of Uposatha, Given by The Blessed One Himself, Who declared the ending of suffering.

The moon and the sun shine unhindered, Dispelling the darkness throughout the sky. Whatever wealth is seen in life, be it pearls, gems, lapis, gold, silver or metal ore, They are not worth even one-sixteenth part when compared To fully observing the eight precepts on the full moon day of Uposatha.

Therefore, by engaging in blameless acts, Men and women bring to themselves countless benefits, resulting in happiness. Even winning a rebirth into the heavenly realms.’