Ud 6.9 — Adhipataka Sutta: Like Moths to the Flame

English translation by Andrew Olendzki.

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Changes: Presentation only: original HTML markup reflowed into plain text; wording, numbering and source repetitions retained. No repetitions expanded.

Completeness: ABBREVIATED. Every source-unit character is preserved; source ellipsis or repetition-omission statement retained. Canonical repetitions were not reconstructed.

Text

One time the Buddha was staying near Savatthi, in Jeta's grove, at the garden of Anathapindika. At that time he was seated under the open sky, on a night of blinding darkness, while oil lamps were burning. And also at that time a great number of winged insects were flying around and falling into those oil lamps, thus meeting with misfortune, meeting with ruin, meeting with both misfortune and ruin. The Buddha saw those great number of winged insects flying around and falling into those oil lamps... And then the Buddha, understanding the meaning of this, gave utterance — at that moment — to this profound utterance:

Rushing up but then too far, they miss the point; Only causing ever newer bonds to grow. So obsessed are some by what is seen and heard, They fly just like these moths — straight into the flames.

Translator's note

This is a wonderful example of the Buddha using whatever situation presents itself as an opportunity for teaching, and his remarks, as usual, can be taken on many different levels.

The insects are drawn irresistibly in the dark night to the shining lamps, but in their zeal to approach the light they go too far and only meet their doom. Humans likewise are drawn to the pleasures of the senses, to what is seen and heard, not realizing the dangers involved. When we get too close — when we hold on with too much attachment — we get burned by suffering. The senses can still be enjoyed, as the moth can stay circling the flame, but only when one holds the proper distance. This quality of "stepping back" or "standing off" from obsession with the senses is something that is cultivated with the practice of mindfulness meditation.

But the fire can also be taken as a symbol of wisdom. We are naturally drawn to the light of truth, to the teachings of the Buddha for example, but must take care not to over-shoot the mark. Getting too attached to views, even if these views are correct, can also lead to harm and the strengthening of bondage. The word translated here as "point" is sara, which can mean the heart, the essence or the crux of something. The subtle idea that seems to be expressed is that rushing or running will never reveal what is essential — the pith can never be approached headlong. What is needed is the tranquility of mind that meditation brings, and the ability to keep even wisdom in proper perspective.

The passage is in the form of an Udana, a solemn utterance, and is in the tristubh meter of eleven syllables per line. The order of the last two lines has been re-arranged in translation to better reflect the syntax of English.