MN 41 — Saleyyaka Sutta: (Brahmans) of Sala

English translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

I have heard that on one occasion, while the Blessed One was on a wandering tour among the Kosalans with a large community of monks, he arrived at Salavatika.

The brahman householders of Sala heard it said: "Gotama the contemplative — the son of the Sakyans, having gone forth from the Sakyan clan — on a wandering tour among the Kosalans with a large community of monks — has arrived at Sala. And of that Master Gotama this fine reputation has spread: 'He is indeed a Blessed One, worthy, & rightly self-awakened, consummate in knowledge & conduct, well-gone, a knower of the cosmos, an unexcelled trainer of those persons ready to be tamed, teacher of human & divine beings, awakened, blessed. He has made known — having realized it through direct knowledge — this world with its devas, maras, & brahmas, its generations with their contemplatives & brahmans, their rulers & common people; has explained the Dhamma admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end; has expounded the holy life both in its particulars & in its essence, entirely perfect & pure. It is good to see such a worthy one.'"

So the brahman householders of Sala went to the Blessed One. On arrival, some of them, bowing down to him, sat to one side. Some of them exchanged courteous greetings with

him and, after an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, sat to one side. Some of them, placing their hands palm-to-palm over the heart in his direction, sat to one side. Some of them, announcing their name and clan in his presence, sat to one side. Some of them, remaining silent, sat to one side.

As they were sitting there, the brahman householders of Sala said to the Blessed One, "What is the reason, Master Gotama, what is the condition, whereby some beings here, with the break-up of the body, after death, reappear in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the lower realms, in hell? And what is the reason, what is the condition, whereby some beings here, with the break-up of the body, after death, reappear in the good destinations, in the heavenly world?"

"Householders, it's by reason of un-Dhamma conduct, dissonant [1] conduct that some beings here, with the break-up of the body, after death, reappear in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the lower realms, in hell. It's by reason of Dhamma conduct, harmonious [1] conduct that some beings here, with the break-up of the body, after death, reappear in the good destinations, in the heavenly world."

"We don't understand the detailed meaning of Master Gotama's brief statement, the detailed meaning of what he hasn't analyzed. It would be good if Master Gotama would teach the Dhamma so that we would understand the detailed meaning of Master Gotama's brief statement, the detailed meaning of what he hasn't analyzed."

"Very well, in that case, householders, listen & pay careful attention. I will speak."

"As you say, master," the brahman householders of Sala responded to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One said: "Householders, there are three sorts of un-Dhamma conduct, dissonant conduct with the body; four sorts of un-Dhamma conduct, dissonant conduct with speech; and three sorts of un-Dhamma conduct, dissonant conduct with the mind.

Unskillful Bodily Action

"And how are there three sorts of un-Dhamma conduct, dissonant conduct with the body?

"There is the case where a certain person takes life, is brutal, bloody-handed, devoted to killing & slaying, showing no mercy to living beings.

"He takes what is not given. He takes, in the manner of a thief, things in a village or a wilderness that belong to others and have not been given by them.

"He engages in sensual misconduct. He gets sexually involved with those who are protected by their mothers, their fathers, their brothers, their sisters, their relatives, or their Dhamma; those with husbands, those who entail punishments, or even those crowned with flowers by another man.

"This is how there are three sorts of un-Dhamma conduct, dissonant conduct with the body.

Unskillful Verbal Action

"And how are there four sorts of un-Dhamma conduct, dissonant conduct with speech?

"There is the case where a certain person engages in false speech. When he has been called to a town meeting, a group meeting, a gathering of his relatives, his guild, or of the royalty [i.e., a royal court proceeding], if he is asked as a witness, 'Come & tell, good man, what you know': If he doesn't know, he says, 'I know.' If he does know, he says, 'I don't know.' If he hasn't seen, he says, 'I have seen.' If he has seen, he says, 'I haven't seen.' Thus he consciously tells lies for his own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of a certain reward.

"He engages in divisive speech.[2] What he has heard here he tells there to break those people apart from these people here. What he has heard there he tells here to break these people apart from those people there. Thus breaking apart those who are united and stirring up strife between those who have broken apart, he loves factionalism, delights in factionalism, enjoys factionalism, speaks things that create factionalism.

"He engages in abusive speech. He speaks words that are harsh, cutting, bitter to others, abusive of others, provoking anger and destroying concentration.

"He engages in idle chatter. He speaks out of season, speaks what isn't factual, what isn't in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, & the Vinaya, words that are not worth treasuring.

"This is how there are four sorts of un-Dhamma conduct, dissonant conduct with speech.

Unskillful Mental Action

"And how are there three sorts of un-Dhamma conduct, dissonant conduct with the mind?

"There is the case where a certain person is covetous. He covets the belongings of others, thinking, 'O, that what belongs to others would be mine!'

"He bears ill will, corrupt in the resolves of his heart: 'May these beings be killed or cut apart or crushed or destroyed, or may they not exist at all!'

"He has wrong view, is warped in the way he sees things: 'There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed. There is no fruit or result of good or bad actions. There is no this world, no next world, no mother, no father, no spontaneously reborn beings; no contemplatives or brahmans who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves.' [3]

"This is how there are three sorts of un-Dhamma conduct, dissonant conduct with the mind.

"It's by reason of this un-Dhamma conduct & dissonant conduct that some beings here, with the break-up of the body, after death, re-appear in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the lower realms, in hell.

"Householders, there are three sorts of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct with the body; four sorts of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct with speech; and three sorts of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct with the mind.

Skillful Bodily Action

"And how are there three sorts of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct with the body?

"There is the case where a certain person, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from the taking of life. He dwells with his rod laid down, his knife laid down, scrupulous, merciful, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings.

"Abandoning the taking of what is not given, he abstains from taking what is not given. He doesn't take, in the manner of a thief, things in a village or a wilderness that belong to others and have not been given by them.

"Abandoning sensual misconduct, he abstains from sensual misconduct. He doesn't get sexually involved with those who are protected by their mothers, their fathers, their brothers, their sisters, their relatives, or their Dhamma; those with husbands, those who entail punishments, or even those crowned with flowers by another man.

"This is how there are three sorts of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct with the body.

Skillful Verbal Action

"And how are there three sorts of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct with speech?

"There is the case where a certain person, abandoning false speech, abstains from false speech. When he has been called to a town meeting, a group meeting, a gathering of his relatives, his guild, or of the royalty, if he is asked as a witness, 'Come & tell, good man, what you know': If he doesn't know, he says, 'I don't know.' If he does know, he says, 'I know.' If he hasn't seen, he says, 'I haven't seen.' If he has seen, he says, 'I have seen.' Thus he doesn't consciously tell a lie for his own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of any reward. Abandoning false speech, he abstains from false speech. He speaks the truth, holds to the truth, is firm, reliable, no deceiver of the world.

"Abandoning divisive speech he abstains from divisive speech. What he has heard here he doesn't tell there to break those people apart from these people here. What he has heard there he doesn't tell here to break these people apart from those people there. Thus

reconciling those who have broken apart or cementing those who are united, he loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord, speaks things that create concord.

"Abandoning abusive speech, he abstains from abusive speech. He speaks words that are soothing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing & pleasing to people at large.

"Abandoning idle chatter, he abstains from idle chatter. He speaks in season, speaks what is factual, what is in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, & the Vinaya. He speaks words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal.

"This is how there are four sorts of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct with speech.

Skillful Mental Action

"And how are there three sorts of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct with the mind?

"There is the case where a certain person is not covetous. He doesn't covet the belongings of others, thinking, 'O, that what belongs to others would be mine!'

"He bears no ill will and is not corrupt in the resolves of his heart. [He thinks,] 'May these beings be free from animosity, free from oppression, free from trouble, and may they look after themselves with ease!' [4]

"He has right view and is not warped in the way he sees things: 'There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits & results of good & bad actions. There is this world & the next world. There is mother & father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are contemplatives & brahmans who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves.' [5]

"This is how there are three sorts of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct with the mind.

"It's by reason of this Dhamma conduct & harmonious conduct that some beings here, with the break-up of the body, after death, re-appear in the good destinations, in the heavenly world.

"Householders, if one — a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct — should wish: 'O if I, with the break-up of the body, after death, were to reappear among well-to-do noble warriors, it is possible that one — with the break-up of the body, after death — would appear among well-to-do noble warriors. Why is that? Because one is a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct. [6]

"If one — a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct — should wish: 'O if I, with the break-up of the body, after death, were to reappear among well-to-do brahmans, it is possible that one — with the break-up of the body, after death — would appear among well-to-do brahmans. Why is that? Because one is a person of Dhamma conduct,

harmonious conduct.

"If one — a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct — should wish: 'O if I, with the break-up of the body, after death, were to reappear among well-to-do householders, it is possible that one — with the break-up of the body, after death — would appear among well-to-do householders. Why is that? Because one is a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct.

"If one — a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct — should wish: 'O if I, with the break-up of the body, after death, were to reappear among the devas of the Four Great Kings, it is possible that one — with the break-up of the body, after death — would appear among the devas of the Four Great Kings. Why is that? Because one is a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct.

"If one — a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct — should wish: 'O if I, with the break-up of the body, after death, were to reappear among the devas of the Thirty-three... the devas of the Hours... the Contented devas... the devas Delighting in Creation... the devas Wielding Power over the Creations of Others, it is possible that one — with the break-up of the body, after death — would appear among the devas Wielding Power over the Creations of Others. Why is that? Because one is a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct. [7]

"If one — a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct — should wish: 'O if I, with the break-up of the body, after death, were to reappear among the devas in Brahma's retinue... the Radiant devas... the devas of Limited Radiance... the devas of Immeasurable Radiance... the devas of Streaming Radiance... the Beautiful devas ... the devas of Limited Beauty... the devas of Immeasurable Beauty... the Beautiful Black devas... the Sky-fruit devas, it is possible that one — with the break-up of the body, after death — would appear among the Sky-fruit devas. Why is that? Because one is a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct. [8]

"If one — a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct — should wish: 'O if I, with the break-up of the body, after death, were to reappear among the Not Falling Away devas... the Untroubled devas... the Good-looking devas... the Clear-seeing devas... the Peerless devas, it is possible that one — with the break-up of the body, after death — would appear among the Peerless devas. Why is that? Because one is a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct. [9]

"If one — a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct — should wish: 'O if I, with the break-up of the body, after death, were to reappear among the devas who have reached the dimension of the infinitude of space... the devas who have reached the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness... the devas who have reached the dimension of nothingness... the devas who have reached the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, it is possible that one — with the break-up of the body, after death — would appear among the devas who have reached the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. Why is that? Because one is a person of Dhamma conduct,

harmonious conduct. [10]

"If one — a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct — should wish: 'O if I — with the ending of the mental fermentations — were to enter & remain in the fermentation-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known and realized them for myself right in the here & now,' it is possible that one — with the ending of the mental fermentations — would enter & remain in the fermentation-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known and realized them for oneself right in the here & now. [11] Why is that? Because one is a person of Dhamma conduct, harmonious conduct."

When this was said, the brahman householders of Sala said to the Blessed One: "Magnificent, Master Gotama! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has Master Gotama — through many lines of reasoning — made the Dhamma clear. We go to Master Gotama for refuge, to the Dhamma, & to the community of monks. May Master Gotama remember us as lay followers who have gone for refuge from this day forward, for life."

Note

1.

Dissonant and harmonious (visama and sama): Throughout ancient cultures, the terminology of music was used to describe the moral quality of people and acts. Discordant intervals or poorly-tuned musical instruments were metaphors for evil; harmonious intervals and well-tuned instruments were metaphors for good. In Pali, the term sama — "even" — describes an instrument tuned on-pitch. AN 6.55 contains a famous passage where the Buddha reminds Sona Kolivisa — who had been over-exerting himself in the practice — that a lute sounds appealing only if the strings are neither too taut nor too lax, but "evenly" tuned.

2.

Pisuna vaca: Some translators mistakenly render this term as "slander," which is actually a form of false speech. Pisuna vaca deals with true matters but is intended to break friendships or to prevent them from happening.

3.

This is the materialist view espoused by Ajita Kesakambalin (DN 2), who maintained that there was no birth after death and that actions bore no results. "Nothing given" means that the act of generosity bears no karmic fruit. "No this world, no next world" means that there is no life after death. "No spontaneously reborn beings" means that there are no inhabitants of heaven or hell.

4.

This passage is the basis for the expressions of good will that are often chanted in Theravada countries.

5.

This definition of right view — called "mundane" right view in MN 117 — is a level of right view that is a preliminary to transcendent right view, i.e., right view in terms of the four noble truths. Mundane right view establishes two principles — that actions bear fruit and that death is normally followed by rebirth — as basic working hypotheses for the practice. MN 60 notes that if a person who does not accept these principles, "it can be expected that, shunning these three skillful activities — good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, good mental conduct — they will adopt & practice these three unskillful activities: bad bodily conduct, bad verbal conduct, bad mental conduct. Why is that? Because [they] do not see, in unskillful activities, the drawbacks, the degradation, and the defilement; nor in skillful activities the rewards of renunciation, resembling cleansing."

6.

This and the following passages on the power of a wish made by a virtuous person are apparently related to a principle — expressed in SN 41.10 — that a wish made by a virtuous person can succeed through the purity of his/her virtue. However, other passages in the Canon suggest that virtue on its own — even when combined with the levels of conviction and discernment embodied in the three types of skillful mental action — may not be enough for any of the attainments listed here. In other words, the ten types of skillful action may be necessary causes for these attainments, but they may not be sufficient causes.

For example, MN 135 states that one must be generous in order to be born into a wealthy family. AN 3.71 states that the rebirth into the six deva realms beginning with the devas of the Four Great Kings is based on five qualities: conviction, virtue, learning, generosity, and discernment. AN 7.49 correlates different motivations for giving with the attainment of different levels of rebirth among these realms after death. AN 4.123 and 125 state that rebirth in Brahma's retinue can follow on the attainment of the first jhana or the meditative development of immeasurable good will.

It should also be noted, in line with MN 136, that skillful conduct in this lifetime is not always rewarded in the immediate next birth, either because of previous bad actions or because of bad actions adopted toward the end of one's life. In such a case, the desired destination will be delayed to a later lifetime. This may be why the Buddha states that "it is possible" that a person of Dhamma conduct will attain his/her desired destination in the next life. Only with the attainment of stream-entry is one guaranteed not to fall into the lower realms.

Conversely, it is not always the case that a person who engages in unskillful conduct in this lifetime will go to a lower destination in the next. There is always the possibility that such a person may have good kamma from the past, or may change his/her ways later in this lifetime. In SN 42.8 the Buddha criticizes those who teach that misdeeds inevitably lead to a bad destination in the next lifetime, saying that anyone who believed such a teaching and knew that he/she had already committed misdeeds would feel that he/she had already been consigned to hell. A more skillful way to regard past misdeeds would be to recognize that they were wrong, to resolve not to repeat them, and to develop attitudes of immeasurable goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity to reinforce one's resolve not to treat anyone in an unskillful way.

AN 3.99 adds that the results of past misdeeds can be mitigated both through the practice of the four immeasurables and through training the mind so that it is not overcome by feelings of pleasure or pain.

7.

The six deva realms listed here, beginning with the Four Great Kings, are the realms of the sensual heavens.

8.

These are the devas (also called brahmas) on the level of form. The commentary notes that the term "Radiant devas" is actually a class name encompassing the following three levels: the devas of Limited Radiance, the devas of Immeasurable Radiance, and the devas of Streaming Radiance. Similarly, the "Beautiful devas" encompass the devas of Limited Beauty, the devas of Immeasurable Beauty, and the Beautiful Black devas. According to AN 4.123 and 125, rebirth among the devas of Streaming Radiance can follow on the attainment of the second jhana or the meditative development of immeasurable compassion; rebirth among the Beautiful Black devas can follow on the attainment of the third jhana or the meditative development of immeasurable empathetic joy; rebirth among the Sky-fruit devas can follow on the attainment of the fourth jhana or the meditative development of immeasurable equanimity.

An Abhidhamma text, the Vibhanga — drawing on a passage in DN 1 — mentions another level of devas of form not listed here: the Non-percipient beings, a level in which there is no perception at all. The commentary explains that they are not listed here because this attainment is open to hermits and seers outside the Buddha's teaching, and does not require virtue. This, however, ignores the fact that the four jhanas and four formless states are also open to people outside the Buddha's teaching; and although virtue helps with the attainment of jhana, it is nowhere stated in the Canon that the jhanas cannot be attained by a person whose virtue is not pure. A more likely reason for omitting the Non-percipient beings here is that this state, unlike the jhanas and four formless states, is not conducive to the arising of insight, and so would not be considered a desirable goal.

9.

These are the Pure Abodes: the brahma heavens into which non-returners are reborn and where they attain total Unbinding. AN 4.124 and 126 state that, to attain these realms, one masters any of the four jhanas or four immeasurable abidings (based on good will, etc.), and then contemplates the resulting mental state in this way: "One regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. At the break-up of the body, after death, he reappears among the devas of the Pure Abodes. This rebirth is not in common with run-of-the-mill people."

10.

These are the devas (also called brahmas) of the formless levels, corresponding to the four formless attainments.

11.

This is the standard description of arahantship, which requires not only heightened virtue, but also heightened mastery of concentration and heightened discernment (AN 3.88).

See also: MN 9; MN 135; AN 3.71; AN 4.123-126; AN 7.49; AN 8.54; AN 10.176.