MN 90 — Kannakatthala Sutta: At Kannakatthala

English translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

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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, including introductions, notes and verse structure. Thanissaro's collection-level note explicitly states that repetitions were cut: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/about.html. This is evidence about the translation method, not an assertion that every individual unit contains an omission; no repetitions reconstructed.

Text

Translator's Introduction

The frame story of this sutta presents a gentle satire of royal life. Despite his position, King Pasenadi Kosala must still act the role of messenger for his wives. Because of his position, he finds himself surrounded by people he cannot trust — he never gets to the bottom of the question of who brought misinformation into the palace — and whose minds fasten on issues of overthrowing and banishing, possibly him. He is so preoccupied with his responsibilities that he doesn't pick up on the Buddha's gentle joke about his servitude to the sisters Soma and Sakula, can't stick with an issue for any length of time, sometimes can't even phrase his questions properly, and can arrive at no greater certainty about the Buddha's teachings than that they seem reasonable. At the end of the sutta he has to leave, not because he has exhausted the issues he would like to discuss, but because one of his courtiers tells him it is time to go. All in all, not an enviable position.

The substance of the discussion, however, does touch on some serious issues. The topic treated in greatest detail concerns the differences among the castes of the Buddha's time, and the Buddha's remarks can profitably be applied to issues of racism in ours.

The discussion and the frame story, of course, play off one another. Because of his social position, King Pasenadi is unable to pursue the path to release that is open to all regardless of race or caste. His social advantages are a spiritual liability. Like many people in the modern world, he has plenty of things but no time.

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying among the Udañña ns, in the Deer Park at Kannakatthala. And at that time King Pasenadi Kosala had arrived at Udañña on some business or other. So King Pasenadi Kosala said to one of his men, "Come, my good man. Go to the Blessed One and, on arrival, showing reverence with your head to his feet in my name, ask whether he is free from illness & affliction, is carefree, strong, & living in comfort, saying: 'King Pasenadi Kosala, lord, shows reverence with his head to your feet and asks whether you are free from illness & affliction, are carefree, strong, & living in comfort.' And then say: 'Lord, today King Pasenadi Kosala will come to see the Blessed One after his morning meal.'"

Having responded, "As you say, sire," the man went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to him, "King Pasenadi Kosala, lord, shows reverence with his head to your feet and asks whether you are free from illness & affliction, are carefree, strong, & living in comfort." And then he said, "Lord, today King Pasenadi Kosala will come to see the Blessed One after his morning meal."

Now, the sisters Soma and Sakula [1] heard, "Today, they say, King Pasenadi Kosala will go to see the Blessed One after his morning meal." So they approached King Pasenadi while his meal was being served and on arrival said to him, "Well in that case, great king, show reverence with your head to his feet in our name, too, and ask whether he is free from illness & affliction, is carefree, strong, & living in comfort, saying: 'The sisters Soma and Sakula, lord, show reverence with their heads to your feet and ask whether you are free from illness & affliction, are carefree, strong, & living in comfort.'"

Then, after his morning meal, King Pasenadi Kosala went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One, "The sisters Soma and Sakula, lord, show reverence with their heads to your feet and ask whether you are free from illness & affliction, are carefree, strong, & living in comfort."

"But, great king, couldn't the sisters Soma and Sakula get another messenger?"

"Lord, the sisters Soma and Sakula heard, 'Today, they say, King Pasenadi Kosala will go to see the Blessed One after his morning meal.' So they approached me while my meal was being served and on arrival said to me, 'In that case, great king, show reverence with your head to his feet in our name, too, and ask whether he is free from illness & affliction, is carefree, strong, & living in comfort, saying: "The sisters Soma and Sakula, lord, show reverence with their heads to your feet and ask whether you are free from illness & affliction, are carefree, strong, & living in comfort."' Lord, the sisters Soma and Sakula show reverence with their heads to your feet and ask whether you are free from illness &

affliction, are carefree, strong, & living in comfort."

"May the sisters Soma and Sakula be happy, great king."

Then King Pasenadi Kosala said to the Blessed One, "Lord, I have heard that 'Gotama the contemplative says this: "It is not possible that a brahman or contemplative would claim a knowledge and vision that is all-knowing and all-seeing without exception."' Those who say this: are they speaking in line with what the Blessed One has said? Are they not misrepresenting the Blessed One with what is unfactual? Are they answering in line with the Dhamma, so that no one whose thinking is in line with the Dhamma would have grounds for criticizing them?"

"Great king, those who say that are not speaking in line with what I have said, and are misrepresenting me with what is untrue and unfactual."

Then King Pasenadi Kosala turned to General Vidudabha: "General, who brought this topic into the palace?"

"Sañjaya, the brahman of the Akasa clan, great king."

So King Pasenadi turned to one of his men, "Come, my good man. Summon Sañjaya the brahman of the Akasa clan, saying, 'King Pasenadi Kosala summons you.'"

Responding, "As you say, sire," the man went to Sañjaya the brahman of the Akasa clan and on arrival said to him, "King Pasenadi Kosala summons you."

Then King Pasenadi Kosala said to the Blessed One, "Could it be that something was said by the Blessed One in reference to something else, which a person could have misunderstood? In what way does the Blessed One recall having said [such] a statement?"

"Great king, I recall having said, 'It is not possible that a brahman or contemplative could know everything and see everything all at once.'"

"What the Blessed One says, lord, seems reasonable. What the Blessed One says seems logical: 'It is not possible that a brahman or contemplative could know everything and see everything all at once.'

"Lord, there are these four castes: noble warriors, brahmans (brahmans), merchants, & workers. Is there any distinction or difference among them?"

"Great king, of these four castes, two — noble warriors & brahmans — are held to be foremost in terms of receiving homage, hospitality, salutation, & polite services."

"I'm not asking about the present life, lord. I'm asking about the future life. Is there any distinction or difference among these four castes?"

"Great king, there are these five factors for exertion. Which five?

"There is the case where a monk has conviction, is convinced of the Tathagata's Awakening: 'Indeed, the Blessed One is worthy and rightly self-awakened, consummate in knowledge & conduct, well-gone, an expert with regard to the world, unexcelled as a trainer for those people fit to be tamed, the Teacher of divine & human beings, awakened, blessed.'

"He is free from illness & discomfort, endowed with good digestion — not too cold, not too hot, of moderate strength — fit for exertion.

"He is neither fraudulent nor deceitful. He declares himself to the Teacher or to his wise friends in the holy life in line with what he actually is.

"He keeps his persistence aroused for abandoning unskillful mental qualities and taking on skillful mental qualities. He is steadfast, solid in his effort, not shirking his duties with regard to skillful mental qualities.

"He is discerning, endowed with discernment leading to the arising of the goal — noble, penetrating, leading to the right ending of stress.

"These are the five factors for exertion.

"As for the four castes, great king: If they were endowed with these five factors for exertion, that would be for their long-term welfare & happiness."

"Lord, if these four castes were endowed with these five factors for exertion, would there be any distinction or difference among them in that respect?"

"I tell you, great king: the difference among them would lie in the diversity of their exertion. Suppose that there were two tamable elephants, tamable horses, or tamable oxen that were well-tamed & well-trained; and two tamable elephants, tamable horses, or tamable oxen that were untamed & untrained. What do you think: would the two tamable elephants, tamable horses, or tamable oxen that were well-tamed & well-trained acquire the habits of the tamed and reach the status of the tamed?"

"Yes, lord."

"And would the two tamable elephants, tamable horses, or tamable oxen that were untamed & untrained acquire the habits of the tamed and reach the status of the tamed?"

"No, lord."

"In the same way, great king, it is impossible that what could be attained by one who has confidence, who is free from illness, who is neither fraudulent nor deceitful, whose persistence is aroused, and who is discerning could also be attained by one who is without conviction, who is sickly, fraudulent & deceitful, lazy, and dull."

"What the Blessed One says, lord, seems reasonable. What the Blessed One says seems logical. But with regard to these four castes: if they were endowed with these five factors for exertion, and they had right exertion, would there be any distinction or difference among them in that respect?"

"I tell you, great king, that there would be no difference among them with regard to the release of one and the release of another. Suppose that a man, taking dry sala wood, were to generate a fire and make heat appear. And suppose that another man, taking dry saka (teak?) wood, were to generate a fire and make heat appear. And suppose that another man, taking dry mango wood, were to generate a fire and make heat appear. And suppose that another man, taking dry fig wood, were to generate a fire and make heat appear. Now what do you think, great king: among those fires generated from different kinds of wood, would there be any difference between the glow of one and the glow of another, the color of one and the color of another, the radiance of one and the radiance of another?"

"No, lord."

"In the same way, great king, in the power that is kindled by persistence and generated by exertion, I say that there is no difference with regard to the release of one and the release of another."

"What the Blessed One says, lord, seems reasonable. What the Blessed One says seems logical. But, lord, are there devas?"

"But why do you ask, 'But, lord, are there devas?'?"

"Whether the devas come back to this life, lord, or whether they don't."

"Those devas who are afflicted [2] come back to this life, whereas those devas who are unafflicted don't come back to this life."

When this was said, General Vidudabha said to the Blessed One, "Lord, can the afflicted devas oust or expel the unafflicted devas from that place?"

Then the thought occurred to Ven. Ananda, "This General Vidudabha is the son of King Pasenadi Kosala, and I am the son of the Blessed One. Now is the time for the son to counsel the son." So Ven. Ananda turned to General Vidudabha and said, "In that case, general, I will ask you a counter question. Answer as you see fit. Through the extent of land conquered by King Pasenadi Kosala — where he exercises sovereign & independent kingship — is he able to oust or expel a brahman or contemplative from that place, regardless of whether that person has merit or not, or follows the holy life or not?"

"Sir, through the extent of land conquered by King Pasenadi Kosala — where he exercises sovereign & independent kingship — he is able to oust or expel a brahman or contemplative from that place, regardless of whether that person has merit or not, or follows the holy life or not."

"And what do you think, general: Through the extent of land not conquered by King Pasenadi Kosala — where he does not exercise sovereign & independent kingship — is he able to oust or expel a brahman or contemplative from that place, regardless of whether that person has merit or not, or follows the holy life or not?"

"Sir, through the extent of land not conquered by King Pasenadi Kosala — where he does not exercise sovereign & independent kingship — he is not able to oust or expel a brahman or contemplative from that place, regardless of whether that person has merit or not, or follows the holy life or not."

"And what do you think, general: Have you heard of the Devas of the Thirty-three?"

"Yes, sir, I have heard of the Devas of the Thirty-three, as has King Pasenadi Kosala."

"And what do you think, general: Could King Pasenadi Kosala oust or expel the Devas of the Thirty-three from that place?"

"Sir, King Pasenadi Kosala can't even see the Devas of the Thirty-three. How could he oust or expel them from that place?"

"In the same way, general, afflicted devas, who will come back to this life, can't even see the unafflicted devas who don't come back to this life. How could they oust or expel them from that place?"

Then King Pasenadi Kosala said to the Blessed One, "Lord, what is the name of this monk?"

"His name is Ananda (Joy), great king."

"What a joy he is! What a true joy! But, lord, are there brahmas?"

"But why do you ask, 'But, lord, are there brahmas?'?"

"Whether the brahmas come back to this life, lord, or whether they don't."

"Those brahmas who are afflicted come back to this life, whereas those brahmas who are unafflicted don't come back to this life."

Then a man said to King Pasenadi Kosala, "Great king, Sañjaya the brahman of the Akasa clan has come."

Then King Pasenadi Kosala said to Sañjaya the brahman of the Akasa clan, "Who brought that topic into the royal palace?"

"General Vidudabha, great king."

General Vidudabha said, "Sañjaya the brahman of the Akasa clan, great king."

Then a man said to King Pasenadi Kosala, "Time to go, great king."

So King Pasenadi Kosala said to the Blessed One, "Lord, we have asked the Blessed One about omniscience, the Blessed One has answered about omniscience, and that is pleasing & agreeable to us, and we are gratified because of it. We have asked the Blessed One about the purity of the four castes, the Blessed One has answered about the purity of the four castes, and that is pleasing & agreeable to us, and we are gratified because of it. We have asked the Blessed One about the higher devas, the Blessed One has answered about the higher devas, and that is pleasing & agreeable to us, and we are gratified because of it. We have asked the Blessed One about the higher brahmas, the Blessed One has answered about the higher brahmas, and that is pleasing & agreeable to us, and we are gratified because of it. Whatever we have asked the Blessed One about, that he has answered, and that is pleasing & agreeable to us, and we are gratified because of it. Now, lord, we must go. Many are our duties, many our responsibilities."

"Then do, great king, what you think it is now time to do."

Then King Pasenadi Kosala, delighting in and approving of the Blessed One's words, got up from his seat, bowed down to the Blessed One and — keeping him to his right — departed.

Notes

1.

According to the Commentary, Soma and Sakula were two wives of the king. The Commentary's treatment of this incident as a whole, however, seems aimed at taking the teeth out of the satire, perhaps to appease the royal patrons of the monks who compiled the Commentary. It insists that the two sisters did not barge in on the king as his meal was being served, but were actually taking part in the meal-serving ceremony. However, the sisters' tone of voice in delivering their request to the king is anything but servile. So perhaps the Commentary is mistaken about their identity as well.

2.

According to the Commentary, "afflicted" here means still subject to suffering; "unafflicted" means free from the roots of suffering.

See also: SN 3.24; AN 3.57