SN 1.20 — SN 1:20 About Samiddhi | Samiddhi Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro 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

About Samiddhi

Samiddhi Sutta (SN 1:20)

The Pali Canon is unique in its approach to the spirit world. While confirming the existence of spirits and other more refined levels of beings, it insists that they are not worthy of worship. The Buddha, after all, is the teacher not only of human beings but also of heavenly beings; and many heavenly beings are not especially knowledgeable or spiritually advanced, in spite of their refined state. The Canon illustrates this point in a number of gentle satires. The most famous is the Kevaṭṭa Sutta (DN 11), where the ignorance & pomposity of a supposedly all-knowing creator is lampooned.

This discourse is another entertaining example of the same genre, pointing out the difficulties of teaching more advanced Dhamma to any being—human or divine—who is obsessed with sensual pleasures. On hearing some verses concerning the awakened one's state of mind—which is not subject to time and is visible here & now—the devatā cannot understand them, and is able to grasp only a few very basic principles of Dhamma practice. It's unusual for the Buddha to aim his words so far over the heads of his listeners. Perhaps in this case, as in SN 1:1, he wants to subdue the devatā's pride. At any rate, there is hope for her: As the Commentary points out, her understanding covers in a rudimentary fashion all the elements of the noble eightfold path. If she follows through with her understanding, she's on the road to the higher attainments.

This discourse also contains some word play on the words "time" (kāla) and "subject to time" (kālika). "Time" can mean not only time in the general sense, but also one's time of death (a person who has died is said to have "done his/her time"). These two meanings of the word underlie the first exchange between Ven. Samiddhi and the devatā. "Subject to time" can mean "obtainable only after a certain time" or "good only for a certain length of time": These meanings underlie their second exchange. There is also word play on the phrase, "visible here & now." The devatā, assuming that Ven. Samiddhi is denying himself human sensuality for the sake of a reward after death, uses this phrase to describe human sensuality. Ven. Samiddhi, who has tasted the deathless, uses the same phrase to describe his actual goal: unbinding. The devatā's inability to understand the meaning of Ven. Samiddhi's words shows clearly that, in spite of her fortunate birth, she still has a great deal to learn.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Rājagaha at Tapodā monastery. Then Ven. Samiddhi, as night was ending, got up & went to the Tapodā Hot Springs to bathe his limbs. Having bathed his limbs and gotten out of the springs, he stood wearing only his lower robe, letting his limbs dry.

Then a certain devatā, in the far extreme of the night, her extreme radiance lighting up the entire Tapodā Hot Springs, went to Ven. Samiddhi. On arrival, while standing in the air, she addressed him with this verse:

"Without having enjoyed

(sensual pleasures),

you go for alms, monk.

You don't go for alms

after having enjoyed.

Having enjoyed, monk,

then go for alms.

Don’t let time pass you by.”

Ven. Samiddhi:

“I don’t know my time.

My time

is hidden.

It can’t be seen.

That’s why, not having enjoyed,

I go for alms:

Don’t let my time pass me by.”

Then the devatā, coming down to earth, said to Ven. Samiddhi, “You have gone forth while young, monk—black-haired, endowed with the blessings of youth in the first stage of life—without having played with sensuality. Enjoy human sensuality, monk. Don’t drop what is visible here & now in pursuit of what’s subject to time.”

“My friend, I’m not dropping what’s visible here & now in pursuit of what’s subject to time. I’m dropping what’s subject to time in pursuit of what’s visible here & now. For the Blessed One has said that sensuality is subject to time, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks; whereas this Dhamma is well taught by the Blessed One, visible here & now, timeless, inviting verification, pertinent, to be experienced by the observant for themselves.”

“But, monk, in what way has the Blessed One said that sensuality is subject to time, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks? And how is this Dhamma visible here & now, timeless, inviting verification, pertinent, to be experienced by the observant for themselves?”

“I’m new, my friend, not long gone forth, only recently come to this Dhamma & discipline. I can’t explain it in detail. But the Blessed One, worthy & rightly self-awakened, is staying here near Rājagaha at Tapodā monastery. Having gone to him, ask him this matter. As he explains it, that’s how you should remember it.”

“Monk, it’s not easy for us to go to the Blessed One, as he is surrounded by other devas of great influence. But if you go to the Blessed One and ask him this matter, I will come along to hear the Dhamma.”

Responding to the devatā, “As you say, my friend,” Ven. Samiddhi went to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there [he told the Blessed One his entire conversation with the devatā]. “Now, lord, if that devatā was telling the truth, she is not far from here.”

When this was said, the devatā said to Ven. Samiddhi, “Ask, monk! Ask! I’ve gotten through.”

Then the Blessed One recited this verse to the devatā:

“Perceiving in terms of signs, beings

take a stand on signs.

Not fully comprehending signs, they

come into the bonds

of death.

But fully comprehending signs, one

doesn’t suppose

a signifier.1

Yet nothing exists for him

by which one would say,

‘To him no thought occurs.’

If you know this, spirit, then say so.”

“I don’t understand, lord, the detailed meaning of the Blessed One’s brief statement. It would be good if the Blessed One would speak in such a way that I would understand the detailed meaning of the Blessed One’s brief statement.”

The Buddha:

“Whoever supposes

‘equal,’

‘superior,’ or

‘inferior,’

by that he’d dispute.

Whereas to one unaffected by these three,

‘equal’

‘superior’

do not occur.2

If you know this, spirit, then say so.”

“I don’t understand, lord, the detailed meaning of the Blessed One’s brief statement. It would be good if the Blessed One would speak in such a way that I would understand the detailed meaning of the Blessed One’s brief statement.”

The Buddha:

“Having

shed classifications,

gone beyond conceit,

he has here

cut

through craving

for name

& form:

This one—

his bonds cut through,

free

from trouble,

from longing—

though they search, they can’t find him,

human beings & devas,

here & beyond,

in heaven

or any abode.3

If you know this, spirit, then say so.”

“Lord, here’s how I understand the detailed meaning of the Blessed One’s brief statement:

In all the world,

every world,

you should do no evil

with speech,

body,

or mind.

Having abandoned sensuality

—mindful, alert—

don't consort

with suffering & stress,

with what doesn't pertain

to the goal."4

Notes

1. This verse is from Iti 63.

2. This verse is from Sn 4:9.

3. This verse is also found in SN 1:40.

4. This verse is also found in SN 1:34.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 11; MN 54; SN 5:1; SN 5:4; SN 5:7; SN 9:1; SN 9:14; SN 35:127; AN 5:75–76; Iti 63; Sn 4:7; Sn 4:9; Sn 5:6; Thag 7:1