

(Saṅgha) Uposatha Sutta

The Discourse on the Observance Day (of the Sangha)

[The spiritual benefits of being a noble disciple]

(Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.190/2:182-184)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2006

1 The (Saṅgha) Uposatha Sutta and the Venāga,pura Sutta

In both **the (Saṅgha) Uposatha Sutta** (A 4.190) and **the Venāga,pura Sutta** (A 3.63), the Buddha describes the mental state of saints. In the (Saṅgha) Uposatha Sutta, the Buddha declares of the monks in his order, thus:

Bhikshus, there are monks in this community of monks who dwell having attained the state of devas...the state of brahmas...the imperturbable...the state of noble ones. [3-6]

In the Venāga,pura Sutta, on the other hand, the Buddha describes his own mental state, but omitting any mention of the four formless attainments (*ānejjā-p,patta*). The relevant states mentioned by the two suttas are here summarized:

(Saṅgha) Uposatha Sutta

("a monk," 3rd person)

deva-p,patta, the deva-states [3]:
the four dhyanas;

brahma-p,patta, the brahma-states [4]:
the four divine abodes;

ānejjā-p,patta [5]:
the four formless attainments;

ariya-p,patta, the noble states [6]:
penetration of the four noble truths.

Venāga,pura Sutta

(the Blessed One, 1st person)

dibba-p,patta, the heavenly states [A 3.63.5]:
the four dhyanas:
walking, standing, reclining is "heavenly," too;

brahma-p,patta, the perfect states [A 3.63.6]:
the four divine abodes:
walking, standing, reclining is "perfect," too;

[none]

ariya-p,patta, the noble states [A 3.63.7]:
walking, standing, reclining is "perfect," too.

While these afterlife states for Brahmanism (and later Hinduism), the Buddhist meditator abides in them *in this life itself*, as proclaimed by the Buddha himself. As such, this quality can be reflected as embodying those of the Dharma, too:¹

it is well taught (*svākkhāto*);
it is visible here and now (*sandiṭṭhika*), sometimes rendered as "to be seen for oneself";
it has an immediate effect (*akālika*);
it invites and entails personal verification (*ehi,passika*);
it is accessible (*opaneyika*), alternately, it "brings on progress";
it is to be personally realized by the wise (*paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*).

¹ See *Dhammānussati* = SD 15.9.

2 Secularization

Like the **Sigāl'ovāda Sutta** (D 31),² the (Saṅgha) Uposatha Sutta is a good example of a study of what in modern religious studies is called “demythologization,” or what in sociology is called “secularization”: as the former has been discussed earlier,³ we shall here only discuss the latter. According to the sociologist, Bryan Wilson,⁴ **secularization** is a process in which religious thinking, practice and institution lose social significance, or that it depicts “a situation in which the beliefs and sanctions of religion become—or are in the process of becoming—increasingly discounted in society as guides to conduct or to decision-making.”⁵ In Europe, this secularization is said to have been brought about by the social changes in urban, industrial society. This idea however has received strong criticisms, as summarized here:

- (1) it has to assume the existence of a “golden age” of religion, when religious institutions did have a widespread social significance;
- (2) it exaggerates the presence of rational, secular belief in modern society, ignoring the evidence of superstition and magic;
- (3) it cannot account for the prevalence of cults among the young, especially those deriving from Oriental religions such as Hare Krishna, Divine Light Mission and the Meher Baba movement;
- (4) it underestimates the importance of organized Christianity as a political force in Europe and North America;
- (5) in a comparative perspective, the vitality of Zionism, militant Islam, and radical Catholicism in Latin America suggests that there is no necessary connection between modernization and secularization;
- (6) by adopting a narrow definition of religion, it equates secularization with de-Christianization;
- (7) there are processes in modern societies which ascribe a transcendental or sacred significance to the self; these processes constitute an invisible religion.

(Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, edd. *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, 2nd ed 1988:217)

The expression “**secular religion**” is often used in a negative sense. Bodhi, in one of his writings, for example, writes

...a vast portion of humankind today has become alienated from religion as a meaningful guide to life, left with no alternative but to plunge headlong into the secular religion of consumerism and hedonism
(Bodhi, “Two paths to knowledge,” 1998:1)⁶

Indeed, Buddhism becomes “**secular**” (in Bodhi’s sense) when its proponents or followers are more guided by worldly ways than spiritual goals: the Buddhism of greed, the Buddha of hate and the Buddhism of delusion are secular religions in this sense. When monastics become more worldly or self-centred, and fail to work for awakening in this life itself, they have become secular.⁷

However, we can, if we define our terms, take “**secular Buddhism**” as a positive term to denote a direct compassionate concern for the world. From the moment the Buddha decides to teach the Dharma to all, he shows concern for the world. And yet the Buddha is not *of* the world: he is merely *with* the world, and his presence is healing and he ferries beings out of suffering.

This “religionless Dharma” is not the dogmas and quirks of arm-chair experts, or of self-anointed gurus, or of ritual specialists, or of the clergy of the world. It is a living spiritual experience of the constant awareness of the impermanent nature of life. One is in touch with the very depths of one’s being,

² D 31/3:180-193 = SD 4.1.

³ See SD 4.1(2).

⁴ *Religion in a Secular Society*, London: Watts, 1966.

⁵ Margaret Hewitt in G Duncan Mitchell (ed), *A New Dictionary of Sociology*. London: Routledge, 1979:170.

⁶ BPS Newsletter cover essay no 42, 1998 (2nd mailing 1999). From: <http://www.accesstosight.org>.

⁷ See eg **The Dharma-ending Age** = SD 1.10 & **The Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** = SD 13.12

an awareness that makes us mountains separated only by the floods of ignorance and views, but when the waters recede, we find ourselves to be a veritable unshakable continent.

Even a quick survey of the early Buddhist texts will show the Buddha using a minimum of rituals and formalism, and the audience is admonished to read between the lines, to cut down the forest of ignorance and fear, but not the tree of wisdom:

Cut down the forest, but not the tree.	<i>vanam chindatha, mā rukkham</i>	
From the forest arises fear;	<i>vanato jāyati bhayaṃ</i>	
Having cut down the forest and growths,	<i>chetvā vanañ ca vanathañ ca</i>	
Bhikshus, you are forest-free!	<i>nibbaṇā hotha bhikkhavo</i>	(Dh 283)

We have to free ourselves from “the forest” of fear, wrong views, superstition and habitual tendencies. We have to sit in the silence of the wisdom tree, the still centre, even though the storm rages all around.

3 Emotional independence

A very important aspect of Buddhist meditation is the cultivation of positive emotion. The recollection on the Sangha is a very effective way of building up a wholesome mind as a basis for deeper concentration. **The Nandiya Sutta** (A 11.14) mentions five of the six recollections (excepting that on moral virtue) in connection with six other qualities (faith, moral virtue, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom).⁸ The recollection on the Sangha there is called the recollection on spiritual friends (*kalyāṇa-mittānussati*), and explained thus:

Again, Nandiya, you should recollect spiritual friends, thus:
 “What a gain it is for me! Well gotten is this gain for me! That I have spiritual friends,
 compassionate, desirous of my welfare, who advise and teach me.”
 Thus, Nandiya, firmly fixed on spiritual friends, you should set up mindfulness internally.
 (A 11.14.6/5:336)

This is the kind of meditation that builds up one’s emotional strength so that one is self-reliant, and as such would be able to let go of worldly things more easily.

If the aim of becoming a Buddhist monastic is to attain arhathood, that is, total liberation in this life itself, then the aim of a lay follower is the attainment of stream-winning here and now.⁹ When these three fetters are broken, one is said to have become a stream-winner:

- (1) self-identity view (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*);
- (2) attachment to rules and rituals (*sīla-b, bata parāmāsa*); and
- (3) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*). (M 1:9; S 5:357; Dhs 182)

The Dhamma,saṅgaṇī explains both self-identity view and attachment to rules and rituals as examples of wrong view (*micchā, diṭṭhi*) only associated with a mind (*citta*) that has greed (*lobha*) as a component,¹⁰ and that these two fetters are particular manifestations of that greed (or attachment). Doubt (*vicikicchā*) is defined by **the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī** as follows:

doubt regarding the Teacher (more specifically, the Buddha’s awakening),
 doubt regarding the Dharma (as the path to awakening),
 doubt regarding the Sangha (that is, the community of saints),
 doubt regarding the spiritual training,
 doubt regarding the past,
 doubt regarding the future,
 doubt regarding the past and future, and

⁸ A 11.14/5:334-337.

⁹ See **Entering the Stream** = SD 3.3 & (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1/3:225) = SD 16.7.

¹⁰ Dhs 75-80, 182 f.

doubt regarding the way in which states arise according to various conditions.¹¹

It is clear here that doubt (including speculative habits) is defined in an exactly opposite manner to faith (*saddhā*) and joyful faith (*pasāda*). While faith here is the steady confidence and lucid joy with regard the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, doubt is uncertainty about them. In simple terms, the defining qualities of a stream-winner are:

- (1) that he has given up self-centredness (our being is impermanent, we are not alone but inter-connected with everything else);
- (2) that he is not superstitious (the answer to life's problems does not lie in *things*, but in *self-effort*); and
- (3) that he does not fall for the idea of helplessness in seeking external solutions (such as the power-centred notions or the God-idea) when the answer really lies within.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas (D 22; M 10) have 16 instances of an “insight refrain” stated after each of the satipaṭṭhāna exercise, both advising how to practise it effectively and its benefits.

- (1) Practising satipaṭṭhāna (in the body, in feelings, in the mind, and in phenomena) internally, externally, and internally-externally;
- (2) watching the nature of arising, of ending, and of arising and ending;
- (3) maintaining the mindfulness of a “body” merely for knowing and awareness; and,
- (4) most importantly, for our purposes here, declares:

And he dwells independent, not clinging to anything in this world.¹²

What is the alternative to emotional and spiritual independence? It can only be a rather unwholesome one. JM Freeman, in his book, *Untouchable: An Indian Life History*,¹³ gives a chilling and dehumanizing example: in a court of law, a brahmin challenges his adversary, an outcaste, to touch him if he is telling the truth. The untouchable cannot bring himself to touch the brahmin, and so loses the case!

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¹¹ *Satthari kaṅkhati vicikicchati, dhamme kaṅkhati vicikicchati, saṅghe kaṅkhati vicikicchati, sikkhāya kaṅkhati vicikicchati, pubbatne kaṅkhati vicikicchati, aparante kaṅkhati vicikicchati, pubbantāparante kaṅkhati vicikicchati, idap, paccayātā, paṭicca, samuppannesu dhammesu kaṅkhati vicikicchati* (Dhs 183).

¹² M 10.5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 25, 31, 33, 35, 37, 39, 41, 43, 45; see **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** = SD 13.1(3.7a).

¹³ JM Freeman, *Untouchable: An Indian Life History*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979:96 f. Qu in Sue Hamilton, *Early Buddhism: A new approach*, 2000:48 n5.

The Discourse on the Observance Day (of the Sangha) (A 4.190/2:182-184)

1a At one time the Blessed One was staying in the mansion of Migāra's mother¹⁴ in the Eastern Park near Sāvattthī.

1b Now at that time—that being the observance day¹⁵—the Blessed One was seated in the midst of the order of monks. Then the Blessed One, having looked around at the absolutely silent order of monks, addressed the monks, thus:¹⁶

“Bhikshus, this assembly is without idle chatter, free from idle chatter.¹⁷

Bhikshus, this assembly is pure, established in the essence.¹⁸

Such a community of monks as this, bhikshus, such an assembly of monks as this, bhikshus, is difficult to see in this world.

Such a community of monks as this, bhikshus, such an assembly of monks as this, bhikshus, is¹⁹
worthy of worthy of offerings,
worthy of hospitality,
worthy of gifts,
worthy of salutation with the lotus-palms,²⁰
a supreme field of merit for the world.

Such a community of monks as this, bhikshus, such an assembly of monks as this, bhikshus: even a little that is given to it becomes great, and a great one becomes greater.²¹

Such community of monks as this, bhikshus, such an assembly as this, bhikshus: it is worth going many leagues with only a travelling bag²² just to see it.²³ [184]

Destinies of the order members

2 Bhikshus, there are monks in this community of monks who dwell having attained the state of devas.

Bhikshus, there are monks in this community of monks who dwell having attained the state of brahmas.

¹⁴ “The mansion of Migāra's mother,” *Migāra,mātu pasāde*. For details, see **Jaṭila S** (S 3.11.1/3:11n) = SD 14.11.

¹⁵ *Tad ah'uposathe = tasmim uposatha,divasa,bhūte* (UA 296). Cf (**Tad Ah'**) **Uposatha S** (A 3.70/1:205-215) = SD 4.18.

¹⁶ The full whole section as at D 1:117, 133; M 3:80; A 2:183.

¹⁷ See (**Moggallāna**) **Uposatha S** (U 5.5), where an impure (unconfessed) monk is thrown out of a Pratimoksha conclave (U 5.5/51 f).

¹⁸ “Established in the essence” (*sāre patiṭṭhitā*), ie established in moral virtue, etc (AA 3:168), where *sāra*, also means “heartwood,” ie, the core or essence of anything; the pith or the best of wood—a simile for spiritual strength and attainment. See, eg, **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18.12/1:111) = SD 6.14 and **Udumbarikā Sihanāda S** (D 25), where the Buddha's humour is evident in such a simile given in the latter (D 25.15-19/3:47-53) = SD 1.4.

¹⁹ Here follows the last 5 virtues of the noble Sangha's 9 virtues. For all the noble Sangha's virtues and comy, see **Aṭṭha,puggala S** (A 8.59/4:292) = SD 15.10b.

²⁰ *Añjali*, or more fully, *kamal'añjali*, “lotus gesture,” that is, with cupped hands held between the chest level and the crown depending on one's devotion. In the Thai tradition, however, the palms are pressed close together.

²¹ For a discussion on gifts, see, eg, **Dakkhiṇā,vibhaṅga S** (M 142) and **Dakkhiṇā S** (A 4.78/2:80 f).

²² *Puṭosena*, vl *puṭamsena*, a bag for carrying food when travelling, a knapsack.

²³ *Puṭosenāpi tathā,rūpo ayaṃ bhikkhave bhikkhu,saṅgho, tathā,rūpā ayaṃ parisā* (Sī Pī Ka). As at D 1:117, 133 (= *pātheyyaṃ gahetvā, puṭo amse assā ti*, “with provision in hand, a bag over the shoulder,” Comy); M 3:80; A 2:183.

Bhikshus, there are monks in this community of monks who dwell having attained the state of the imperturbable.

Bhikshus, there are monks in this community of monks who dwell having attained the state of noble ones.

Those dwelling in deva-states

3 And how, bhikshus, a monk attained the deva-state?

I. CULTIVATION OF THE DHYANAS²⁴

(1) Here, bhikshus, a monk, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome mental states, he reaches and dwells in the **first dhyana**, accompanied by initial application and sustained application, accompanied by zest and happiness, born of solitude.²⁵ He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body²⁶ with the zest and happiness born of solitude.²⁷

(2) And, furthermore, bhikshus, with the stilling of initial application and sustained application, by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, he reaches and dwells in the **second dhyana**, free from initial application and sustained application, accompanied by zest and happiness born of concentration.²⁸ He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the zest and happiness born of concentration.

(3) And furthermore, bhikshus, with the fading away of zest, he remains equanimous, mindful and clearly knowing, and experiences happiness with the body. He reaches and dwells in the **third dhyana**, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Happily he dwells in equanimity and mindfulness.’ He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the happiness free from zest.

(4) And furthermore, bhikshus, with the letting go of pleasure and pain—and with the earlier ending of happiness and suffering—he reaches and dwells in the **fourth dhyana**, that is neither painful nor pleasant, and with mindfulness fully purified by equanimity. He sits, pervading the body with a pure, bright mind,²⁹ so that there is no part of his entire body that is not pervaded by a pure, bright mind.

In this way, bhikshus, a monk has attained to the deva-state.

Those dwelling in brahma-states

4 And how, bhikshus, a monk attained the brahma-state?

II. CULTIVATION OF THE FOUR DIVINE ABODES³⁰

(1) Here, bhikshus, a monk dwells pervading one quarter with a mind filled with lovingkindness; likewise the second quarter, likewise the third quarter, likewise the fourth quarter. Thus above, below,

²⁴ As at V 3:4; M 1:89; Vbh 245.

²⁵ On the omission of “one-pointedness of mind” (*cittassa ek’aggatā*) and “concentration” (*samādhi*) here, see “The Laity and Dhyana,” SD 8 (2005).

²⁶ Here “body” (*kāya*) refers to the “mental body” (*nāma,kāya*), ie feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), formations (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) (Vism 4.175/169).

²⁷ These are the dhyana factors: *vitakka vicāra pīti sukha* *ek’aggatā*, respectively.

²⁸ The 2nd dhyana is known as “the noble silence” (*ariya,tuṇhī,bhāva*) because within it applied thought and sustained thought (thinking and discursion, *vitakka,vicāra*) cease, and with their cessation, speech cannot occur. (S 2:273); cf. S 4:293 where *vitakka* and *vicāra* are called verbal formation (*vacī,saṅkhāra*), the mental factors responsible for speech. In Ariya,pariyesanā S (M 1:161), the Buddha exhorts the monks when assembled to “either speak on the Dharma or observe the noble silence” (ie either talk Dharma or meditate).

²⁹ See **Accharā Vagga** (A 1.6.1-2): “Monks, this mind is radiant (*pabhassara*), but it is defiled by defilements from outside. The uninstructed ordinary person does not understand this as it really is. As such, for him there is no personal development.” (A 1:10). On reaching the 4th dhyana, the practitioner becomes directly aware of the truly and naturally pure nature of the mind. See also A:ÑB 1999 §4.

³⁰ More commonly called “the divine abode: (*brahma,viḥāra*); also “companionship with Brahmā” (*brahmā,-sahavyatā*, M 97.32/2:194 f = SD 4.9). The foll passage on cultivation of the divine abodes (*brahma,viḥāra*) is as at D 1:251, 2:186 f, 3:49 f, 78, 223 f; M 1:38, 127, 297, 335, 351, 369 f, 2:76, 82, 195, 207, 3:225, 4:296, 322, 351; A 1:183, 192, 196, 2:129 ff, 184, 3:225, 4:390, 5:299, 344; Pm 2:39 f; Vbh 272-275.

across, everywhere and to everyone as well as to himself, he dwells pervading the whole world with lovingkindness that is vast, exalted, boundless, without enmity, without ill-will.

(2) Furthermore, bhikshus, the monk, dwells pervading one quarter with a mind filled with compassion...pervading the whole world with compassion...boundless, without enmity, without ill-will.

(3) The monk dwells pervading one quarter with a mind filled with altruistic joy...pervading the whole world with altruistic joy...boundless, without enmity, without ill-will.

(4) The monk dwells pervading one quarter with a mind filled with equanimity, likewise the second quarter, likewise the third quarter, likewise the fourth quarter. Thus above, below, across, everywhere and to everyone as well as to himself, he dwells pervading the whole world with equanimity that is vast, exalted, boundless, without enmity, without ill-will.

In this way, bhikshus, a monk has attained to the brahma-state.

Those dwelling in the imperturbable

5 And how, bhikshus, a monk attained the imperturbable state?

III. CULTIVATION OF THE FOUR FORMLESS ATTAINMENTS³¹

(1) Through the utter transcending of the perception of physical form, the passing away of the perception of impingement [sense-contact], and non-attention to the perception of diversity, [contemplating,] ‘Space is infinite,’ one enters and dwells in the sphere of the infinity of space.

(2) Here, bhikshus, through the utter transcending of the infinity of space, [contemplating,] ‘Consciousness is infinite,’ one enters and dwells in the sphere of the infinity of consciousness.

(3) Through the utter transcending of the sphere of the infinity of consciousness, [contemplating,] ‘There is nothing,’ one enters and dwells in the sphere of nothingness.

(4) Through the utter transcending of the sphere of nothingness, one enters and dwells in the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

In this way, bhikshus, a monk has attained to the imperturbable state.

Those dwelling in the noble state

6 And how, bhikshus, a monk attained the noble state?

IV. PENETRATION OF THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS³²

Here, bhikshus, a monk

knows as it really is, ‘This is suffering’;

knows as it really is, ‘This is the arising of suffering’;

knows as it really is, ‘This is the ending of suffering’;

knows as it really is, ‘This is the way leading to the ending of suffering.

In this way, bhikshus, a monk has attained to the noble state.

— evaṃ —

060310; 060919; 080208; 081225a

³¹ As at D 2:112 (as the last 4 of the 8 liberations), 3:224; M 3:27, 43; S 5:119; A 2:184; Pm 2:39; Vbh 245.

³² As at D 1:84, 209, 2:304; M 1:62, 183, 279, 348, 442, 522, 2:162, 227, 3:136; S 5:199, 229, 414 f, 442, 445, 458-460, 480, 465; A 1:107, 117, 123 f, 165, 167, 220, 235, 245, 285, 288 f, 2:104-108, 184, 195, 202, 211, 250, 3:93, 4:397 f; Nm 1:40, 148, 2:270, 348; Nc:Be 35; Pm 1:85 f.