

# The Four Nutriments of Life

## An Anthology of Buddhist Texts

*Translated from the Pali  
with an Introductory Essay  
by*

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# The Four Nutriment of Life

## Introductory Essay

**A**LL BEINGS subsist on nutriment” — this, according to the Buddha, is the one single fact about life that, above all, deserves to be remembered, contemplated and understood.<sup>1</sup> If understood widely and deeply enough, this saying of the Buddha reveals indeed a truth that leads to the root of all existence and also to its uprooting. Here, too, the Buddha proved to be one who “saw to the root of things” (*mūla-dassāvī*).<sup>2</sup> Hence, it was thought useful to collect his utterances on the subject of nutriment (*āhāra*), together with the instructive explanations by the teachers of old, the commentators of the Pāli scriptures.

The laws of nutriment govern both biological and mental life, and this fact was expressed by the Buddha when speaking of four kinds of nutriment: edible food, sense-impressions, volitions, and consciousness. It is hunger that stands behind the entire process of nutrition, wielding its whip relentlessly. The body, from birth to death, craves ceaselessly for material food; and mind hungers as eagerly for its own kind of nourishment, for ever new sense-impressions and for an ever expanding universe of ideas.

Craving (*taṇhā*) is the principal condition of any “in-take” or “up-take” (*upādāna*),<sup>3</sup> that is, of nutriment in its widest sense. This is the first factor common to all types of nutriment, be they physical or mental.

The second common factor is the process of the assimilation of food. In the process of eating and digesting, what was external becomes absorbed in the internal; what was foreign matter becomes “one’s own” and is identified with one’s personality. A German proverb says: “*Der Mensch ist, was er isst*” — “Man is what he eats.” And this applies as well to mental nourishment. Our mind also feeds on “external” material: on sense-impressions and variegated experiences; on the contents of the store-

house of knowledge accumulated by the race; and on the precipitate derived from all these sources. Also our memories, when they become objects of mind, are as “external” to the present thought-moment as the ideas read in a book. What cannot be absorbed by the system is discarded, and thus, in the body as well as in the mind, there is a constant process of grasping and rejecting, assimilating and dissimilating, identifying with oneself and alienating. When we look closely at this process of nutrition, physical and mental, we shall notice that it is not only the eater who consumes the food, but, in the course of assimilation, also the food devours the eater. There is thus mutual absorption between them. We know how much people can be changed (for better or worse) by ideas they have absorbed and which finally have absorbed and consumed them.

These laws governing nutriment (physical and mental) are indeed sufficient to convince a thoughtful observer how illusory the conception of an abiding self or substance is. This alone should be enough to vindicate the Anattā doctrine, the Buddha’s deeply revolutionizing teaching of not-self.

Individualized life is, as Paul Dahlke says, “neither a metaphysical ‘I’-identity (pure spirit, pure subject, according to the soul-theory of the religions) nor a mere physical process (pure body, pure object, according to scientific materialism), but a nutrimental process and as such it is neither something which is in and by itself, nor something caused by another, but something that is maintaining itself: and all these so-called higher faculties of thinking and feeling are different forms of eating, of maintaining oneself.”

But in addition to the vindication of the Anattā doctrine (not-self), nutriment is likewise a convincing teacher of the two other characteristics of life, Impermanence and Suffering.

Change, or Impermanence (*anicca*), is at the very root of the nutritive process which cries for constant replenishment of the food consumed. The bottomless gaping hole has to be filled again and again as long as the being lives. And it is no different with our mental hunger that craves for change and variety.

This repetitive monotony of the process of nutrition kept going by the urge to preserve life — this is enough to reveal the *dukkha*-nature of life,

the tiresomeness of the tedious round of eating and being hungry again. Hence a medieval Jewish sage was moved to say, "I am fed up with being hungry again and again, and I hunger after final satiety."<sup>4</sup>

This is the suffering inherent in the very function of eating, though mostly hidden by the habituation to this most elementary feature of routine life. The concrete suffering and pain involved in the search for food and its acquisition, is obvious enough to all and this misery was, is and will be life's constant companion. There is the mute suffering in the animal world where "devouring each other is the law" (and man joining in it by even rearing animals for food); we also know of primitive man's fight for pasture land (basically the same as modern man's wars for "world markets"); we also know of the pangs of hunger among the poor, and of starving children the world over. And though the resources for feeding humanity have grown considerably in our days, man still has not controlled famine, even where it would be in his power to do so; and all progress in the field of food-production threatens to be dwarfed by the rapid growth of world population. This problem looms large on the horizon of present-day humanity and may well become desperate if the disparity between available food and increasing population reaches a critical point. Should that critical point be reached, we do not know what dire consequences may follow from that situation, unless a united mankind can solve the problem by concerted action and peaceful means. Hence, also for mankind's future, what the Dhamma teachers of old said remains true: that the search for food (*āhāra-pariyetthi*) is an ever-present source of suffering (*vattamāna dukkha*) and as such it can stir man's sense of urgency (*saṃvega*) when he considers, in the light of "nutriment," man's own nature, his incessant needs and his situation in the world.

This contemplation of the dukkha-aspect of nutriment leads us to a formulation of the Four Noble Truths in terms of nutriment, as given in the last text (No. 7) of this anthology. The four nutriments of life stand for the first truth of Ill; the craving for the four nutriments is the origin of Ill, the second Truth; the stopping of that craving is the cessation of the continued process of grasping for material and mental food, which is the end of Ill, the third Truth; and the Noble Eightfold Path is the way to that cessation.

It is because the process of nutrition (material and mental) demonstrates the conditioned nature of all existence that we have found it to cover those salient features of the Dhamma — the three signata (impermanence, suffering and not-self) and the Four Truths.

We shall now consider each of the four kinds of nutriments singly.

## ***1. Edible Food***

*Simile:* A couple, foodless in the midst of a desert, eat their little child, to enable them to reach their destination.

Just like the husband and wife in the Buddha's simile, mankind ever since it emerged on this planet, has traversed the desert of life where food is the most urgent concern. And again, as in that story, the stilling of man's hunger has often been a heart-rending business — if not for the sometimes quite callous "eater," then for his prey and for a sensitive observer. Often, in his search for food, man has destroyed what is commonly dearest to him, be it relatives and friends or the ideals of his youth. True, this is only one aspect of life: life is not "desert" entire; it has a goodly number of oases where travelers can rest and enjoy themselves to such an extent that they are prone to forget the surrounding desert, which often encroaches on the tiny oasis and buries it.

The couple in the Buddha's story, coming near starvation, eat their own beloved child. It is a gruesome and seemingly fantastic story indeed. But knowing from the records of history that, at times of famine, war or shipwreck, men did resort to cannibalism, we have to admit that what our story tells may have substantially happened ever so often, in one way or another. In his incessant search for food, or for better food or for control of food resources, how often has man killed, cruelly crushed or exploited his fellow creatures, even those who are close to him by common blood or common race! And is there not close kinship between all that lives? These last words are not merely a sentimental phrase (as which they are mostly used); but they are also a hard and cruel fact. Are we not akin to the voracious greed, the cruel rage and the destructive stupidity, which

we encounter in life and of which we become victim or perpetrator in the struggle for food or power? If we were not akin to it, could we encounter it, in one way or another? For an unfathomable time, caught in the ever-turning Wheel of Life, we have been everything: the prey and the devourer of all, parent and child of all. This we should consider when contemplating the nutriment of edible food and the Buddha's simile for it.

If we wish to eat and live, we have to kill or tacitly accept that others do the killing for us. When speaking of the latter, we do not refer merely to the butcher or the fisherman. Also for the strict vegetarian's sake, living beings have to die under the farmer's plowshare, and his lettuce and other vegetables have to be kept free of snails and other "pests," at the expense of these living beings who, like ourselves, are in search of food. A growing population's need for more arable land deprives animals of their living space and, in the course of history, has eliminated many a species. It is a world of killing in which we live and have a part. We should face this horrible fact and remain aware of it in our Reflection on Edible Food. It will stir us to effort for getting out of this murderous world by the ending of craving for the four nutriments.

In one short lifetime, how many trainloads of food have passed in and out of our puny body! How many people have had to labor in the production, preparation, and distribution of that food, for keeping unbroken the "traffic line" that runs straight through our body! It is a grotesque picture if we visualize it.

There is yet another aspect of that "life-giving" function of eating. To illustrate it, let us think of a silo, or a storehouse or food bag: after it has been emptied, a few grains or other tiny morsels of food will mostly remain in it. Similarly there will always be left some tiny remnants of food in our body that are neither assimilated nor expelled but remain and putrefy. Some physiologists say that it is this putrefaction of residual food that ultimately brings about the aging and death of the organism if there are no other causes. If they are right, then food is not only life-giving but also death-bestowing, and it appears that we have in this life of ours the choice between death by starvation or by putrefaction. "The food devours the eater!" This close connection between nutriment and death is very poignantly expressed in Greek myth, according to which Demeter is the Goddess of corn (that is, food) and of death as well. Bachofen, that great

explorer and interpreter of classic myth, has expressed the significance of it very succinctly: “She feeds man as a prey to herself.”

People, as far as they give any thought to the humdrum act of eating, have taken very different attitudes towards food. Some who became tired of the dull routine of eating dull food, have made a “fine art” of it and became gourmands. To them the Buddha says: “All nutriment is miserable, even divine food.” Others, keenly aware of the importance of food for good health, have devised various ideas about “pure food”: we have here the dietetic rules of several religions, and the belief of ancient and modern sects in man’s “purification by nutriment” (*āhāra-parisuddhi*), of which already the Buddha made mention (adversely, of course), down to our own days with their ersatz religions of numerous food-reformers. Others, again, have tried to solve the problem of the body’s dependence on food by reducing nourishment below sustenance level and by long periods of fasting. This harsh and futile method of self-mortification the Buddha, too, had tried out and rejected before his Enlightenment, and had vividly described his experience in the Discourse on the Noble Quest (*Ariya-pariyesana Sutta*). Also later on, the Buddha never recommended periods of fasting beyond the abstention from solid food after noon enjoined upon bhikkhus, and in the periodic observance of the Eight or Ten Precepts. What the Buddha, as a teacher of the Middle Way, advised was moderation in eating, non-attachment to the taste of food, and wise reflection on nutriment.

## ***2. Sense-impression***

*Simile:* A skinned cow, wherever she stands, will be ceaselessly attacked by the insects and other creatures living in the vicinity.

Like a skinned cow, man is helplessly exposed to the constant excitation and irritation of the sense-impressions, crowding upon him from all sides, through all six senses.

The Pāli word *phassa*, rendered here by sense-impression, means literally “touch” or “contact.” But it is not a physical impact that is meant



here, but a mental contact with the objects of all six senses, including the mind. Sense-impression, together with attention (*manasikāra*), is the mind's first and simplest response to the stimulus exercised by the world of material objects and ideas. According to Buddhist psychology, sense-impression is a constituent factor in each and every state of mind, the lowest and the highest, occurring also in dream and in subliminal states of consciousness.

Sense-impression is a basic nutriment, that is a sustaining condition of life, and what is nourished or conditioned by it are feelings or sensations (*vedanā*) which are living on that multitude of constantly occurring sense-impressions and assimilating them as pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent. This relationship has also a place in the formula of Dependent Origination: "Conditioned by sense-impression is feeling (*phassa-paccayā vedanā*)." As long as there is craving (*taṇhā*) for sense-impressions which arises from unguarded feelings (*vedanā-paccayā taṇhā*), there will be an unlimited supply of that foodstuff to be digested by feeling. In an unending stream and in rapid alternation, forms, sounds, smells, flavors, bodily impacts, and ideas impinge upon us as long as we live. It is the poignant awareness of that constant bombardment by sense-impressions that induced the Buddha to choose for the sense-impressions the simile of a skinned cow whose raw flesh is the target of swarms of insects that cause intensely painful feelings to the animal. According to the Buddha, any type of feeling is bound to cause suffering and conflict in him who has not yet freed himself from attachment. Painful feeling is suffering in itself; pleasant feeling brings suffering through its transience and its unsatisfying and unsatisfactory nature; worldly indifferent feeling produces suffering through the dullness and boredom involved in it. It is sense-impression that is the constant feeder of these feelings.

A monk of old, yearning to see still more vividly the burning and irritating nature of sense-impressions, was moved to exclaim:

When shall I with calm endowed  
Wisely see as caught in raging blaze  
The countless forms, sounds, scents, and tastes,  
And contacts and mental things?

Theragatha v. 1099 (Tālapuṭa)<sup>5</sup>

Though man is amply aware of the host of impressions that cause painful sensations in him, yet he is quite willing to pay that price for his pleasurable experiences, nay, for almost any sort of “experiencing” which he prefers to no sensation at all, unless the pain it causes comes too close to tolerance level. What is at the psychological root of this situation is man’s hunger for ever new experiences. If that hunger is not temporarily but regularly satisfied, it leaves him empty, starved and helpless. From that comes man’s wish for change and novelty, and his longing for a close contact with life that for its own sake becomes a habituation and makes solitude unbearable for most men.

The nutriment sense-impression feeds the “World as Enjoyment” or the “World as Enjoyment of Experience.” It feeds the craving for existence (*bhava-taṇhā*). This habitual craving can be broken only if one ceases to identify oneself with the stream of impressions and learns to stand back as an observer wherever one can dispense with active response. Then feeling that is nourished by sense-impression will cease to turn into craving, and the Dependent Origination of suffering has been severed at this point.<sup>6</sup>

### ***3. Volitional Thought***

Volitional thought here means chiefly *kamma* — i.e., rebirth-producing and life-affirming action — and the Buddha has compared it with a man dragged by two others towards and into a pit of glowing embers.

The two dragging forces are man’s kammic actions, good (but still deluded) and evil. It is our kammic proclivities, our life-affirming volitions, our plans and ambitions, that drag us irresistibly to that deep pit of *samsāra* with its glowing embers of intense suffering. Hence it was said that volitional thought, in the sense of *kamma*, is the nutriment for rebirth on the three planes of existence.

The nutriment volitional thought manifests itself in man’s incessant urge to plan and to aspire, to struggle and conquer, to build and to destroy, to do and to undo, to invent and to discover, to form and to transform, to organize and to create. This urge has sent man into the depth of the ocean and into the vastness of space. It has made him the most vicious of predatory animals and also enabled him to reach the lofty heights of a genius of creative art and thought.

The restlessness that is at the root of all that lust for activity and of the creative urge, is the constant hunger for all four nutriments of life and for a variety of them on different levels of coarseness and sublimity. It is volitional thought that has to go foraging to provide man with the other kinds of nutriment he craves for. It is an incessant task, yielding a conquest of but short duration, and one that again and again ends in defeat.

In volitional thought, the world appears as will and power, and as creative force. Nourished by this powerful nutriment, the process of world-building and world-destruction will go on until saṃsāra is seen in its true nature as a pit of glowing embers, the bottomless depth of which cannot be filled by our plunging into it again and again in whatever guise we assume in our migrations.

#### ***4. Consciousness***

The nutriment consciousness has been compared with the punishment of a criminal who thrice daily is pierced with three hundred spears.

The sharp shafts of conscious awareness, the punitive results of past cravings and delusions, inflicted on us at all times of the day, pierce our protective skin and lay us open to the impact of the world of objects.

This shockingly harsh image of consciousness as a punishment reminds us of one of Franz Kafka's main motifs so often appearing in his work — the hidden, unknown, intangible, and seemingly quite amoral guilt of man inherent in his very existence, for which he is inscrutably punished and which punishment, in the depth of his being, he accepts as just (see, e.g., *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *In the Penal Colony*).

The desire for conscious awareness has the same character as that for sense impressions: the craving to be alive, to feel alive in the constant encounter with the world of objects present to consciousness (or present within consciousness — as the idealists prefer to say).

But there is still more meaning than that to be derived from the description of consciousness as a nutriment if we consider that it is explained primarily as rebirth consciousness. This rebirth consciousness, which is a single moment's occurrence, feeds (or conditions) the mind-body process (*nāma-rūpa*) of the present existence; and it is the arising of

such moments of rebirth consciousness at the beginning of each successive life that continues the interminable chain of future births, deaths and sufferings. Growth or proliferation is a characteristic feature of all consciousness. Each rebirth consciousness, though its direct link is with the life immediately preceding it, has behind it the inexhaustible storehouse of the beginningless past, a vast granary of potential seeds of life. Fed from the dark unfathomable recesses of the past, lurks consciousness, an octopus with not eight but a thousand arms, ready to grasp and take hold wherever it finds a chance, and there to procreate a fresh breed of beings, each with its own set of grasping tentacles.

The writer once visited large subterranean caverns which had long passages and high-roofed temple-like halls with huge stalactites and stalagmites resembling the lofty columns of a cathedral. For the convenience of the numerous visitors to the caverns, electric light was installed, and where the bulbs were low enough one could see around them a small spread of lichen, the only trace of organic life amidst the barren rocks. Life springs up wherever it gets the slightest chance through favoring conditions like warmth, moisture, and light. In the spectator's mind this little harmless proliferation of primitive plant life assumed the menacing features of a beast of prey that, having lurked long under the cover of darkness, at last got the chance for its hungry leap.

Life is always in readiness to spring up, and its most prolific manifestation is consciousness. Seen from our limited viewpoint, it is consciousness that contributes most to the "expanding universe" of saṃsāra. Hence the Enlightened One warned: "Do not be an augments of worlds!" (Dhammapada v. 167). It is by our insatiable and greedy feeding on consciousness and the other nutriments that the world "grows"; and the potentialities for its growth are endless. Also the end of the world of consciousness cannot be reached by walking. Seen from that world-wide perspective, consciousness appears as the feeder and procreator of innumerable beings all of whom undergo that daily ordeal of life's piercing spears. Such a visualization of the reach of consciousness will increasingly lead to revulsion, to turning-away and dispassion, undeceived by the magician's enchanting illusions with which the aggregate consciousness was compared by the Buddha.

Looking back to the Buddha's similes for the four nutriments, we are struck by the fact that all four evoke pictures of extreme suffering and danger. They depict quite unusual situations of greatest agony. Considering the fact that the daily process of nutrition, physical and mental, is such a very humdrum function in life, those extraordinary similes are very surprising and even deeply disturbing. And they obviously were meant to be disquieting. They are meant to break through the unthinking complacency in which these so common functions of life are performed and viewed: eating, perceiving, willing, and cognizing.

The contemplations on the four nutriments, as presented in these pages, cut at the very roots of the attachment to life. To pursue these contemplations radically and methodically will be a grave step, advisable only for those who are determined to strive for the final cessation of craving and, therefore, are willing to face all consequences which that path of practice may bring for the direction of their present life and thought.

But apart from such full commitment, also a less radical pursuit but serious and repeated thought given to this teaching of the four nutriments will be beneficial to any earnest follower of the Buddha. To those who feel it premature for themselves to aim straight at the cessation of craving, the Dhamma has enough teachings that will soothe the wounds received in the battle of life, and will encourage and help a steady progress on the Path. Though gentle guidance will often be welcome amidst the harshness of life, yet when there is only such gentleness and when, for a while, the winds of fate blow softly and pleasantly, there will be the danger that man settles to a comfortable routine and forgets his precarious situation in this world, which the Buddha so often described. Hence there is the need that man, and especially a Buddhist, should face now and again such stern teachings as those on the nutriments, which will keep him alert and will strengthen his mental fiber so that he can fearlessly meet the unveiled truth about the world in which he lives.

The contemplation on the four nutriments of life can do this for him. From that contemplation, man can learn "not to recoil from the real and

not to be carried away by the unreal." He will learn from it that it is suffering which is nourished and pampered by the four nutriments. He will more deeply understand that

*Only suffering arises where anything arises and only suffering ceases where anything ceases.*

And another word of the Master will gain fresh significance and increasing weight:

*This only do I teach: suffering and its end.*

## 1. *One Thing...*

Monks, when a monk becomes entirely dispassionate towards one thing, when his lust for it entirely fades away, when he is entirely liberated from it, when he sees the complete ending of it, then he is one who, after fully comprehending the Goal, makes an end of suffering here and now.

What one thing? "All beings subsist by nutriment." When a monk becomes entirely dispassionate towards this one thing (nutriment), when his lust for it entirely fades away, when he is entirely liberated from it, and when he sees the complete ending of it, then, O monks, he is one who, after fully comprehending the Goal, makes an end of suffering here and now.

— AN 10.27

## ***2. The Discourse on “Son’s Flesh” or The Similes for the Four Nutriment***

### ***The Discourse***

At Sāvattḥī.

“There are, O monks, four nutriment<sup>7</sup> for the sustenance of beings born, and for the support of beings seeking birth.<sup>8</sup> What are the four?

“Edible food, coarse and fine;<sup>9</sup> secondly, sense-impression;<sup>10</sup> thirdly, volitional thought;<sup>11</sup> fourthly, consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

“How, O monks, should the nutriment edible food be considered? Suppose a couple, husband and wife, have set out on a journey through the desert, carrying only limited provisions. They have with them their only son, dearly beloved by them. Now, while these two traveled through the desert, their limited stock of provisions ran out and came to an end, but there was still a stretch of desert not yet crossed. Then the two thought: ‘Our small stock of provisions has run out, it has come to an end; and there is still a stretch of desert that is not yet crossed. Should we not kill our only son, so dearly beloved, prepare dried and roasted meat, and eating our son’s flesh, we may cross in that way the remaining part of the desert, lest all three of us perish?’

“And these two, husband and wife, killed their only son, so dearly beloved by them, prepared dried and roasted meat, and, eating their son’s flesh, crossed in that way the remaining part of the desert. And while eating their son’s flesh, they were beating their breast and crying: ‘Where are you, our only and beloved son? Where are you, our only and beloved son?’

“What do you think, O monks? Will they eat the food for the pleasure of it, for enjoyment, for comeliness’ sake, for (the body’s) embellishment?”<sup>13</sup>

“Certainly not, O Lord.”



“Will they not rather eat the food merely for the sake of crossing the desert?”

“So it is, O Lord.”

“In the same manner, I say, O monks, should edible food be considered. If, O monks, the nutriment edible food is comprehended, the lust for the five sense-objects is (thereby) comprehended. And if lust for the five sense-objects is comprehended, there is no fetter enchained by which a noble disciple might come to this world again.<sup>14</sup>

“And how, O monks, should the nutriment sense-impression be considered? Suppose, O monks, there is a skinned cow that stands close to a wall, then the creatures living in the wall will nibble at the cow; and if the skinned cow stands near a tree, then the creatures living in the tree will nibble at it; if it stands in the water, the creatures living in the water will nibble at it; if it stands in the open air, the creatures living in the air will nibble at it. Wherever that skinned cow stands, the creatures living there will nibble at it.

“In that manner, I say, O monks, should the nutriment sense-impression be considered. If the nutriment sense-impression is comprehended, the three kinds of feeling<sup>15</sup> are thereby comprehended. And if the three kinds of feeling are comprehended, there is, I say, no further work left to do for the noble disciple.<sup>16</sup>

“And how, O monks, should the nutriment volitional thought be considered? Suppose, O monks, there is a pit of glowing embers, filled to cover a man’s height, with embers glowing without flames and smoke. Now a man comes that way, who loves life and does not wish to die, who wishes for happiness and detests suffering. Then two strong men would seize both his arms and drag him to the pit of glowing embers. Then, O monks, far away from it would recoil that man’s will, far away from it his longing, far away his inclination. And why? Because the man knows: ‘If I fall into that pit of glowing embers, I shall meet death or deadly pain.’

“In that manner, I say, O monks, should the nutriment volitional thought be considered. If the nutriment volitional thought is comprehended, the three kinds of craving<sup>17</sup> are thereby comprehended. And if the three kinds of craving are comprehended, there is, I say, no further work left to do for the noble disciple.

“And how, O monks, should the nutriment consciousness be considered? Suppose, O monks, people have seized a criminal, a robber, and brought him before the king saying: ‘This is a criminal, a robber, O Majesty! Mete out to him the punishment you think fit!’ Then the king would tell them: ‘Go, and in the morning strike this man with a hundred spears!’ And they strike him in the morning with a hundred spears. At noon the king would ask his men: ‘How is that man?’ — ‘He is still alive, Your Majesty.’ — ‘Then go and strike him again at noontime with a hundred spears!’ So they did, and in the evening the king asks them again: ‘How is that man?’ — ‘He is still alive.’ — ‘Then go and in the evening strike him again with a hundred spears!’ And so they did.

“What do you think, O monks? Will that man, struck with three hundred spears during a day, suffer pain and torment owing to that?”

“Even if he were to be struck only by a single spear, he would suffer pain and torment owing to that. How much more if he is being struck by three hundred spears!”

“In that manner, I say, O monks, should the nutriment consciousness be considered. If the nutriment consciousness is comprehended, mind-and-matter are thereby comprehended. And if mind and body are comprehended, there is, I say, no further work left to do for the noble disciple.”

— SN 12.63

## ***Commentary on the Discourse on “Son’s Flesh”***

Taken from the Venerable Buddhaghosa’s *Sārattha-ppakāsini*,  
the Commentary to the Saṃyutta-Nikāya

In explaining the “need arisen” (*atthuppatti*), i.e., the particular reason for the Buddha giving this discourse, the commentator says that, at that time, the community of monks received abundant support by way of alms food and other requisites. Considering this, the Master asked himself:

“Will the bhikkhus be able, or will they not be able, to eat the alms food and still keep to that mindfulness and clear comprehension which lays hold (of the true nature) of nutriment? Will they be detached, and free of desire and greediness?” And he saw that there were some sons of good families, recently ordained, who ate the alms food without due reflection. Seeing this, he thought: “When I practiced the perfections (*pārami*) for four incalculable periods and a hundred thousand *kalpas*, I did not do so for the sake of the requisites, such as robes, alms food, etc., but for the sake of the highest fruition, of sainthood, did I practice them. Also these bhikkhus who went forth under me, did not go forth for the sake of these requisites, but for the sake of attaining sainthood did they go forth. And now they take the unessential for the essential, the worthless for what is worthy!” Such concern arose in him, and he thought further: “If it were possible to declare a fifth grave offense (*pārājika*), the monks, partaking of food without due reflection should be made a fifth grave offense. It is, however, not possible to do so, because food is constantly used by beings. But I shall speak to them in such a way that they will consider (such thoughtlessness) as if it were a fifth grave offense. I shall place before them a mirror of the Dhamma for their self-control and restraint, so that, contemplating on it again and again, the bhikkhus of times to come will make use of the four requisites only after due reflection.”

Nutriment (*āhāra*) has the meaning of “condition” (*paccaya*); because conditions carry (*āharanṭi*) their own results.

...Here an objection may be raised: “If the meaning of nutriment is that of condition, why are only four of them mentioned here, though living beings are conditioned also in other ways?” In reply it is said: “Because these four are prominent conditions for the individual life-continuity.”

For beings living on material food, “edible food” is an important condition for their physical organism (*rūpa-kāya*). As to their mental organism (*nāma-kāya*), sense-impression is an important condition of feeling, volitional thought of consciousness, and consciousness of mind-and-body (*nāma-rūpa*). Accordingly it was said: “Just as this body subsists on nutriment, subsists because of nutriment, does not subsist without nutriment; in the same way, O monks, are feelings conditioned by sense-impression, is consciousness conditioned by kamma-formations (*saṅkhāra-cetanā*, ‘karmic volition’), is mind-and-body conditioned by consciousness.”

What is it, now, that is fed (or conditioned) by each of the four nutriments? Edible food feeds and conditions the set of corporeal qualities that have nutritive essence as their eighth factor.<sup>18</sup> The nutriment sense-impression feeds and conditions the three kinds of feeling. The nutriment volitional thought feeds and conditions the three states of existence. The nutriment consciousness feeds and conditions mind-and-body at rebirth.

In which way does this take place? Edible food, immediately when it is placed in the mouth, produces the eight corporeal qualities.<sup>19</sup> And each morsel that is chewed and swallowed produces again a set of the same eight qualities. Thus it is that edible food feeds and conditions the eight corporeal qualities that have nutritive essence as their eighth factor.

The nutriment sense-impression that is liable to be felt as pleasant, immediately on its arising feeds and conditions a pleasant feeling. And it is similar with sense-impressions liable to be felt as unpleasant or neutral. So does the nutriment sense-impression in all its types (visual impression, auditory, etc.) feed and condition the three kinds of feeling.

The nutriment volitional thought when occurring as kamma leading to rebirth on the sensuous plane, feeds and conditions sensuous existence. When occurring as kamma leading to rebirth on the fine-material or

immaterial plane, it feeds and conditions the corresponding existence. So does the nutriment volitional thought in all cases feed and condition the three states of existence.

The nutriment consciousness, at the moment of rebirth, feeds and conditions the three other mental groups (*khandhā*), conjoined with it; and by way of conascence-condition, etc., it feeds and conditions the thirty corporeal processes that arise in a triple continuity (*ti-santati*).<sup>20</sup> So does the nutriment consciousness feed and condition mind-and-body at rebirth.

When saying that “volitional thought feeds and conditions the three states of existence,” only karmically wholesome and unwholesome volition, subject to the taints (*sāsava-kusala-akusala*) is spoken of; and when saying that “consciousness feeds and conditions mind-and-body at rebirth,” only rebirth-consciousness (*paṭisandhi-viññāṇa*) is meant. But in general application these four are called “nutriments” (*āhāra*) because they carry or feed the mental processes associated with these nutriments, and the corporeal processes produced by them (*taṃ-sampayutta-taṃ-samuṭṭhāna-dhammānaṃ āharaṇato*).

**The Functions.** Among these four nutriments, edible food fulfills the function of nourishing, by way of sustaining (*upatthambhento*); sense-impression, by touching (providing contact; *phusanto*); volitional thought, by accumulating (*kamma*; *āyūhamāno*); consciousness, by cognizing (*vijānantam*). In which way?

The nutriment edible food sustaining<sup>21</sup> the body by fortifying it, serves for the (bodily) stability of beings. Though this body is produced by *kamma*, it is through being sustained by edible food that it lasts for 10 years or 100 years, until the end of a being’s normal life span. This may be compared, firstly, to a child that, though brought forth by the mother, is nourished by the wet-nurse at the breast, and is nurtured in other ways; and reared thus it lives long. Secondly it is like a (dilapidated) house propped up by supports. As it was said: “Just as a house that is about to fall, will not fall when supported by timber, so, O great king, is this body sustained by nutriment and persists because of nutriment” (*Milindapañhā*).

Similarly it is by sustaining that the nutriment edible food fulfills its function of nourishing. In fulfilling that function, it is a condition to two

kinds of corporeal continuity: that produced by nutriment (*āhāra-samutṭhāna*) and that karmically acquired (*upādiṇṇaka*; due to clinging in a former life). For kamma-born (*kammaja-upādiṇṇaka*) corporeal processes, edible food is a condition by way of being their preserver (*anupālaka*); and for those produced by nutriment, by way of being their originator (*janaka*).

The nutriment sense-impression, by establishing contact with an object that is the basis of pleasure, etc., makes for the sustenance of beings by causing the occurrence of pleasant feelings, etc.

The nutriment volitional thought, in accumulating wholesome and unwholesome kamma makes for the sustenance of beings by generating the root of existence.

The nutriment consciousness, in its cognizing function, serves the sustenance of beings by causing the occurrence of mind-and-body.

**The Dangers.** In these four nutriments, thus fulfilling their respective functions of sustaining, etc., there are four kinds of danger (*bhaya*) which should be known.

In the nutriment edible food, desire<sup>22</sup> is the danger; in sense-impression, approaching (an object)<sup>23</sup> is the danger; in volitional thought, accumulation (of kamma and rebirths) is a danger;<sup>24</sup> in (rebirth) consciousness, manifestation (of a new mind-and-body) is the danger.<sup>25</sup>

For what reasons are they danger? Having desire for the nutriment edible food, people, taking up various crafts for the sake of food, undergo many hardships, like enduring cold, etc. Others, having become monks in this dispensation, seeking food in a way wrong for a monk, engage themselves in a physician's work, etc., and thereby incur blame in this very life; and hereafter they become hungry monk-ghosts as described in the Lakkhaṇa-saṃyutta: "with his robe burning and ablaze." For these reasons, it should be understood that desire is an element of danger in edible food.

Those who are fond of sense-impressions, may, in their approach to sense-impression, offend against others' property which is under their guard and protection, or they may offend against the wives of others, etc. Then the owners of that property will seize the offenders and the goods (stolen), cut those thieves into pieces and throw them on the rubbish

heap; or the owners will hand them over to the king who will punish them, inflicting various tortures on them. And after the break-up of the body, a bad destiny awaits the offenders. Thus all kinds of danger occur here and hereafter, which are rooted in fondness for sense impressions. For this reason, (active) approach is the danger in sense-impression.

All danger that occurs in the three states of existence, is rooted in the accumulation of wholesome and unwholesome kamma. Hence the danger in the nutriment volitional thought is the accumulation of kamma.

In whatever place rebirth-consciousness becomes manifest, there it arises along with the mind-and-body existing at the moment of rebirth. And with the arising of that mind-and-body, all dangers have arisen because they have their roots in it. It is for this reason that manifestation (in a mind-and-body) is the danger in the nutriment consciousness. Thus it should be understood.

## **1. The Nutriment Edible Food**

### *The Simile of the Son's Flesh*

Based on the bare factual account (in the discourse), the meaning of the simile may in brief be explained as follows:

Once, it seems, a couple, husband and wife, together with their little son, set out for a journey through a desert of 100 *yojanas* extent, taking with them only few provisions. Having traversed 50 *yojanas*, their provisions came to an end. Feeble from hunger and thirst, they sat down in a sparse patch of shade, and the man spoke to his wife: "My dear, for 50 *yojanas* from here, in any direction, there is not a single village or hamlet. Therefore I cannot do now what is a man's work, like tilling a field or raising cattle, (for seeing to your needs). Hence, you had better kill me, eat half of the flesh, and taking the other half with you as provision, you can safely cross the desert, together with our child." But she said: "My lord, I too cannot do now a wife's duty towards you, like weaving and other work. So please kill me, eat half of the flesh, and with the other half as provision you can safely get through the desert, together with our boy." He replied: "My dear, if the mother dies, it means death of two. This

delicate little boy cannot live without his mother. But if we two remain alive, we may get another child. Hence let us kill the child, take the flesh and thus escape from the desert." Thereupon the wife told the child: "Go, my dear, to your father!" And the child went. But the father said: "To bring up this child, I took up on me the great suffering and fatigue of a farmer's work. I cannot kill the child. You may kill it!" And he sent it back to the mother. But she said: "Longing for a son I went through much hardship by offering prayers and undertaking severe vows; to say nothing about the pains I suffered when bearing it in my womb. I cannot kill my son." And she told the child: "Go to your father, dear!" While thus being sent to and fro, the feeble child died. Seeing it dead, the parents took the flesh, ate of it and continued their trek through the desert.

This food of their son's flesh, being loathsome for nine reasons, was not eaten by them for pleasure and enjoyment, nor for comeliness' sake and for the body's embellishment, but solely to enable them to cross the desert. What are the nine reasons of its loathsomeness? Its being flesh of the same — i.e., human — species; the flesh of a relative, their own son; the flesh of a beloved son; its being tender, raw, tasteless, unsalted, unsmoked. When partaking of their son's flesh, so loathsome for those nine reasons, they did not eat it with gusto and full of greed for it, but ate it in a detached way, without lust and desire. When eating they did not leave aside what was attached to bone, sinew and skin, selecting only the choice, substantial pieces; but they ate just what came to their hands. They did not take their fill, gorging themselves, but they took only very little of it, just sufficient to sustain them for a day. They did not grudge or envy each other the food, but free from the stain of selfishness they ate it with a pure heart. They did not eat it with the illusion that it was deer's meat or peacock's meat, but they were well aware that it was the flesh of their beloved son. They did not eat it with longing, "Oh, may we again eat such flesh of our son!"; but they ate it without any such longing. They did not hoard a portion of it, thinking: "That much we shall eat in the desert, and the remainder we shall eat when we are out of the desert, adding to it salt and spices." But having reached the end of the desert and fearing that the town people would see it, they would have buried any remainder in the ground or burned it. They did not harbor any such pride and conceit as: "There is none like us who has the chance of eating such meat!"; but they



rather ate it with quite the opposite of such pride (that is, with shame and humility). They did not eat it with disdain, “Oh that saltless, tasteless and evil-smelling thing!”; but they ate it without such disdain. They did not quarrel with each other, “This is your share, that is my share! It is your son! It is my son!”; but they ate in concord and harmony.

Now, the Master, considering in such food its aspect of being taken without greed and attachment, wanted also the community of monks to appreciate that aspect, and said: “What do you think, monks, will they eat the food for the pleasure of it...?”

“In the same manner,” that is, similar to the flesh of a beloved son, should edible food be considered by way of its nine loathsome aspects. What nine? A monk takes edible food reflecting on the repulsiveness of having to go out (on almsround), of having to search (for the almsfood) and of the partaking of it; the repulsiveness of the bodily secretion (while ingesting), of the food’s bodily receptacle, of its digested and undigested condition (in the stomach), of smearing and evacuation. These nine are explained in detail in *The Path of Purification*, in the section on “The Perception of the Repulsiveness in Nutriment.”<sup>26</sup>

Hence food should be taken, after applying the Simile of the Son’s Flesh by way of those nine reasons of loathsomeness.

*Here follows a lengthy section in which the statements about the couple not eating their son’s flesh with gusto and greed, etc., are applied to a monk’s attitude towards his alms-food. This is treated in full up to the last item on “not quarreling.”*

**Comprehension.** “If the nutriment edible food is comprehended (*pariññāte*)...” — i.e., if comprehended by the three kinds of comprehension (*pariññā*): comprehension as the known, as investigating, and abandoning.<sup>27</sup> In which way?

1. Herein a monk understands: What is called the “nutriment edible food” is the material group with nutritive essence as the eighth factor (i.e., nutritive essence), with (the other component factors of) its material basis.<sup>28</sup> This material octad, where does it impinge? At the tongue-sensitivity (*jivhā-pasāda*). On what is the tongue-sensitivity based? On the four great primaries of matter (the elements). Hence (on this occasion of

eating), the material octad with nutritive essence as its eighth factor, tongue-sensitivity, and the conditions of it, the four great primaries, — these things constitute the aggregate of corporeality (*rūpakkhandha*). The group of mental factors having contact (sense-impression) as the fifth factor,<sup>29</sup> which takes it up (i.e., the aggregate of corporeality), these are the four mental aggregates. All these (phenomena constituting the) five aggregates are just “mind-and-matter” (*nāma-rūpa*). Thus he understands (the ultimate facts underlying the act of eating).

Having defined these phenomena according to their individual functions and characteristics, he searches for their conditionality and finds it in the dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), in its ascending and descending order.<sup>30</sup>

By such correct understanding of mind-and-matter with its conditions, in the instance of the nutriment edible food, the latter has in so far been comprehended (*pariññāta*) “as known” (*ñāta-pariññā*; i.e., as an object of knowledge in ultimate terms).

2. To that very (instance of) mind-and-matter with its conditions, he now applies the three signata — impermanence, suffering and not-self — and discerns it (*sammāsati*) by way of the seven contemplations.<sup>31</sup> Hereby the nutriment edible food has been comprehended by way of the investigating comprehension consisting in the full penetration of the three signata and the knowledge of discernment (*sammasana-ñāṇa*).

3. By discarding attachment and desire in regard to that very mind-and-matter, and comprehending it through the attainment of the path of non-returning, the nutriment edible food has been comprehended by comprehension as abandoning (*pahāna-pariññā*).

For explaining the same statement in the discourse, that is, “If the nutriment edible food is comprehended, the lust for the five sense-objects is thereby comprehended,” there is another set of three kinds of comprehension, namely: single comprehension (*eka-pariññā*), total comprehension (*sabba-pariññā*) and root-comprehension (*mūla-pariññā*).

1. What is single comprehension? If a monk fully understands the single (fact of) craving for taste occurring at the sense-door of the tongue, thereby (all) lust for the five sense-objects is comprehended. Why? Because that craving arises (on that occasion) at the five sense doors. This

very craving when arising at the eye door, is called “lust for visual objects” (*rūpa-rāga*); when arising at the door of the ear, etc., it is called “lust for sounds,” etc. It is as with a robber who does his misdeeds on five roads; if he is caught on one of these roads and subsequently beheaded, then all five roads will be safe. Similarly, if the craving for taste is comprehended at the tongue sense-door, the entire lust for the five sense-objects is thereby comprehended. This is the single comprehension.

2. What is total comprehension? In a single food morsel that has been placed into the monk’s almsbowl, all fivefold sense-desire obtains. How? By first looking at the food’s clean, bright appearance, there is lust for visual objects. When hot ghee is poured over it, there is a sizzling sound; or when chewing hard food, there is also a sound; and when enjoying such sounds, there is lust for sounds. When enjoying the food’s smell, there is lust for odors. Through its pleasant taste there is lust for taste objects. When enjoying the softness of the food, there is lust for touch objects. When in such a way the food is considered with mindfulness and clear comprehension (*sati-sampajañña*), and is being eaten without greed and attachment, then there is a total comprehension of it.

3. What is root comprehension? The nutriment edible food is the root or basis of the lust for the five sense-objects. Why? Because when the former exists, the latter arises. It is told that (in Ceylon) during the famine at the time of the brahman Tissa’s rebellion, for twelve years husband and wife did not even look at each other with sensuous thoughts. And why? Because of the scarcity of food. But when the famine had subsided, the whole isle of Ceylon was like a single large festival of children’s birth celebrations. If nutriment is thus comprehended as being the root, also the lust for the five sense-objects is hereby comprehended. This is root comprehension.

## **2. The Nutriment Sense-Impression**

Just as the skinned cow, exposed to the danger of being attacked by the creatures living in various places, has no wish for honor and attention paid to her, nor for bodily care given to her by cleaning her back and massaging — similarly the monk, considering that he is exposed to the danger coming from those devouring creatures, the mental defilements,

that are rooted in the nutriment sense-impression, has no desire for the sense-impressions of the three planes of existence.

Here, too, there are three comprehensions:

1. In this case, sense-impression represents the formation aggregate (*sankhāra-khandha*); the feeling conjoined with it is the feeling aggregate; perception is the perception aggregate; consciousness (*citta*) is the consciousness aggregate (*viññāṇa-kkhandha*); the (respective) organ base and its objects are the corporeality aggregate (*rūpa-kkhandha*). Such correct understanding of mind-and-matter with its condition is “comprehension as the known.”

2. The application to it of the three signata and the examining of it as impermanent, etc., by way of the seven contemplations — this is “comprehension as investigating.”

3. The path of sainthood (*arahatta-magga*) that discards attachment and desire for that very (combination of) mind-and-body — this is “comprehension as abandoning.”

If the nutriment sense-impression is thus comprehended in a threefold way, the three kinds of feeling are likewise comprehended thereby, because they have their root in sense-impression and are conjoined with it (*sampayutta*).

In such a way, the exposition of the nutriment sense-impression has been led up to the attainment of sainthood.

### 3. The Nutriment Volitional Thought

The application of the simile of the pit of glowing embers is as follows:

The pit of glowing embers is the round of existence in its three spheres. The man desirous to live, is a foolish worldling attaching himself to the round of existence. The two strong men are the wholesome and unwholesome kamma. Their dragging the man to the pit is the accumulation of kamma (or karmic effort; *kammāyūhana*), because if kamma is accumulated it drags into rebirth. The pain inflicted by the pit of embers is the saṃsāric suffering inflicted by kamma.

The connection with the threefold comprehension is the same as in the case of sense-impression.

“...If the nutriment volitional thought is comprehended, the three kinds of craving are thereby comprehended,” i.e., the sensual craving, the craving for (eternal) existence and the craving for self-annihilation. Why is this so? Because volitional (kammic) thought has its root in craving, and if the cause is not abandoned, the result cannot be abandoned.

In such a way, the exposition of the nutriment volitional thought has been led up to the attainment of sainthood.

#### **4. The Nutriment Consciousness**

In the application of the simile of the criminal pierced by spears, the king should be understood as kamma. The criminal is the foolish worldling attaching himself to the round of existence. The 300 spears are the rebirth-consciousness. The order of the king to pierce the criminal with 300 spears, corresponds to the King of Kamma seizing the foolish worldling attached to saṃsāra, and flinging him into rebirth. Though, herein, the 300 spears have been compared to rebirth consciousness, there is no pain in the spears themselves, but the pain that originates from the wound caused by the spears’ piercing. Similarly, there is no suffering in rebirth itself; but there is kamma-resultant suffering (*vipāka-dukkha*) arising during the life-process in a given rebirth, as corresponding to the painful wound caused by the spears.

Here, too, the threefold comprehension should be understood as in the case of the nutriment sense-impression.

“...Mind-and-body are thereby comprehended”: mind-and-body as conditioned by consciousness (according to the dependent origination). If consciousness is comprehended, also mind-and-body are comprehended, being rooted in consciousness and arising together with it.

In such a way, also the exposition of the nutriment consciousness has been led up to the attainment of sainthood.

### *3. The Conditioned Nature of Nutriment*

#### *The Discourse*

At Sāvattthī.

“There are, O monks, four nutriments for the sustenance of beings born, and for the support of beings seeking birth. What are the four?

“Edible food, coarse and fine; secondly, sense-impression; thirdly, volitional thought; fourthly, consciousness.

“Of these four nutriments, O monks, what is their source, what is their origin, from what are they born, what gives them existence?

“These four nutriments, O monks, have craving as their cause, have craving as their origin, are born of craving, and craving gives them existence.

“And this craving, O monks, what is its source, what its origin, from what is it born, what gives it existence? Craving has feeling as its source and origin, it is born of feeling, and feeling gives existence to it.

“And this feeling, O monks, what is its source and origin, from what is it born and what gives existence to it? Feeling has sense-impression as its source and origin...

“And this sense-impression, O monks, what is its source...? sense-impression has the six sense-bases as its source and origin...

“And these six sense-bases, O monks, what is their source...? The six sense-bases have mind-and-body as their source and origin...

“And this mind-and-body, O monks, what is its source...? Mind-and-body has consciousness as its source and origin...

“And this consciousness, O monks, what is its source...? Consciousness has kamma-formations as its source and origin...

“And these kamma-formations, O monks, what is their source and origin, from what are they born, what gives existence to them? Kamma-formations have ignorance as their source and origin, they are born of ignorance and ignorance gives existence to them.

“Thus, O monks, through ignorance conditioned are kamma-formations; through the kamma-formations conditioned is consciousness; through consciousness conditioned is mind-and-body; through mind-and-body conditioned are the six sense-bases; through the six sense-bases conditioned is sense-impression; through sense-impression conditioned is feeling, through feeling conditioned is craving; through craving conditioned is clinging; through clinging conditioned is becoming; through becoming conditioned is birth; through birth conditioned are decay and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. Thus arises this whole mass of suffering.”

—SN 12.11

#### *Translator’s Note*

In this discourse, the origin of the four nutriments is traced to craving (*taṇhā*), and the conditioned arising is pursued further back, in terms of the dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*).<sup>32</sup> But while, in the usual formula of the dependent origination, it is clinging (or grasping, *upādāna*) that is conditioned by craving, here, in this text, nutriment (*āhāra*) takes the place of clinging. So it also does in the Mahā-Taṇhāsankhaya Sutta (MN 38), while the Cūla-Sihanāda Sutta (MN 11) has here the fourfold division of clinging, with, otherwise, the same wording as our present text.

Both Pāli words, *āhāra* (nutriment) and *upādāna* (clinging) have originally the same meaning of “taking up,” “seizing,” and both are also used to signify the fuel of a fire or a lamp (see SN 22.88).

## Commentary

Here the statement in the discourse that the four nutriments have craving as their source, should be understood to mean that cravings in a former life are the source of the nutriments; or, in other words, of the (present) individual (*attabhāva*), from (the moment of) rebirth (i.e., conception) onwards. How? At the moment of rebirth, there is present “nutritive essence” (*ojā*) that has originated within the corporeality arisen by way of seven units of corporeal continua (*satta-santati*),<sup>33</sup> in the case of beings with complete sense faculties; or in the case of other beings,<sup>34</sup> with the appropriate reduction of the continua. This “nutritive essence” constitutes the karmically acquired nutriment “edible food” (*upādiṇṇaka-kabaḷiṅkārāhāra*) that has (past) craving as its source. The sense-impression and volition associated with the rebirth-consciousness, as well as that consciousness itself — these are the karmically acquired nutriments sense-impression, volitional thought, and consciousness which have craving as their source. This so far refers to the nutriments arising at rebirth and having as their source the craving in a former life. The same applies also to the nutriments arising later, at the first moment of *bhavaṅga*, and so forth.

But because the Exalted One not only knows the source of the nutriments which is craving, but also the latter’s source which is feeling, and so forth; therefore the discourse continues “And this craving, O monks, what is its source...?” showing by this method the saṃsāric cycle (*vaṭṭa*) and (implicitly) the stopping of that cycle (*vivaṭṭa*).

Here, however, the exposition is given under the aspect of the past, and accordingly the cycle of kamma and kamma result has been described in terms of past (existence).<sup>35</sup> How? This (present) individual is conceived (as a product of) the four nutriments.

[Among the factors of the Dependent Origination given here], craving (*taṇhā*) is the generative kamma (*janaka-kamma*) for this (present) individual. “Feeling, sense-impression, sixfold sense-base, mind-and-body, and consciousness” are the factors present in the individual (of the past) that performs that (past) kamma; they have been mentioned here for indicating [this latter fact].



Thus the individual (of the present and the past) has been indicated here in two places (i.e., by mentioning the nutriments and by mentioning feeling, etc.); and in two places the generative kamma of that (past and present individual) has been indicated, (namely, by mentioning craving and by mentioning ignorance and kamma-formations). In such a way, two things have been shown here in brief, kamma and kamma result; and in doing so, the exposition has been given under the aspect of the past, and accordingly the saṃsāric cycle has been described here in terms of past (existence).<sup>36</sup>

But one should not think that this exposition of the dependent origination is incomplete because it does not extend to its future part. [Though the future is not dealt with expressly] it is implied by indicating the method [applicable also to the future], and therefore it should be understood that this exposition is quite complete.

This is a simile for it: Suppose a clear-sighted man sees a crocodile lying on the water's surface. At the foremost part of it he sees the throat, further on the back and at the end the root of the tail. But when looking at the belly, he does not see the rest of the tail nor the four legs which are submerged in the water. Yet, for that reason, he does not think that the crocodile is incomplete; but by methodical inference he takes it to be complete.

The application of this simile is as follows. The crocodile lying on the surface of the water is like the saṃsāric cycle on its three levels. The clear-sighted man standing on the shore, is the meditator. The time when the man sees the crocodile on the surface of the water, corresponds to the time when the meditator understands this individual existence by way of the nutriments. Seeing the throat as the foremost part is like seeing craving as the generative force for this individual. Seeing the crocodile's back, is like the seeing of feeling, etc., in that existence where the kamma called craving has been performed. Seeing the root of the tail is like seeing ignorance and kamma-formations being the generative factors of this individual's existence. Looking at the belly below, and, though not seeing the end of the tail and the legs, yet not assuming that the crocodile is incomplete, but taking it as complete, by methodical inference — this is like accepting the exposition to be complete and not believing it to be

incomplete, if in a canonical passage this or that section of the cycle of conditions is not mentioned.

There is here one link (of fruit and cause) between nutriment and craving; one link (of cause and fruit) between craving and feeling; and one link (of fruit and cause) between consciousness and kamma-formations. Thus the cycle (of conditions) has been shown in three links (*sandhi*) and four sections (*saṅkhepa*).<sup>37</sup>

#### 4. *Moliya-Phagguna*

“There are, O monks, four nutriments...(as above, Text 2).”

After these words, the venerable Moliya-Phagguna addressed the Exalted One as follows:

“Who, O Lord, consumes<sup>38</sup> the nutriment consciousness?”

“The question is not correct,” said the Exalted One. “I do not say that ‘he consumes.’<sup>39</sup> If I had said so, then the question ‘Who consumes?’ would be appropriate. But since I did not speak thus, the correct way to ask the question will be: ‘For what is the nutriment consciousness (the condition)?’<sup>40</sup> And to that the correct reply is: ‘The nutriment consciousness<sup>41</sup> is a condition for the future arising of a renewed existence;<sup>42</sup> when that has come into being, there is (also) the sixfold sense-base; and conditioned by the sixfold sense-base is sense-impression.’”<sup>43</sup>

“Who, O Lord, has a sense-impression?”

“The question is not correct,” said the Exalted One.

“I do not say that ‘he has a sense-impression.’ Had I said so, then the question ‘Who has a sense-impression?’ would be appropriate. But since I did not speak thus, the correct way to ask the question will be ‘What is the condition of sense-impression?’ And to that the correct reply is: ‘The sixfold sense-base is a condition of sense-impression, and sense-impression is the condition of feeling.’”

“Who, O Lord, feels?”

“The question is not correct,” said the Exalted One. “I do not say that ‘he feels.’ Had I said so, then the question ‘Who feels?’ would be appropriate. But since I did not speak thus, the correct way to ask the question will be ‘What is the condition of feeling?’ And to that the correct reply is: ‘sense-impression is the condition of feeling; and feeling is the condition of craving.’”

“Who, O Lord, craves?”

“The question is not correct,” said the Exalted One. “I do not say that ‘he craves.’ Had I said so, then the question ‘Who craves?’ would be appropriate. But since I did not speak thus, the correct way to ask the question will be ‘What is the condition of craving?’ And to that the correct reply is: ‘Feeling is the condition of craving, and craving is the condition of clinging.’”

“Who, O Lord, clings?”

“The question is not correct,” said the Exalted One, “I do not say that ‘he clings.’ Had I said so, then the question ‘Who clings?’ would be appropriate. But since I did not speak thus, the correct way to ask the question will be ‘What is the condition of clinging?’ And to that the correct reply is: ‘Craving is the condition of clinging; and clinging is the condition of the process of becoming.’ Such is the origin of this entire mass of suffering.”<sup>44</sup>

“Through the complete fading away and cessation of even these six bases of sense-impression, sense-impression ceases;<sup>45</sup> through the cessation of sense-impression, feeling ceases; through the cessation of feeling, craving ceases; through the cessation of craving, clinging ceases; through the cessation of clinging, the process of becoming ceases; through the cessation of the process of becoming, birth ceases; through the cessation of birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair cease. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of suffering.”

— SN 12.12

## 5. *If there is lust...*

At Sāvattthī.

“There are, O monks, four nutriments for the sustenance of beings born, and for the support of beings seeking birth. What are the four?

“Edible food, coarse and fine; sense-impression is the second; volitional thought, the third; and consciousness, the fourth.

“If, O monks, there is lust for the nutriment edible food, if there is pleasure in it and craving for it, then consciousness<sup>46</sup> takes a hold<sup>47</sup> therein<sup>48</sup> and grows.<sup>49</sup> Where consciousness takes a hold and grows, there will be occurrence of mind-and-body.<sup>50</sup> Where there is occurrence of mind-and-body, there is<sup>51</sup> growth of kamma-formations.<sup>52</sup> Where there is growth of kamma-formations, there is a future arising of renewed existence.<sup>53</sup> Where there is a future arising of renewed existence, there is future birth, decay and death. This, I say, O monks, is laden with sorrow, burdened with anguish and despair.

“If, O monks, there is lust for the nutriment sense-impression... volitional thought... consciousness, if there is pleasure in it and craving for it, then consciousness takes a hold therein and grows. Where consciousness takes a hold and grows, there will be occurrence of mind-and-body. Where there is occurrence of mind-and-body, there is growth of kamma-formations. Where there is growth of kamma-formations, there is a future arising of renewed existence. Where there is a future arising of renewed existence, there is future birth, decay and death. This, I say, O monks, is laden with sorrow, burdened with anguish and despair.

“Suppose there is a dyer or a painter. Having some dye or lac, (yellow) turmeric, (blue) indigo or crimson, he would depict, on a well-smoothed wooden tablet, on a wall or a piece of cloth, the figure of a woman or a man, with all the major and minor features (of the body). Similarly, O monks, if there is lust for the

nutriments edible food, sense-impression, volitional thought and consciousness... then consciousness takes a hold therein and grows. Where consciousness takes a hold and grows, there is occurrence of mind-and-body. Where there is occurrence of mind-and-body, there is growth of kamma-formations. Where there is growth of kamma-formations, there is a future arising of renewed existence. Where there is a future arising of renewed existence, there is future birth, decay and death. This, I say, O monks, is laden with sorrow, burdened with anguish and despair.<sup>54</sup>

“But if, O monks, there is no lust for the nutriments edible food, sense-impression, volitional thought and consciousness, if there is no pleasure in them and no craving for them, then consciousness does not take a hold therein and does not grow. Where consciousness does not take a hold nor grow, there will be no occurrence of mind-and-body. Where there is no occurrence of mind-and-body, there is no growth of kamma-formations. Where there is no growth of kamma-formations, there is no future arising of renewed existence. Where there is no future arising of renewed existence, there is no future birth, decay and death. This, I say, O monks, is free of sorrow, of anguish and despair.

“Suppose, O monks, there is a gabled house or a gabled hall, with windows at the northern, southern, and eastern sides. Now, when at sunrise, a ray of the sun enters through a window, where would it find hold?” — “On the western wall, O Lord.” — “But if there were no western wall, O monks, where would it find a hold?” — “On the earth, O Lord.” — “And if there were no earth, where would it find a hold?” — “On the water,<sup>55</sup> O Lord.” — “And if there were no water, where would it find a hold?” — “It would not find any hold whatsoever, O Lord.”

“Similarly, O monks, if there is no lust for the nutriments edible food, sense-impression, volitional thought and consciousness, if there is no pleasure in them and no craving for them, then consciousness does not take hold therein and does

not grow. Where consciousness does not take a hold nor grow, there will be no occurrence of mind-and-body, there is no growth of kamma-formations. Where there is no growth of kamma-formations there is no future arising of renewed existence. Where there is no future arising of renewed existence, there is no future birth, decay and death. This, I say, O monks, is free of sorrow of anguish and despair.”

—SN 12.64

## 6. *Come to be*

“‘This has come to be’<sup>56</sup> — do you see that, Sāriputta?”

“‘This has come to be’<sup>57</sup> — that, O Lord, one sees with true wisdom,<sup>58</sup> as it really is. And having seen with true wisdom, as it really is, that ‘this has come to be,’ one is on the way<sup>59</sup> towards revulsion from what has come to be, towards dispassion and cessation.

“‘Produced by such nutriment’ — that one sees, with true wisdom, as it really is. And having seen, with true wisdom, as it really is, that ‘this has been produced by such nutriment,’ one is on the way towards revulsion from its production by nutriment, towards dispassion and cessation.

“‘By the cessation of nutriment, that what has come to be is bound to cease’<sup>60</sup> — that one sees with true wisdom, as it really is. And having seen, with true wisdom, as it really is, that ‘By the cessation of that nutriment, what has come to be is bound to cease,’ one is on the way towards revulsion from what is liable to cease, towards dispassion and cessation. Thus, O Lord, is one in higher training.”<sup>61</sup>

“And how, O Lord, is one a comprehender of Dhamma?<sup>62</sup> ‘This has come to be’ — that, O Lord, one sees with true wisdom, as it really is. And having seen with true wisdom, as it really is, that ‘this has come to be,’ then, through revulsion from what has come to be, through dispassion (concerning it) and the cessation (of it), one is liberated without any clinging.”<sup>63</sup>

“‘Produced by such nutriment’ — that one sees with true wisdom, as it really is. And having seen with true wisdom, as it really is, that ‘this has been produced by such nutriment,’ then, through revulsion from its production by nutriment, through dispassion (concerning it) and the cessation (of it), one is liberated without any clinging.



“By the cessation of nutriment, that what has come to be is bound to cease’ — that one sees with true wisdom, as it really is. And having seen with true wisdom, as it really is, that ‘by the cessation of that nutriment, what has come to be is bound to cease,’ then, through revulsion from what is liable to cease, from dispassion (concerning it) and the cessation (of it), one is liberated without any clinging. Thus, O Lord, is one a comprehender of Dhamma...”

“Well spoken, Sāriputta, well spoken,” said the Exalted One.

— SN 12.31

## *7. Nutriment as Basis of Right Understanding*

...Then the monks put another question to the venerable Sāriputta: “Friend, could there be another way in which a noble disciple can be said to be one of Right Understanding, whose view is upright, who is possessed of steadfast confidence in the Dhamma, who has attained to this good teaching?”

“There could be, friends. If, friends, a noble disciple knows nutriment, knows the origin of nutriment, knows the ceasing of nutriment, and knows the way leading to the ceasing of nutriment, then he is, in so far, one of Right Understanding, whose view is upright, who is possessed of steadfast confidence in the Dhamma, who has attained to this good teaching.

“And what is nutriment? There are four nutriments for the sustenance of beings born, and for the support of beings seeking birth. What are the four? Edible food, coarse and fine; sense-impression is the second; volitional thought, the third; and consciousness, the fourth.

“Through the origin of craving, there is origin of nutriment. Through the ceasing of craving, there is ceasing of nutriment. The way leading to the ceasing of nutriment is the Noble Eightfold Path, namely, right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

“Friends, if a noble disciple thus knows nutriment, knows the origin of nutriment, the ceasing of nutriment and the way leading to the ceasing of nutriment, he entirely abandons the inner tendency to lust, he casts off the inner tendency to ill-will, eliminates the inner tendency to the opinion-and-conceit of ‘I am,’ he discards ignorance, produces knowledge, and becomes an ender of suffering here and now.”

—Sammā-ditṭhi Sutta, MN 9

# Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Text 1.

<sup>2</sup> Sutta-Nipāta v. 1043.

<sup>3</sup> See Translator's Note to Text 3 (a), and *The Wheel* No. 17, page 19 under "Clinging."

<sup>4</sup> Abraham ben Chisdai, in *Ben-hamelekh we-hanasir (The Prince and the Ascetic)*. This is an old Hebrew version of the "Barlām and Joasaph" story which unwittingly carried the main features of the Buddha's life story through a major part of the medieval world. The Hebrew version has several distinct traces not only of the Buddha's life story, but also of Buddhist ideas, like the one quoted above. Only a comparison of the numerous versions of the "Barlām and Joasaph" story could decide on whether these ideas were part of the tradition and common to other versions, or whether they originated in the Hebrew author's mind.

<sup>5</sup> Transl. by Soma Thera in *His Last Performance, Verses of Tālaputa Thera* (Colombo 1943; available from Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy). See also the "Fire Sermon" (*The Wheel* No. 17: "The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye contact is burning. The ear... mind is burning, ideas are burning...")

<sup>6</sup> See *The Wheel* No. 15, *Dependent Origination*, p. 24 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Pāli: *āhāra*; from *āharati*, to take up, to take on to oneself; to bring, carry, fetch.

<sup>8</sup> Of beings born — *bhūtānam*; lit.: of those who have come to existence. —

Of beings seeking birth — *bhavesinam*, lit.: of these seeking existence.

The latter term refers, according to the Commentary, in the case of egg-born and womb-born beings, to the period before they have emerged from the egg shell or the membranous sheath. Beings born of moisture (*sedaja*) or spontaneously (*opapātika*) are called “seeking birth” at their first thought moment.

<sup>9</sup> “Edible food,” *kabaliṅkāro āhāro*, lit.: “morsel-made food.” Comy: “It is a

term for the nutritive essence (*ojā*) of which boiled rice etc., is the

(coarse) basic (*vatthu*).”

<sup>10</sup> “Sense-impression” (or contact; *phassa*) is sixfold: through eye, ear, nose,

tongue, body, and mind.

<sup>11</sup> “Volitional thought” *mano-sancetanā*, is according to Comy. identical

with *cetanā*, and refers here to kammic volition.

<sup>12</sup> “Consciousness” (*viññāna*) refers to all types of consciousness.

<sup>13</sup> The same phrases occur in the monk’s reflection on his alms food, e.g.,

at MN 2; explained in *Visuddhimagga*, trans. by Nāṇamoli, p. 31 ff.

<sup>14</sup> That is he has become a non-returner (*anāgāmi*) by eradicating the fetter

of sensuous desire (*kāmarāga-samyojana*) which, according to Comy.

forms a unit with those other fetters which are given up (*pahānekattā*)

at this stage, i.e., personality belief, skeptical doubt, attachment to

rites and rituals, and ill-will.

<sup>15</sup> Pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling.

<sup>16</sup> This refers to the attainment of sainthood (*arahatta*).

- <sup>17</sup> Sensual craving, craving for (eternal) existence, craving for self-annihilation.
- <sup>18</sup> *ojaṭṭhamaka-rūpāni*, the “basic corporeal octad” (*suddhaṭṭhaka-kalāpa*), consisting of the four material elements, and color, smell, taste, and nutritive essence.
- <sup>19</sup> See Note 18.
- <sup>20</sup> At the moment of conception of a human being, three units (*kalāpa*) of corporeal processes arise in continuity: the body-decad, the sex-decad, and the heart-decad. These decads have in common nine factors: the basic eight (see above) and physical vitality; to these, as the varying tenth factor, is added: body (i.e., bodily sensitivity; *kāya*), sex differentiation (*bhāva*), heart (*hadaya*; the physical basis of mental activity).
- <sup>21</sup> Sub-Comy: “It is by way of sustaining (*upatthambhento*; lit.: propping up) that ‘food’ is said to be a ‘producer of corporeality’ (*rūpam samuṭṭhāpeti*). Its function of sustaining consist in the production of the basic octad, with nutritive essence as its eighth factor (*ojaṭṭhamaka-rūpa*).
- <sup>22</sup> Sub-Comy: “This is said because the craving for taste is strong when taking edible food. By being the cause of much harm, it is a danger.”
- <sup>23</sup> Sub-Comy: “‘Approach’ is the coming-together (*saṅgati*) of object, sense-organ, and consciousness, or of object and consciousness. By being the cause of arising of feeling, etc., it is a danger.”
- <sup>24</sup> Sub-Comy: “The danger lies in its being the cause of the origination of existence.”

<sup>25</sup> Sub-Comy: “The danger in consciousness is its being a root-cause of all those harmful phenomena which are the originators of a new existence.”

<sup>26</sup> Trans. by Nāṇāmoli, p. 372ff.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 704f, and Ledi Sayadaw, *A Manual of Insight* (The Wheel No. 31/32), pp. 52-82.

<sup>28</sup> *savatthukavasena*. Bracketed explanation, according to Sub-Comy.

<sup>29</sup> *phassa-pancamaka-dhammā*, the pentad of sense-impression, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness. See Nyanaponika Thera, *Abhidhamma Studies*, 2nd ed., Kandy 1964 (Buddhist Publication Society), p. 47ff.

<sup>30</sup> Sub-Comy: “The condition of the five aggregates, here defined as mind-and-matter, is consciousness; and the latter’s condition is kamma-formations; and the condition of that is ignorance.” See *The Wheel* No. 15a/b.

<sup>31</sup> See *Path of Purification*, p. 705.

<sup>32</sup> See *The Wheel* No. 15a/b, *Dependent Origination*, by Piyadassi Thera.

<sup>33</sup> This refers to seven decads of corporeal factors, consisting of nine constant factors, i.e., the basic octad (see Note 18) and vitality; as the tenth, one of the following seven is added to form seven decads of corporeal continua: eye-sensitivity, ear-, nose-, tongue-sensitivity, bodily sensitivity, sex, and heart-basis (the physical basis of mind).

<sup>34</sup> Those blind, deaf or sexless (Sub-Comy).

<sup>35</sup> Additions in round brackets ( ) are from the subcommentary.

- <sup>36</sup> Sub-Comy: “By the mention of kamma, reference to a past birth is implied; that is, to the existence where that kamma has been accumulated. Hereby the beginninglessness of the saṃsāric cycle is illustrated.”
- <sup>37</sup> See *Path of Purification*, p. 669.
- <sup>38</sup> Consumes or eats (*āharati*) — The commentators say that this monk believed that he understood the three other kinds of nutriment but concerning consciousness he had conceived the notion that there was a “being” (*satta*) that takes consciousness onto himself as nutriment.
- <sup>39</sup> Comy: “I do not say that there is any being or person that consumes (or eats).”
- <sup>40</sup> Comy: “That means: ‘For what (impersonal) state (or thing; *katamassa dhammassa*) is the nutriment consciousness a condition (*paccaya*)?’”  
The term dhamma, in the sense of an impersonal factor of existence, is here contrasted with the questioner’s assumption of a being or person performing the respective function. By re-formulating the question, the Buddha wanted to point out that there is no reason for assuming that the nutriment consciousness “feeds” or conditions any separate person hovering behind it; but that consciousness constitutes just one link in a chain of processes indicated by the Buddha in the following.
- <sup>41</sup> The nutriment consciousness signifies here the rebirth-consciousness.
- <sup>42</sup> *āyatim punabbhavābhiniḅbatti*; Comy: “This is the mind-and-body (*nāma-rūpa*) conascent with that very (rebirth) consciousness.” This refers to the third link of the dependent origination: “Through (rebirth) consciousness conditioned is mind-and-body” (*viññāṇa-paccayā nāma-rūpam*).

<sup>43</sup> Comy: “The Exalted One said this for giving to the monk an opening for a further question.”

<sup>44</sup> Comy: “Why does not the monk continue to ask: ‘Who becomes?’ Because as one cherishing wrong views, he believes that ‘A being has become, has come to be.’ Hence he does not question further, because it would conflict with his own beliefs. And also the Master terminates here the exposition, thinking: ‘However much he questions, he will not be satisfied. He is just asking empty questions.’”

<sup>45</sup> Comy: “Here the Master takes up that very point from where he started the exposition: ‘Through the sixfold sense (organ) base conditioned is sense-impression,’ and here he now turns round the exposition (to the cessation of the cycle of dependent origination).

“In this discourse, there is one link (of cause and fruit) between consciousness and mind-and-body; one link (of fruit and cause) between feeling and craving, and one link (of cause and fruit) between the process of becoming and birth.”

Sub-Comy: “Since, in the words of the discourse, ‘The nutriment consciousness is a condition for the future arising of a renewed existence,’ (consciousness is regarded) as being a condition in a former existence for a future existence, and as being a principal cause (*mūla-kāraṇa*), therefore the Commentary says that ‘there is a link (of cause and fruit) between consciousness and mind-and-body.’ Hence it should be understood that by the term consciousness, also the ‘kamma-forming consciousness’ (*abhisankhāra-viññāṇa*) is implied” (i.e., apart from being resultant rebirth consciousness).

<sup>46</sup> Sub-Comy: kamma-forming consciousness.



<sup>47</sup> Sub-Comy: it attains to (or: can express) its own nature (*laddha-sabhāva*).

<sup>48</sup> In the nutriment, or in the cycle of rebirths.

<sup>49</sup> Sub-Comy: it obtains growth (or maturity) for producing its fruit. —  
Comy: Kamma takes a hold and comes to growth in its capacity to drag (beings) to rebirth and it thus accelerates (the process of becoming; *javāpetvā*).

<sup>50</sup> *nāmarūpassa avakkanti*.

<sup>51</sup> In the present resultant sector of the cycle (*vipāka vaṭṭa*).

<sup>52</sup> Kamma-formations causing the future cycle.

<sup>53</sup> See Note 41.

<sup>54</sup> Comy: “This is the application of the simile: the dyer or painter is the kamma with its adjuncts. The wooden tablets, the wall or the piece of cloth, correspond to the three planes of existence in the cycle of rebirths. As the painter produces a figure on a clean surface, so kamma with its adjuncts produces forms (*rūpa*) in various existences. If the painter is unskilled, the figures he paints will be ugly, misshapen and not pleasing; similarly, if a person performs a kamma with mind devoid of knowledge (*ñāṇa-vippayuttena cittena*), then that kamma will produce a (bodily) form that does not lend beauty to the eye, etc., but will be ugly, misshapen and not pleasing even to father and mother. But if the painter is skillful, the figures he produces will be beautiful, of attractive shape and pleasing; similarly if a person performs kamma in a state of mind imbued with knowledge (*ñāṇasampayutta*), then the bodily form produced by that kamma, will give beauty to the eye, etc., will be attractive and well-shapen, like a finished work of art.

“Here, taking nutriment together with consciousness, there is one link (of cause and fruit) between nutriment and mind-and-body. Including mind-and-body in the section of the resultants there is one link (of fruit and cause) between mind-and-body and kamma-formations. Finally, there is one link (of cause and fruit) between kamma-formations and the future existence.”

<sup>55</sup> According to Indian cosmology, the earth rests on water.

<sup>56</sup> *bhūtam idan'ti.*

<sup>57</sup> Comy: This refers to the five aggregates (*pancakkhandha*).

<sup>58</sup> Comy: This refers to the wisdom bestowed by the paths (of stream-entry, etc.) together with the insight (leading to it; *saha-vipassanāya magga-pannāya*).

<sup>59</sup> Comy: From the observance of morality up to the path (-moment) of sainthood (*arahatta-magga*) one is “on the way” (*paṭipanno*).

<sup>60</sup> *tad-āhāra-nirodhā yam bhūtam tam nirodha-dhamman' ti.*

<sup>61</sup> *sekho*, one who has attained to the four paths and three lower fruitions.

<sup>62</sup> *sankhāta-dhammo*. This is one who has attained to the fourth and highest fruition of sainthood (*arahatta-phala*), an arahant or asekha, “one beyond training.”

<sup>63</sup> *anupādā vimutto.*

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