Pahankanuwa Sermon #167

English Translation

Translated from Sinhala

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(Pahankaṇuwa Sinhala Audio Dhamma Sermon No.108)

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

(Homage to the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Fully Self-Enlightened One)

Pali Stanza:

"Yathā daṇḍena gopālo,

gāvo pāleti gocaraṃ,

Evaṃ jarā ca maccū ca,

āyuṃ pājenti pāṇinaṃ."

From:

Dhammapada Verse 135 (Daṇḍa Vagga)

Dear Listeners,

Poson Full Moon Poya day is a day on which we pay tribute on a grand scale to the heritage of the Buddha Sāsana that we received from the great Arahant Mahinda. Today is a day when temples across this entire island, starting from the summit of Mihintale mountain, are illuminated by devotees clad in pure white garments of virtue. This mobilization for the sake of practice (*patipatti*) is extremely valuable. Understanding the ultimate purpose within this practice is even more valuable. The background story that led to the preaching of the verse we have chosen as our theme today reminds us of the importance of this second point.

On a certain Full Moon Poya day, while the Buddha, the Teacher of the Three Worlds, was residing at the Pubbārāma monastery, the group of laywomen observing the precepts under the chief lay disciple Visākhā gathered at the monastery. Visākhā, the great lay benefactress, approached the elderly laywomen in that group and asked, "Mothers, why are you observing the eight Uposatha precepts on this Poya day?"

They replied, "We are observing these precepts to be born in the heavenly worlds"—with the expectation of rebirth in heaven. Next, she asked the middle-aged laywomen. They replied, "We observe the eight Uposatha precepts to escape living

with co-wives (*sapatnī vāsa*)." Devotees, in India at that time, polygamy was prevalent. When a husband took several wives, it caused great distress, jealousy, and hatred among the wives. Therefore, some of them made this aspiration.

"We observe these eight Uposatha precepts on this Poya day with the aspiration to escape living with co-wives, which arises from polygamy." Next, she asked the young women, "What is your purpose in this? What do you hope to gain?" Their reply was, "To obtain a son from our very first pregnancy." Next, she asked the young girls—not exactly princesses, but young girls: "Why are you observing these precepts?" They replied, "With the aspiration that we may get married while we are still young."

Bringing these stories along with her, Visākhā took this entire group to the Buddha, and said, "Venerable Sir, these are the kinds of answers I received." Then the Buddha said, "Visākhā, such is the way of worldlings. They only spin around in this wheel of saṃsāra; no one wishes to leap out of it." He then uttered this verse we have chosen as our theme, which conveys the idea that just as a cowherd with a staff in hand drives the cows, so do decay and death (*jarāmaraṇa*) drive the lifespan of living beings toward death.

Yathā gopālo gāvo pāleti gocaraṃ,

evaṃ jarā ca maccū ca āyuṃ pājenti pāṇinaṃ.

"Just as a cowherd drives the cows to the pasture with a staff, even so do decay and death (*jarāmaraṇa*) drive the lifespan of beings towards the mouth of death." That is the meaning.

From this story, we can see that the external mobilization of Visākhā's group of five hundred laywomen was highly commendable. However, their internal alignment was apparently not so commendable. Why? Because they were observing these eight Uposatha precepts based on ordinary, mundane objectives related to this saṃsāra, such as household life and marriage. The value the Buddha placed on these eight Uposatha precepts is mentioned in numerous suttas. On certain occasions, addressing the Sangha, he declared: "Monks, the observance of the Uposatha consisting of eight factors is of great fruit, of great benefit, of great splendor, and of great radiance."

"By observing it in what manner, and with what purpose, does this eightfold Uposatha become of great fruit and great benefit?" The Buddha himself raised this question and then explained: "Here, a noble disciple reflects thus: 'As long as they live, the Arahants abstain from destroying life, laying aside the cudgel and the sword; they are modest, full of pity, and dwell compassionate toward all living beings. Today, for this one day and night, I too shall abstain from destroying life, observing this training rule at the very level the Arahants observe it, thereby following and imitating the Arahants. By this, I keep the Uposatha.' In this manner, the Buddha

indicates that observing each training rule at the level of the Arahants is the true purpose."

Although we need not discuss each precept individually, there is something that must be specifically mentioned. Devotees who observe the eight Uposatha precepts know that the third training rule, in particular, is not something meant for ordinary lay life. It is the abstention from unchastity (*abrahmacariya*), which belongs to the practice of the Arahants. That concerns living the holy life (*brahmacariya*). Likewise, regarding abstaining from untimely food (*vikāla-bhojana*): in lay life, one can eat whenever one is hungry, without distinguishing between night and day. But during the eight Uposatha precepts, one observes the training rule of abstaining from untimely food. Next, dancing, singing, music, watching theatrical shows, and beautifying the body are things belonging to lay life. But on this Poya day, one goes to a temple, abstains from these things, and spends the day in renunciation. Similarly, the matter of high and large beds does not apply at home. At home, there are highly luxurious items. Giving those up, one comes to a temple, dresses in simple attire, and lies down on the floor. What is the meaning of this?

Is it because this causes harm to the world? Is it because it causes harm to society? No. There is a much greater purpose in observing these eight Uposatha precepts. What is the idea behind this? When speaking of wholesome deeds (*kusala*), they are spoken of as *saṃvaṭṭagāmī kusala* (wholesome deeds leading to the continuation of saṃsāra) and *vivaṭṭagāmī kusala* (wholesome deeds leading to the ending of saṃsāra). *Saṃvaṭṭagāmī* means wholesome deeds that cause one to spin around in saṃsāra. When performing meritorious acts, many people pray for heavenly wealth, worldly possessions, and the like. *Vivaṭṭagāmī* means the aspiration: "May this lead to my liberation from this saṃsāra, and to the realization of Nibbāna through Dhamma discussions and meditation! May it be a cause for escaping saṃsāra!" Thus, even giving (*dāna*), if done with a *vivaṭṭagāmī* intention—with the intention of escaping saṃsāra, with the disposition of relinquishment—it is then that it becomes of great fruit and great benefit. It is the same with virtue (*sīla*). This is shown on many occasions. Sīla is also classified as *parāmaṭṭha* (clung to) and *aparāmaṭṭha* (unclung). *Parāmaṭṭha* means virtue grasped through craving (*taṇhā*) and views (*diṭṭhi*). This is described as follows: "By observing this virtue, by practicing this vow, may I become a god! May I attain such a status!" It is true that such a state may be gained. But if that is made the primary goal, then the true value of virtue is lost.

The Buddha, to put it briefly, presented this virtue as an opportunity for the lay devotee to reach the gateway of Nibbāna. This is the value, the standard, that the Buddha set for this virtue. Therefore, we only have the right to measure its value upwards, not downwards. That is, if a devotee starts with the resolution, "I shall observe for this day and night these training rules which the Arahants observe for their entire lives," and elevates its value instead of degrading it, then such a devotee will not stop at observing precepts on the Full Moon Poya, but will also observe them on the New Moon (*amāvaka*) and the eighth-day phases (*aṭṭhamī*). Furthermore,

some individuals, in addition to those days, take up other days and observe precepts for eight days a month. In the past, some devotees spent four or even eight days a month at temples with those high aspirations. What is the concept behind this? It is the concept of renunciation (*nekkhamma*).

Thus, within this eightfold Uposatha virtue lies the concept of renunciation (*nekkhamma*). The Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddhist is common to both the layperson and the monk. Whether lay or ordained, the Noble Eightfold Path is the Buddhist's path of practice. The thought (intention) of this Noble Eightfold Path is one of those thoughts—indeed, it is the primary thought (i.e., *nekkhamma-saṅkappa*). However, in daily lay life, there is no opportunity to practice that thought of renunciation. Therefore, on Full Moon days, New Moon days, and other special days, devotees gather at temples and try to observe those training rules through a simple life. The effort made there is where the value lies. That is the value.

For those devotees who are weary of the sufferings and tribulations of lay life, and who wish to ordain, this serves as a rehearsal. Developing the eight Uposatha precepts is a primary step toward fulfilling the aspiration of leaving the household life. Instead, aiming for heavenly pleasures or targeting the resolution of everyday lay problems, such as marriage issues, is a degradation of that high standard. It is an undervaluation. Seeing hundreds, thousands, or hundreds of thousands of lay devotees observing precepts on a Poya day is indeed a sight that gladdens the hearts of us Buddhists. That external mobilization is a very valuable spectacle. We can contemplate it and rejoice. However, if a spiritual alignment does not accompany that external mobilization to the same degree, it cannot be said to be of great fruit and great benefit. It lacks that much value and strength. That is why we said that even though something appears good on the surface, we must not forget its ultimate purpose. We must constantly remind ourselves of the ultimate purpose, the value the Buddha attributed to this. But the answers given to the questions asked by the great laywoman Visākhā show that those laywomen held a degraded view of its value. Fortunately, it does not appear that the Treasurer (Anāthapiṇḍika) asked the laymen. Even so, let us imagine: if a Visākhā were to come forward today and ask these laywomen of various age groups why they are keeping these precepts, what kind of answers would we get? Likewise, if an Anāthapiṇḍika were to come and ask these laymen of various age groups, "Why are you mobilizing by the hundreds and thousands to keep these precepts?" what kind of answers would we get? We are not going to say. Devotees must think and answer this for themselves. However, we have to remind you, in accordance with the word of the Buddha, that this is indeed a special opportunity for the lay devotee when we consider the nature of lay life—how full of suffering and tribulation it is.

A mouse trapped in a mouse trap runs extremely fast around the trap searching for the exit. No matter how much it runs, it cannot find the exit. But when it slows down its speed, the exit may become visible. In the same way, like mice caught in a mouse trap, how restlessly is lay life spent! The expectation of observing these eight

Uposatha precepts is to create a pause, a temporary cessation, within that busy life. Within that pause, if the lay devotee resolves on a state of virtue at the level of the Arahants, generates joy by reflecting on that virtue, calms the mind, directs it toward some meditation, and then applies the mind to the four foundations of mindfulness (*cattu-satipaṭṭhāna*), then the exit of the mouse trap can be found. Indeed, the exit from this wheel of saṃsāra, the exit of the mouse trap, is the four foundations of mindfulness. For one who has fallen into this saṃsāra, no matter how much external mobilization there is, one must find this door by oneself. One must find this door for oneself. The door will not open automatically just because of the strength of external mobilization. One must walk the path and open the gateway of Nibbāna, the gateway to crossing over from saṃsāra. There is such a profound meaning, a depth, within this. That is why we specifically reminded you of this. However, we live in an era where the world quickly forgets the internal purpose, even if the external aspects and the outer shell of everything remain. The primary meaning of keeping the eight Uposatha precepts is to be considered as a transitional phase, a step in the gradual transition or transformation from lay life to the ordained life.

Devotees, you may have seen a caterpillar hanging under a leaf of a tree, eating the leaf, and then one day becoming a beautiful butterfly with lovely wings, flying from flower to flower drinking nectar without bruising the flowers. If one can break free from the coarse bonds of wife and children, shatter those heavy chains, take up the bowl and robes, and become a monk—resembling that beautiful winged butterfly—and fulfill that noble purpose, such is the transformation one should envision. To achieve this, we must keep the Uposatha precepts by elevating this highest value in our minds. During the few hours we spend at a temple, away from our homes, we must bring to mind the conduct of the Arahants, and maintain the thought: "To the best of our ability, we are drawing close to them today." If we do so, gradually observing one Poya, two, three, or four, we will finally realize at some point that those coarse bonds of wife and children, which we thought could never be broken, are actually very easy to break. That is the value of the eight Uposatha precepts.

Indeed, when we reflect on each of these eight Uposatha precepts, it is quite wonderful. It is not at the level of the virtue observed daily in lay life. There is a much nobler meaning, a sublime standard here. It is by presenting that sublime standard that we must practice.

Moreover, the very nature of saṃsāra is the difficulty of escaping this wheel. Wandering in the wheel happens almost automatically. There is an amusement ride called a merry-go-round. Parents take a child to an amusement park and place the child on a wooden horse. Amidst band music resembling the fivefold instrumental music, it spins. The child thinks they are actually traveling on this horse. After about three rounds, it stops, but the child does not want to get off. "Another round, another round!" Such is this saṃsāric life. Amidst the five cords of sensual pleasure, amidst that instrumental music, the merry-go-round spins. What is this round? Birth (*jāti*), decay (*jarā*), sickness (*vyādhi*), and death (*maraṇa*). That is the round. That round

keeps spinning. No one wants to jump out. "Another round, another round!" That is the concept found in the world. However, if a wise person reflects, "I must escape from this fearful saṃsāra," they can use the pause provided by this Uposatha day to support that, by raising in their mind thoughts related to the concept of renunciation (*nekkhamma*). This is not something to be shown off to the world. It is only by understanding the true nature of one's own life and body through the path of meditation that liberation can be attained.

When speaking of this saṃsāra, it is also worthwhile for us to contemplate the deep meaning of the Buddha's verse. At first glance, it seems to be a very simple verse. What is it? Just as a cowherd with a staff in hand drives the cows to the pasture, so do decay and death drive this lifespan. How does this happen? It is difficult to grasp all at once. This verse has been explained in various ways since ancient times. It appears to us that a great multitude of meanings is contained within each small verse. What are decay (*jarā*) and death (*maraṇa*)? How should we understand them in connection with the cowherd? Here, Death (*maccu*), who is Māra, is the cowherd. Next, what is the staff? It is decay (*jarā*). Māra the cowherd drives this lifespan with the staff of decay. How does he drive it? If we explain this through seven stages, we can understand it as follows:

A child born into this world receives the most delicious and nutritious food in the world. What is it? The most delicious and nutritious food is mother's milk. The child receives mother's milk. Next, the safest place in the world is the mother's lap. The child receives the mother's lap. Can the child remain there forever? Is that milk received forever? Can the child stay in the mother's lap forever? No. When a certain period arrives, the milk that flowed for the child dries up. "Drying up" means decay (*jarā*). Just as the body wastes away, the milk dries up. That is decay. The staff of decay has operated. The child is displaced from the mother's lap.

Next, what does the child do? The child moves on all fours, which is crawling. That helpless child then crawls on all fours. Because the child must be kept occupied with something, they are given some toys and dolls. Crawling among them, the child manage with great difficulty to hold onto a coffee table or a chair and stand up. Ah, as soon as the child stands up, see what happens next! Māra then hands over that staff of decay to both parents and teachers. Handing over canes, rods, and sticks of orange and tamarind branches to both parents and teachers, they drive the little child from there to preschool and then to school. That is what decay does next. One cannot stay with toys forever. Next, the student goes to school. By what means is this student driven next? The staff that decay utilizes next is "examinations." Passing exams, they are pushed forward year after year. Conducting exams, this student is passed along and driven forward. Going thus beyond schools and universities, they now fall as young men and women into this complex society.

What has to be said from this point onward must be said with some caution, as devotees might get upset with us. Let us explain it using the cowherd's story itself.

When a cowherd is driving cattle, if some cattle cannot be tamed and go astray, what does he do? He yokes them together in pairs as a team. Yoking them as a team, he beats them and drives them forward. Something similar happens in society. Devotees may understand how that is. While the yoked pairs of cattle are driven forward under beatings, a time comes when they get bruised and grow old. They then take pride in being respected for their gray hair. Now it is middle age. Without one's even knowing it, middle age tips over to the other side. Although called a "grown-up" (adult), one cannot remain grown. Next, without one's knowing it, one decays. The stage where that staff operates directly is old age. In the ordinary world, "decay" (*jarā*) refers to old age.

But the Buddha says that decay occurs even within the mother's womb. After coming out of the mother's womb, from the very beginning we mentioned, the staff of decay operates. This is Māra's work. Finally, old age is reached. To compete with the staff of decay, a staff now comes into one's own hand—a walking stick. But decay cannot be driven away with a walking stick. Finally, when this becomes acute, the time comes to pass away (*kālakriyā*). The time to die arrives. What happens next? This body-cage, which was fed, given drink, bathed, adorned, and carried with so much pride—what happens to it in the end? It goes to the pasture. Going to the cemetery, this body-cage finally becomes prey to the worms inside and to the dogs and crows outside.

That, as far as we understand, is the meaning of that verse. Devotees might understand it in even greater detail. To us, it appears in this manner. It is to escape from this condition that the Buddha showed this eightfold Uposatha virtue. If we do not wish to remain in this wheel of saṃsāra forever, but want to escape from it, we must obtain at least a small pause from those activities and processes connected with lay life, and make a special effort. These things do not come automatically. They are not obtained merely through external mobilization. Spiritual alignment must also come in that manner. Indeed, many consider this present era to be one full of calamities (*kāla-vipatti*). Shocking calamities are heard of occasionally and suddenly. Devotees go to sleep well at night, and when they wake up in the morning, they do not know what has happened—terrible, unimaginable calamities occur as temporal disasters. Amidst these, lay devotees who come to meet us often tell us their grievances: "If we had not made a slight mistake, we too would have ordained like you."

Be that as it may, what we consider as temporal calamities are those floods, droughts, famines, and tsunamis that occur occasionally and circumstantially. However, the Buddha considered decay (*jarā*) and death (*maccu* / *maraṇa*) as the true, perpetual calamities (*kāla-vipatti*). There is a fine Dhamma story that serves as a good illustration of this. One day, King Pasenadi of Kosala came to visit the Buddha. This was a frequent occurrence; the King's visits were common. But when he arrived, the Buddha asked him: "Great King, where are you coming from? What have you been doing?" The King replied: "Venerable Sir, I have been busy with those duties of

anointed kings who are intoxicated with power, obsessed with the five cords of sensual pleasure, and who rule having conquered the earth." He probably said this with some pride: "I have not come after doing some ordinary work; I have come to see the Blessed One after engaging in those duties belonging to crowned kings."

Then the Buddha immediately presented a simile: "Great King, what do you think? Suppose a trustworthy messenger were to come to you from the East, and say: 'Great King, Sire, I come from the East. There, a massive mountain as high as the sky, like a dark cloud, is rolling forward, crushing and grinding to powder all living beings in its path. Great King, if there is anything to be done, do it!' Along with that, another messenger comes from the West with the same message. Then another comes from the North, telling the same story of a rolling mountain. And one comes from the South with the exact same message." The Buddha is still describing this. Then the Buddha asks: "Great King, when such messages arrive, when such a terrible disaster destroying human beings has arisen, and human birth is so rare, what is there to be done, Great King?"

King Pasenadi of Kosala replied: "Venerable Sir, what else is there to do except righteous living (*dhamma-cariya*), harmonious living (*sama-cariya*), doing wholesome deeds (*kusala-kiriya*), and performing meritorious acts (*puñña-kiriya*)?" That is all he said: *dhamma-cariya, sama-cariya, kusala-kiriya, puñña-kiriya*. Harmonious living means abandoning unrighteous living; it is connected with virtue (*sīla*). Doing wholesome and meritorious deeds—there is nothing else to do except this. Then the Buddha declared: "Great King, I declare to you, I announce to you: decay (*jarā*) and death (*maraṇa*) are rolling forward, crushing you. That mountain simile was given to represent decay and death (*jarāmaraṇa*). Decay and death are rolling forward, crushing you. What is there to be done, Great King?"

Then the King replied: "Venerable Sir, when decay and death (*jarāmaraṇa*) are rolling forward, there is nothing I can do. When other wars come, crowned kings have their fourfold armies of elephants, cavalry, chariots, and infantry—I am referring to those. Venerable Sir, in the face of decay and death, elephant warfare is of no use. Elephant warfare is futile, cavalry warfare is futile, chariot warfare is futile, and infantry warfare is futile to save me from decay and death. Furthermore, kings have very clever ministers, ministers skilled in conspiracy. They can spy on enemy kings, act in a divisive manner, and employ strategies to conquer those lands. But even through those strategies, we cannot conquer decay and death. We cannot conquer decay and death through conspiracy. Moreover, kings have great treasures hoarded in the earth, vast amounts of wealth. When enemy kings become powerful and we are helpless, we sometimes escape by paying tributes, which is a wealth-war. But we cannot escape by paying tributes to decay and death." King Kosala speaks in this manner. The Buddha also approves: "So it is, Great King. When decay and death are rolling forward, there is no shelter in any of those things." King Kosala concludes with the very same point: "The only shelter in the face of decay and death is righteous living (*dhamma-cariya*), harmonious living (*sama-cariya*), doing wholesome deeds

(*kusala-kiriya*), and performing meritorious acts (*puñña-kiriya*). There is no other shelter." From this, we can see that what we consider as calamities are those terrible disasters that suddenly appear in black letters in the newspapers. Ignorance (*avijjā*) considers those as calamities. When a few days pass after such an event, people forget it. That is the very nature of ignorance.

But the Buddha speaks of these eternal laws of nature (*sanātana dharmatā*) as the true calamities. For every living being born in this saṃsāra, from the moment of birth, Māra operates the staff of decay. From that moment, he drives them. Driving them from stage to stage, he brings them to the final place—the pasture (cemetery). Under this condition, it is only after a Buddha is born that the opportunity to escape from this saṃsāra arises. Therefore, we must make every effort to derive the maximum benefit from it. Devotees who speak of calamities, if you reflect deeply, will see that this is not like the temporal calamities we suddenly hear of through the media. Decay and death, which go hand in hand with this body eternally, are the true calamities. None of those aforementioned forces can fight against this. It cannot be done through armies, conspiracies, or wealth. What must be done is righteous living and harmonious living. To look at it even more deeply, the ultimate result of this must be realized through meditation. We must understand the true nature of this life, the true nature of the five aggregates (*pañca-skandha*). The Buddha, on a certain occasion, describes the reason for our wandering in this saṃsāra for so long in just two words:

"Monks, you and I have wandered and run through this long saṃsāra. How have we wandered? Because of the hindrance of ignorance (*avijjā-nīvaraṇa*) and the fetter of craving (*taṇhā-saṃyojana*)." The hindrance of ignorance covers the true nature of the mind. Next is the fetter of craving. Craving is the bond, the shackle. Indeed, if we look at it in another way, we can say that for all of us in saṃsāra, our parents are ignorance and craving. It is said in one place: *taṇhā janeti purisaṃ*—"craving gives birth to man." Thus, the parents of the entire saṃsāra are ignorance and craving. They are the parents of all of us. Devotees perform the service of ministering to these parents very well. For many, the ultimate goal is to strengthen ignorance and craving. That is the service of ministering to saṃsāric parents, and it is carried out without any lack. But the more it is done, the more suffering (*dukkha*) increases.

Instead of strengthening ignorance, we must create opportunities to thin it out. We must create opportunities to thin out craving (*taṇhā*). It is precisely for this that the Buddha showed these special occasions, such as the eight Uposatha precepts. It is like living close to the Arahants. In the ancient concept, "Uposatha" meant living close to the gods. In our view, it is living close to the Arahants. What does that mean? It is by living close to those who have realized Nibbāna that one can enter the path of Nibbāna. But now, there is ignorance.

Next, we must also reflect on the matter of *saṃvaṭṭa* (rolling on) and *vivaṭṭa* (rolling back). The very nature of this world is to go around in this cycle of birth (*jāti*), decay

(*jarā*), sickness (*vyādhi*), and death (*maraṇa*). Wholesome deeds leading to the continuation of saṃsāra (*saṃvaṭṭagāmī kusala*) indeed help in obtaining good rebirths in saṃsāra. Those are the meritorious deeds like virtue (*sīla*) that we perform. But if our aspiration is not set on a higher target, we will continue in that very cycle, through heavenly worlds and Brahma worlds, for countless eons. Yet, even in the heavenly worlds, passing away (*cuta*) is the same as dying.

Thus, wherever one is, whether one dies or passes away, within this impermanence (*aniccatā*) of saṃsāra, the beings of this world are immersed in a great mass of suffering (*dukkha*). That is why the Buddha presented the entire saṃsāric existence as an equation of suffering. He showed the entire saṃsāric existence as suffering. Why? Because there is a vast multitude of arisings and passings away here. Because they do not see this multitude of arisings and passings away correctly, these beings, through grasping (*upādāna*) born of craving (*taṇhā*), take them to be real. They regard form, feeling, perception, preparations, and consciousness (*rūpa, vedanā, saññā, saṅkhāra, viññāṇa*) as permanent and real. This is due to the absence of insight-wisdom (*vipassanā-paññā*).

Because this understanding is not correctly present, they are covered by the hindrance of ignorance (*avijjā-nīvaraṇa*). Ignorance, to put it briefly, is the notion that "there is something." The notion that "there is something" is ignorance. Craving is the notion that "it is not enough." The very result of the notion that "there is something" is the feeling that "it is not enough." That is all there is to ignorance and craving. To understand this correctly, it must be realized through insight (*vipassanā*) according to the law of impermanence (*aniccatā*) taught by the Buddha, that here there is only a vast multitude of arisings and passings away. Due to the limitations of our thinking and our sense faculties, this is not visible to us. It is not visible to our physical eye. Likewise, it cannot be grasped by logical reasoning; it is a Dhamma beyond logical reasoning (*atakkāvacara*). This is visible only to the eye of insight-wisdom (*vipassanā-paññā-cakkhu*). The eye of wisdom must be developed. Through the development of the eye of wisdom, at some point, it is understood that even what is taken as "existing" is only a vast multitude of arisings and passings away. Ultimately, there is only a heap of breakages here. Through that, grasping (*grahaya*) is reduced. To whatever extent ignorance is reduced, to that extent craving is also reduced.

When ignorance is entirely eliminated, craving has nothing to grasp there. It was because we thought "there is something" that we said "it is not enough." Now, instead of the feeling that "there is something," everything is understood as an extremely rapid flow of arising and passing away—this is impermanence (*aniccatā*). In the Dhamma, this is precisely what is called preparations (*saṅkhāra*). It is only a heap of preparations. There is only a transient state of arising and passing away. Through that, craving gradually thins out. That is what the Buddha shows as Nibbāna. What we grasp as existence/becoming (*bhava*), as life, is indeed those

transient phases we proudly call "my life," which Māra the cowherd drives, beating them with the staff of decay. We say, "This is my youth, this is my old age."

But what is within this? It is impermanence (*aniccatā*), and the very nature of suffering (*dukkha*) arising from it. Within that nature of suffering, the Buddha highlighted the nature of non-self (*anattā*). There is nothing here to be taken as a self. Taking it as a self is a view (*diṭṭhi*)—one's own grasp of the perception of permanence (*nicca-saññā*). One clings to it and thinks of it as a self: "Form is my self, feeling is my self." This is the train of thought present in the ordinary worldling. The Buddha shows that one cannot escape from this through logical reasoning. One cannot escape through debate. One must begin by establishing oneself in virtue (*sīla*) and restraining body and speech. Today, on this day you have observed the precepts, you possess a much greater tranquility of mind compared to the times you spend at home. To put it briefly, you have stepped away, at least temporarily, from those suffering and tribulations.

Next, you have resolved on a high standard of virtue. While keeping it, when you reflect on it after an hour or two, a great joy arises in your mind: "Today, I am a different person, not only in dress but in my thinking. Living on food offered by others, I spend this day with my mind directed toward the Dhamma and meditation." If one systematically practices a subject of meditation (*kammaṭṭhāna*), more opportunities arise to concentrate the mind. If one develops mindfulness meditation (*satipaṭṭhāna*) with a concentrated mind, one can realize the true nature of the body as we mentioned: there is only a vast multitude of arisings and passings away here. There is nothing to be grasped as a self. When this is deeply understood at some point, the dogma of self-illusion (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*)—the force that has been feeding ignorance and craving, which are like the parents of this saṃsāra—can be shattered to a great extent. It is only after that strong dogma of self-illusion is eliminated.

It is by proceeding gradually in this manner that one can realize the Nibbāna shown by the Buddha. Therefore, especially on a day like today, we must reflect: what is this that we consider the Sāsana? Is it just this external mobilization? Is this religion a spectacle, a public display? Is this done to show off to others? No. It is merely an effort to step away from the tribulations of lay life, to gather individually at a temple, and through that train of thought, to draw close to the lives of the Arahants. When we look at the result, it may appear as a spectacle that gladdens the mind. But that is not the purpose. As it is said, *paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi*—"this Dhamma is to be realized by the wise individually." The effort toward that begins with virtue (*sīla*). It starts first with virtue.

Next, utilizing the comfort of mind brought about by virtue, the joy of having abstained from wrong deeds, and the unworldly joy (*nirāmisa-pīti*), one calms the mind through a subject of meditation. If one's past perfections (*pāramī*) are well matured, when that concentrated mind is directed toward one's own five aggregates (*pañca-skandha*), one understands that here there is complete emptiness (*suññatā*).

That is why the Buddha declared that the world is empty (*suñña*). When thinking logically, this may produce a strange fear in a person. The Buddha advised to look upon the world as empty. How is it empty? In the manner we mentioned, there is nothing here to be taken as a self, nothing permanent. There is only a heap of preparations (*saṅkhāra*). Within that heap of preparations, there is only the conceit of "I" and "mine." It is because of this very conceit that the world suffers.

But if this is removed at some point, discarding the body becomes like discarding an old garment. In the past, regarding the final passing away (*parinibbāna*) of Arahants, it is mentioned that some Arahants set fire to their own bodies at the final moment. Today, there are separate cremation ceremonies. How did those Arahants set fire to their own bodies? It was not to frighten anyone, as if fasting. When their final moment arrived, they separated the body from the mind, and through the power of concentration, entering the fire-device (*tejo-kasiṇa*), they lit a fire. This was possible because they had attained the power to remove the grasp of "I" and "mine" which they had held throughout saṃsāra. That is the end of saṃsāra. Nibbāna is indeed the final end of this journey of birth and death in saṃsāra. Realizing this in this very life is the peaceful and sublime Nibbāna.

Therefore, devotees who engage in these meritorious acts must reflect on the deep side of this Dhamma, and understand the true purpose, the true value of the concept of renunciation (*nekkhamma-saṅkappa*) within the Noble Eightfold Path. Within this saṃsāra, there are two aspects: saṃsarana (wandering) and nissarana (escape). Wandering means spinning in the same place. Escaping (*nissaraṇa*) means jumping out of this, like the rolling back (*vivaṭṭa*) we mentioned. A great strength is required for that. Since the beings of this saṃsāra travel under the influence of greed, hatred, and delusion (*lobha, dosa, moha*), it is only through the wholesome roots of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion (*alobha, adosa, amoha*) that one can escape from saṃsāra. All qualities of virtue and the like are connected to this.

Devotees must bear in mind that it is only by understanding the true nature of life through insight-wisdom (*vipassanā-paññā*) in meditation that this saṃsāric liberation can be achieved. The Buddha shows on many occasions that this realization can be attained by some while listening to the Dhamma, if they possess the necessary perfections (*pāramī*) and a highly developed mind. Some attain it while preaching the Dhamma, and some while pondering over the Dhamma. Not everyone may possess that strength.

Even if these seem easy to do, what must be practiced daily is a subject of concentration meditation (*samādhi-kammaṭṭhāna*). Considering a subject of meditation as the most valuable gain in one's life, one must practice and develop it constantly. Without limiting it to this Poya day, a devotee who practices a subject of meditation in daily lay life can derive the true benefit of the Poya day. The entire secret of this saṃsāra lies within our mind. The Buddha has declared that consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and Name-and-Form (*nāmarūpa*) spin around each other

like a whirlpool. Along with the feeling of "I" in this world, there is "mine." The world spins within these two. If one understands at some point that both the internal and the external are empty, and that in both places there is only a heap of preparations (*saṅkhāra*) from the perspective of meditation, then one escapes.

Thus, this is not something to be learned merely from books, but to be observed closely within one's own life, within one's own body: "This is form, this is the arising of form, this is the passing away of form." The wearing away of this form happens every day in our lives; the food and drink we take, and the in-breaths and out-breaths, are just like that. It is said that every Buddha attained enlightenment by directing the mind to this process of in-breathing and out-breathing—mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*). What is within this? What is this breath we call "mine"? Within the in-breath and out-breath, there is that same spinning wheel.

In-breathing means grasping (*upādāna*) some external air, trying to maintain and stop it, but failing; it must be exhaled. That is a natural process. Due to the grasping we develop toward it, we hold onto it. Because of this holding, we then develop the conceit of "I." The entire world is like this. It is like a race. The clung-to (*upādinna*) is this small life coming from the mother's womb, grasped through our own past kamma-forces in saṃsāra. That is the difference between what we call a living being and a tree. A tree does not possess consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Within this living being, there is consciousness. Within this consciousness lies the seed, the secret of saṃsāra. Because of this consciousness, there is the world. Next, there is the internal world taken as "I." This world is divided on one side. On the other side, there are external things, objects to be preyed upon.

Just like the process of in-breathing and out-breathing in the world, because of the attachment to this body, everything like food and drink is taken inside. When its true nature is understood at some point, there is nothing to be taken as "I" here. There is only a process here. Because of craving (*taṇhā*), because of that desire to run in this saṃsāric wheel and enjoy the five cords of sensual pleasure, we bring upon ourselves a mountain of suffering (*dukkha*). We do not even realize that this suffering is suffering. We only understand that breathing is suffering when we look at an asthmatic patient. When watching an asthmatic patient closely, we see that the only thing that person does is breathe. Because of the intense attachment to life, the asthmatic patient breathes with great difficulty, directing their entire attention to a single breath. But in truth, we are all asthmatic patients.

Living beings (*prāṇīn*) are those who survive on this in-breath and out-breath. Every living being draws in a portion of the atmosphere from the external world and then expels it. This process itself is a great suffering (*dukkha*). That is why a Buddha is born through mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*). The secret lies within this. It enters as an in-breath and exits as an out-breath. This process is a great suffering. Although we look at the asthmatic patient's breathing and see it as suffering, in our daily lives we engage in other activities without even knowing whether we are

breathing. That is why the Buddha advises us to take a small holiday, a pause from other activities, and direct our mind to the in-breath and out-breath. When the mind is directed to the in-breath and out-breath, it reveals that the breath we took to be "my in-breath, my breath" is actually only a series of waves, a flow of arising and passing away. Then, gradually, instead of the perception of compactness (*ghana-saññā*), which we always mention, the perception of a heap (*rāsi-saññā*) arises. Compactness is grasped through the ignorance (*avijjā*) of not knowing. Gluing it together with the adhesive of craving (*taṇhā*), we take it as one to satisfy our grasping (*upādāna*). To satisfy our desire to grasp, we grasp a breath.

But when mindfulness (*sati*) is well applied to it, we realize that here there is only a process, only a mechanism. The out-breath is also like that. Therefore, the constant repetition of this is a great suffering. The same applies to nourishing and maintaining this body. The multitude of tribulations undergone for that purpose is the suffering of saṃsāra. That is why the Buddha compared the entire existence to suffering (*dukkha*). Indeed, there is nothing in this saṃsāra that cannot be taken as a subject of meditation. To that extent, Nibbāna is present within everything. We can subject a falling leaf, a fading flower, or any part of this body-cage to insight (*vipassanā*) in that manner. Reflecting on the things that became subjects of meditation for the Arahants of the past fills us with wonder. The Buddha, by revealing subjects of meditation suited to the specific thoughts and feelings of weariness toward saṃsāra of various individuals, led them to realize Nibbāna very easily in the past. Thus, we see that there are countless illustrations in the world that show this natural law, the nature of impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*). It is only that we do not make use of them. For the meditator with a well-concentrated mind, who has developed a subtle wisdom regarding the world, when a calamity like the ones we mentioned occurs, spiritual urgency (*saṃvega*) arises.

A great spiritual urgency regarding saṃsāra, a powerful spiritual urgency and weariness (*nibbidā*) regarding life must arise if we are to turn to the other side. As soon as that weariness arises, sometimes the penetration of the paths and fruits (*magga-phala-paṭivedha*) can occur through that itself. Therefore, this phenomenon indeed occurs rapidly. One must make the necessary effort for it. If that effort was not made in the past, one must try to make it in this life. What is it? To understand the world as it is—the impermanence (*aniccatā*) within everything. Bringing these to mind, the devotee who has developed spiritual urgency can raise insight-knowledges (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*) in such an event, and at some point, realize the noble element of Nibbāna through the penetration of the paths and fruits of Stream-entry (*sotāpatti*), Once-returning (*sakadāgāmitā*), Non-returning (*anāgāmitā*), and Arahantship (*arahatta*).

Therefore, devotees must reflect on this without directing their minds to other affairs. Today, you have been able to spend the day close to the lives of the Arahants, close to their thoughts, and close to their conduct. It is by fulfilling these practices that we can make this Buddha Sāsana shine. The message of escaping from saṃsāra

is what is primarily present within the Buddha Sāsana. What is external to that is what is often brought forward today. If you too reflect, you will see that to preserve the Sāsana, that deep portion of the Sāsana connected with the Four Noble Truths (*caturāriya-sacca*) and Dependent Origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) must be preserved. Otherwise, only the outer bark will remain.

Therefore, if you have developed wholesome thoughts that support the spiritual faculties (*indriya*) and powers (*bala*) of faith (*saddhā*), energy (*viriya*), mindfulness (*sati*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) through the virtue you kept, the meditation you practiced, and by listening to this Dhamma sermon, may the power of those benefits enable you to escape as quickly as possible from all saṃsāric suffering of birth (*jāti*), decay (*jarā*), sickness (*vyādhi*), and death (*maraṇa*), and may it give you the strength and power to find peace in the noble, deathless Nibbāna! May it be a supportive condition for that! Likewise, if any living beings in this world-system, from the Avīci hell to the Akaniṭṭha heaven, wish to share in these merits of preaching and listening to the Dhamma, may they all, by sharing in these merits, realize the noble, deathless Nibbāna through their own aspired Bodhi! Sharing merits in this manner, make your aspirations.

"*Ettāvatā ca amhehi……*"