

# *Fleeting moment*



**Venerable Uda Eriyagama Dhammajīva Mahā Thero**

Vipassanā Fellowship Digital Edition

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## *Introduction*

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This teaching captures the essence of *Acchanti Sutta*<sup>1</sup>, a short discourse from the *Devatāsamyutta* of the *Samyutta Nikaya*. Although short in length, the *sutta* imparts an invaluable message and a call for urgency, recollecting the fleeting nature of this rare human birth and the importance of maximising the opportunity available.

The title given in Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation, *Time Flies By*,<sup>2</sup> captures the very essence of the urgency imparted by the celestial being, who appeared before the Buddha at Jeta's Grove.

These teachings were given by Venerable UdaEriyagama Dhammajīva Mahā Thero during a short residential retreat at the Nissarana Vanaya Meditation Centre, in May 2013. Drawing from his own mastery of the subject and practical insights as an experienced meditation master, he lucidly articulates the Buddha's original teaching with penetrative insight, making it readily accessible to any *yogi*, steeped in the cultivation of the meditation practice.

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<sup>1</sup>*Samyutta Nikaya*, 1.1.4.

<sup>2</sup>Translation of *Acchanti Sutta*, available in Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya)*, p 91

## *About the Author*

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Venerable UdaEriyagama Dhammajīva Mahā Thero is an experienced meditation teacher of the *Theravāda* Buddhist tradition. He is presently the Chief Preceptor of the Mitirigala Nissarana Vanaya, a monastery in the strict forest tradition in Sri Lanka.

Venerable Dhammajīva Mahā Thero has undergone intensive training under the guidance of both Most Venerable Mātara Srī Ñāṇārāma Mahāthera and Sayādaw U Panditabhivamsa in Burma.

Speaking lucidly on the Buddhist meditation practice and drawing from his own personal experience as a dedicated *yogi*, Venerable Dhammajīva Mahā Thero articulates a vision of the Buddha's teaching, bent on the cultivation of the meditation practice. Giving the necessary instructions to harness the practice towards deeper insights, he maps the path for yogis to confidently steer ahead towards final liberation and a realisation of the Buddha's timeless wisdom.

## *Fleeting Moment*

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Once, when resident at Jeta's Grove, a celestial being (*devatā*) appeared before the Buddha, stood by the Buddha's side and uttered the following verse:

*Time flies by, the nights swiftly pass;<sup>3</sup>  
The stages of life successively desert us;  
Seeing clearly this danger of death;  
One should do deeds of merit that bring happiness.*

Having uttered the above verse, the *devatā* expected some critical evaluation by the Buddha.

The Buddha acknowledged the *devatā*'s utterings, as of course, time does vanish from our midst to never return; this human life is fleeting - it is as if it were an arrow escaping from the bow; the stages of life desert us so swiftly; and death approaches us fast. Yet, instead of stopping short at doing meritorious deeds that bring about happiness, the Buddha calls for a separation from sensual desire to reach a state of peace.

So, the Buddha responded:

*Time flies by, the nights swiftly pass;*

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<sup>3</sup> Translation of *Acchanti Sutta*, available in Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya)*, p 91.

*The stages of life successively desert us;  
Seeing clearly this danger of death;  
A seeker of peace, should drop the world's bait.*

The *devatā's* recommendation is to accumulate merit, yet, the Buddha's suggestion is to separate from sensual pleasure. Both messages are positive and praiseworthy, although the meaning is different and nuanced.

### ***Right view of cause and effect***

Accumulating merit and undertaking good deeds is common to Buddhists as well as Hindus. Believing that good begets good and bad begets bad is part and parcel of the spiritual life of a Buddhist or a Hindu. The unrestrained mind commits bad deeds and fails in discipline or control to do what is good. The *devatā's* utterings are steeped in the right view of cause and effect, although the Buddha's invitation is to progress further, to stop the mind attuning to sensual pleasure and to progress towards the inner states to develop peace of mind.

The first and foremost for a *yogi* is the right view of cause and effect. Without the right view of cause and effect, one fails in moral restraint. Moral shame and moral fear set in when one understands moral shame (*lajjā*) and moral fear (*baya*). When restraint of the faculties is absent, one fails to take responsibility for one's deeds, giving rise to physical and verbal misdeeds.

Without restraint of the faculties: eye, ear, nose, tongue and the body, one fails in morality (*sīla*). Healthy shame and healthy fear and a restraint of faculties are the most proximate factors that lend towards the morality of a person. The *devatā's* invitation is to abide by good so that one could reach the celestial states. Yet the Buddha recommends a state of stilling, a progression towards a witnessing of phenomena as they are (*vipassanā samma dhitti*) and the right view of path and fruition (*magga* and *pala samma dhitti*).

To move towards a state of peace, one must exert moderation in sensual pleasure. The Buddha reduces all suffering as borne of sensual pleasure. You may have moral restraint, but, immersed in colours and addicted to music and good food and luxuries, you fail to maximise the opportunity for liberation in this rare human birth. Being born as humans, we are already in a good state and have the necessary conditions to commence the practice of meditation.

### *Towards a state of peace and calm*

So, we must go to a forest, sit under a tree or a place of minimum distractions to focus the mind on a single point. As we separate from our daily lives to undertake the practice, we leave behind wealth and relatives and those known to us (*albeit temporarily*).

Even as we sit and close our eyes, we continue to be plagued by what has been left behind. We struggle to keep the mind on a single (neutral) object. Our accumulated assets and our attachment to those near and dear to us continue to torment us with memories and feelings of longing. As a result, the mind becomes distracted and doesn't allow us to focus on the neutral object such as the in-breath and the out-breath. So, you see how difficult it is to reach a peaceful state of mind.

Yet, when death arrives, we have to part and leave all that we have accumulated, valued and cherished. Those endowed with various accomplishments and a greater accumulation of wealth will live in fear of death, the unknown, as they sought security in well-connected family ties and associations, and by attaching many investments to their name.

Be bold and go under a tree or to a forest and aim to retain the mind aligned with the breath. You will see the nature of the mind and its nature; how it habitually jumps around, failing to fix on an object. Gradually, with each passing moment, try to align

the noting mind with the primary object (in-breath and out-breath) and by retaining continuity of awareness, from one moment to the next, concentration will set in and the mind reaches a state of one-pointedness.

Gain an appreciation of the mind that moves about like a monkey and compare it with one that retains its attention on a single object. Practise with faith in the Buddha, exert effort and understand the power of now. Understanding this comparison before death, one begins to appreciate a dimension separate from visual objects, sounds, smells, tastes and touch.

Close your eyes to avoid 'seeing'. Go to a silent place to avoid sounds. Sit in a place where no smells or any tastes could be experienced. Sitting in a comfortable and erect posture, retain your attention on your posture, bring your mind to the "here and now". Retaining the mind on the stream of consciousness, understand the potential to experience immaterial experience based on the touch of the sitting posture, the breath or the rising and falling of the abdomen. Gradually, the touch of the breath or the rising and the falling of the abdomen disappears. The touch of sitting also disappears. In this moment, our consciousness is not connected to thoughts of our assets or relatives, fame or gain or any visual objects captured through eye sensitivity or the body and tactile sensations.

### *Separating from the senses*

Separating from the sensory realm, you forego an opportunity to do meritorious deeds. In the conventional realm, we make plaques with our names to note the great meritorious acts performed, but, when we do nothing in the practice, when the breath disappears, there is nothing worthy of bragging. So, very few people meditate as the grandeur of the material realm is absent; there is no salutation of names and status and the appearance of contributions on plaques nor any broadcasting of meritorious deeds through mass media. Fame and glory are absent.

Anything done volitionally could only give cause to suffering. *Sankhāra* is pre-determined action; a volitional activity, which is subject to change. Do away with sensual pleasure; entertaining visual objects, listening to pleasant sounds or giving in to tantalizing flavours or aromas and separate from the sense bases. Focusing on the in-breath and out-breath with the presence of continuity of mindfulness, the mind calms down and the breath gradually dissolves to a state of neither perception nor non-perception. As the practice gathers momentum to reach the deeper layers, you no longer feel the touch of the sitting posture or the in-breath and the out-breath. The ego dissipates and you enter a state devoid of boundaries.

Yet, your meditative progress is one which does not trigger "achievement" - nothing to brag about or to throw parties over. Often this state of being is seen as destructive and so the Buddha is accused of being a nihilist. Instead, the preference is, as uttered by the *devatā*, to carry out *puja*. I do not wish to disparage celestial beings or what they recommend, as they are beings accomplished of much merit. Instead, this *sutta* reiterates the message captured by the Buddha's recommendation, to go to a place of solitude and train the mind to focus on a single object to gradually reach a state of stilling of the mind and a separation from the senses.

Abiding in the sensual sphere is an addiction and the celestial world has many distractions worthy of attraction. Leaving the heavenly realm is a very difficult and remorseful experience for celestial beings. In the *Devatā nimitta sutta*, the Buddha narrates this state of departure from the celestial realm; how celestial beings, playing in the *nandina uyana*, from time to time witness a smell emanating from a colleague's body, their garlands wilting, divine clothing soiled and dispassion towards celestial food and their abode. As these signs appear, they know that their colleague is about to depart the celestial realm. So, they gather around in an attempt to pacify the distressed *devatā*. Yet, as the Buddha enumerates, the heaven for a heavenly being is the human world and the greatest wealth in the human world is *saddhā* (faith). For without faith, one fails in the right view of cause and effect.

Failing to understand what is 'better' from that which is good in the practice of *dhamma* is a loss. Aim to cultivate the practice and emulate what is better and reach a state of 'no bondage'. First, become morally responsible, establish moral restraint and then, commence the practice of meditation. Throughout *samsāra*, you

accumulated much fame, gain, knowledge and wealth. You carried them with you and then, left them behind.

In this birth, we re-ignite the same journey and as we close our eyes to commence the practice, our own addictions and attachments stir our minds, not allowing us to retain our awareness on the primary object. Be with the continuity of the breath, from one moment to the next, until it reaches a state of subtlety. Gradually the primary object may disappear. It is not only worldly pleasure, but you leave sensory perception behind. The state of awareness experienced is incomprehensible and indescribable. You experience a sense of aloneness, as you feel as if you have lost your bearings. Yet, it is only at this state that you are able to free yourself of sensual pleasures and sensory perception.

You may begin to experience the elements in the practice, the heat of the fire element or the tension and movement of the air element, but you should not localise the experience to a part of the body; instead, become aware of the characteristics of the elements. Just understand the language and communication of the elements. When the internal and the external merge, just become aware of it. When the experience is one with the universe, there is no separation of good and bad; male and female; young and old. As the practice matures, you can diversify your mindfulness, extend it to the walking path and to day to day affairs. You remain in solitude amidst day to day activities and could experience calm and quiet amidst a busy schedule.

Until we reach the age of six, phenomena is experiential; as we mature beyond the age of six, we start to measure, the good and the bad; and aesthetic value judgment

sets in. With the deepening of our practice, we go back to our childhood, our real home, to experience all presently arising phenomena, as they are.

### ***Exerting right effort***

It is our pursuit of sensual pleasure that serves as a veil or blockage in our journey. Relatives and wealth give us the most suffering. So, when we practice, we separate from them, at least, temporarily. It is because of the danger of attachment to those near and loved by us that we need to take a step back from them. As soon as Princess *Yasodara* gave birth, the Buddha to be, left household pleasure. It appears to be a callous approach. Yet, without such sacrifice, an invaluable opportunity would have been lost.

Throughout our *samsāric* journey, we have failed to take a step back. So, we lost the opportunity for liberation. Seeking after worldly opportunity, we derail to the sensual realm. In spite of the opportunity for liberation in this human birth, we, ourselves make the decision to be negligent, to postpone our aspiration to another life. Instead of pursuing after worldly accumulation, approach life with a utility value in what you do, live modestly and do as necessity demands. Due to preference and measurement, we fail to appreciate the truth, the way things are. Be aware that what you select may not contain the truth; and what you reject could contain the truth. The truth may not lie with your preference or rejection. The Buddha says, what is not there, may carry the truth.

Many criticise mindfulness as something that cannot be proved, cannot be described or a hallucination of the mind. Yet, the Buddha says that it is those attaching to conditional phenomena and operating on the conventional realm that remains immersed in hallucination. Their experience of life rests on a mirage; is characteristic of theatre and addiction to worldly pleasure. You only live when you witness the magic of the mind and its operations. At all other times, you are in a dream world. Truth cannot be tested in argument or judgment.

We are already good, so we must think of what is better. We are in a rut because of what we have heard and believed. Know faith as faith; preference as preference; hearsay as hearsay and argument as argument, don't arrive at a conclusion, instead, continue with direct experiential knowledge. Appreciate the time we have; the *sāsana* and the opportunities presented; be glad that the *dhamma* is alive and that role models are still present; if you so wish, you can renounce even today, unless you are resolved to ignorance and worldly affairs. Don't stagnate. Instead, go to the Buddha. Continue with the practice and don't stop at what is good, but strive for the better, that liberated peace of mind. If you wish to go against the grain, enter the stream gradually, slowly and steadily and without interruption. You can do this now, in this present moment.

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