

A Manual of Profound Meaning

Gambhira Dīpanī

Venerable Ledi Sayādaw

Aggamahāpaṇḍita, D.Litt.



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Edited by
Bhikkhu Pesala

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Editor's Foreword

The Sayādaw addressed these verses to a wealthy minister, Kinwun Mingyi, a devout traditional Buddhist, who was addicted to sensual pleasures, status, and wealth. Modern Buddhists who are equally heedless of the true Dhamma would do well to ponder on the profound meaning of these verses to arouse a sense of spiritual urgency (*saṃvega*).

Previously published under the title, “Four Stanzas on Saṃvega,” but I believe that the current title was the original one.

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A Manual of Profound Meaning

1. Due to the darkness without any light,
the deathless upper land is out of sight.
In time, you can't struggle on in any way,
drifting in the whirlpool in this bay all day.
2. Now, it's the most favourable chance,
five rare attainments to enhance.
Oh! You're a man of international fame,
and you've plenty of affairs all the same.
They seem important and substantial,
but they are not useful nor essential.
Your viewpoint is neither clear nor right,
in charcoal-room at dark cloudy midnight.
You perform good actions occasionally,
according to your whims, traditionally.
Time is steadily passing without stopping,
as to death, the leveller, you're approaching;
as a gift or fee for the executioner,
with various foods, to present or to offer.
Resting in the aggregates of wealthy chamber,
you are waiting to die with satisfaction
enjoying the worldly assumed perfection.
3. Though they're causes of grief and despair,
you fancy them to be a pleasant affair.
With unseen starting point of life,
in the process of existences that strike.
Always you're in perpetual hunger,
without quenching the thirst of desire.
You're seeking taste in objects as in reality,
but they're just a pile of ash in fragility.

Hoisting the banner of self-centred 'I',
 you live like a villager's swine in a sty.
 That pig will become fatter and fatter
 for food, its danger is nearer and nearer.
 You're haughty and proud in society,
 lofty with status and without anxiety.
 You're happy and pragmatic
 just like that villager's pig.
 Screened by custom, pride, society, and glory,
 far from seeing any truth or reality.
 You have to face the total loss at last,
 to mingle with common ash and earth.

4. The empire of 'I' is very large,
 in three eras from sky to earth.
 Fire of death is blazing down ever and anon,
 that won't leave even a tiny atom.
 Shaking the whole universe
 death, the murderer, is at large.
 The existences or lives are only fuel,
 appearance and disappearance are perpetual.
 Death is the only monarch
 in cycles of world after world.
 You can't have the knowledge of reality,
 on conditional materiality and mentality.
 When will you be able to extinguish the fire
 that's very dangerous, ferocious, and dire?

Explanation of the Verses

First Verse

The four kinds of ignorance (*avijjā*) that conceal four kinds of truth. These four kinds of ignorance are called **“darkness without any light.”** In other words truth cannot be realised because the darkness of ignorance conceals it.

The four kinds of truth are as follows:

1. The five aggregates of materiality and mentality are the truth of suffering.
2. Greed or craving is the truth of the cause of suffering.
3. The peace of nibbāna is the truth of the end of suffering.
4. The Noble Eightfold Path starting from right view is the truth of the way to the end of suffering.

There are four kinds of ignorance that hide the aforesaid four kinds of truth. There are also four kinds of wisdom or knowledge (*vijjā*) that reveal them.

The **“deathless”** is nibbāna, which is free from death. Moreover, nibbāna is not associated with condition things (*saṅkhārā*) so it is deathless. Nibbāna is also called **“the upper land”** because it is attained by struggling against the current of *saṃsāra*, the eternal cycle of birth and death.

“In time, you can’t struggle on in any way” means Kinwun Mingyi¹ is not able to practise the noble path to attain nibbāna.

“This bay” means the flood of *saṃsāra*.

“Whirlpool” means a vicious circle (*vaṭṭa*) spinning around in *saṃsāra* without being liberated. There are three kinds of vicious circles relating to good existences:

1. Desire for pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, and thoughts, the cycle of defilements (*kilesā-vaṭṭa*).

¹ One of the king’s ministers, for whom the Venerable Ledi Sayādaw wrote this poem in 1894. King Thibaw, the last king of Upper Burma, was deposed by the British in November 1885 and exiled to India. Lower Burma had already been under British Rule since 1850.

2. The volitional activities of donation, morality, mental development, etc., the cycle of kamma (*kamma-vaṭṭa*).
3. The resultant of life as a human, or celestial being, the cycle of resultants (*vipāka-vaṭṭa*).

The circulation of these three cycles is the whirlpool of *saṃsāra*. Kamma, the volitional activities such as donation, arises due to defilements such as ignorance.

Volitional activities like donation gives rise to resultants such as human existence, which again give rise to defilements including ignorance. Due to defilements, kamma produces resultants, which gives rise to defilements. So it is endless like the orbit of a spinning-wheel. That is why the cycle is called “the whirlpool.”

Second Verse

“Five difficult attainments” refers to:

1. The very rare appearance of a Buddha and his teaching (*buddhuppāda dullabha*).
2. The very rare and precious human rebirth (*manussatta dullabha*).
3. The very rare opportunity to be a Buddhist monk or novice (*pabbajjita dullabha*).
4. The very rare attainment of confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha, and the law of kamma (*saddhāsampatti dullabha*).
5. The very rare opportunity of hearing the Dhamma leading to nibbāna (*saddhammasāvana dullabha*).

“They aren’t worthy or essential” refers to worldly or political affairs, which are not concerned with morality, concentration, and insight. It means that Kinwun Mingyi was fully occupied with those unimportant affairs until his old age, so his life was in vain. He was preoccupied with futile anxiety, delusion, and restlessness.

“They seem to be important or real” means that Kinwun Mingyi was sincerely trying his best for those affairs, but they were in vain.

“Your view-point is neither clear nor right” means that you cannot see the true nature of the five aggregates of materiality and mentality. If

you think that they are not your own, it is right view. If you regard them as yours, that view is not right. Right view means seeing things as they really are (*yathabhūta*). Wrong view is personality view (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*) or belief in a soul (*atta-diṭṭhi*).

You do not try to follow the right way, so you are going astray. That is why there is no chance for your accumulated perfections (*pārami*) to appear. They are hidden like embers covered with wet mud. Therefore, your viewpoint is neither clear nor right.

“At dark cloudy midnight.” In your younger days, you had few detrimental affairs. When you heard of the Buddha, Dhamma, or Saṅgha your confidence could shine. With the growth of wealth and property, your detrimental works are increasing day by day. You are not a stranger to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha, but your confidence is fading with age. Despite the repeated echoes of the noble qualities of Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha, your confidence is no longer radiant. You perform good deeds in the traditional way merely to gain the high regard of others. So you are at dark cloudy midnight.

“In charcoal-room” refers to the worldly affairs to support your family that darken your view.

“You perform good actions occasionally, according to your whims, traditionally.” Now that you have reached a mature age, you have fallen into the charcoal-room of worldly affairs for the welfare of your family, and cannot get out of it. Then you put the blame on your lack of accumulated perfections. With weak confidence and wisdom, you occasionally accomplish the traditional meritorious deeds of charity and meditation. However, you take solace in meditation with weak expectations. You sometimes contemplate impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self, or the noble qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha, but your insight and confidence are far from clear. You only carry out these noble deeds with the hope of cultivating a good habit.

“Time” is a being’s life-span for meditation on death. If a being is expected to live for a hundred years, the life-span is a hundred years. According to the Burmese way of calculation, it is six hundred seasons or 2,400 lunar fortnights. When a train is moving, trees and bushes

are left behind as if they were in a circle beside the railway. In the course of a life-span, hours and days are left behind in the same way. Therefore, **“time is steadily passing by without stopping.”**

The **“executioner”** means death. Sentient beings are wandering in the innumerable universes of infinite *saṃsāra*, the starting-point of which cannot be seen. All these existences are only the **“various foods”** of death. They are waiting for the time of death to collect the **“fee.”** They are waiting with healthy bodies, houses, land, furniture, and family. Therefore, **“you are waiting to die with satisfaction enjoying the worldly assumed perfection.”**

“You are waiting to die with satisfaction” means that you are trying to satisfy the defilements until the arrival of death. You are treating defilements with various objects so that they never become weary. Thus, you are waiting for death. The duty for death is to be alive before its advent. The responsibility for the defilements is endless. The defilements must be served with better and better objects. Blind worldlings are passing life after life, carrying out these duties and responsibilities, which are not for their own benefit. Ignoring the responsibility for defilements and being dutiful to death, the good worldlings try their best to be free from death.

Third Verse

“Causes of grief and despair.” Not only worldly affairs, but also deeds of charity and morality for the achievement of future good existences and wealth are causes of defilements. So they are called **“causes of grief and despair.”** They are also causes of worry and suffering. Various achievements are the causes of failure or destruction. Those affairs are prolonging *saṃsāra*. The cause of suffering — craving — is the cause of grief. The truth of suffering is the cause of despair. These two truths are the important parts of *saṃsāra*. Their affairs seem to be important.

The cycle of defilements (*kilesā-vaṭṭa*), which includes ignorance, craving and attachment, is the **“cause of grief.”** The cycle of volitional activities (*kamma-vaṭṭa*), consisting of ten wholesome deeds and ten unwholesome deeds, arises due to the cycle of defilements. They are important. The cycle of resultants (*vipāka-vaṭṭa*), existences obtained

due to volitional activities, is destined to destruction and decay, so it is the **“cause of despair.”**

The eye, the faculty of seeing, is the slave of the defilements and cause of grief. Being the fuel of the fire of aging and death, it is the cause of despair. It is just a part of the building of the mundane imperialists — craving, conceit, and wrong view. Similarly, the ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind are also the slaves of the defilements and causes of grief. As they are the fuels of aging-fire and death-fire they are causes of despair. They are the assets of craving, conceit, and wrong view, the three mundane imperialists.

“Unseen starting-point of life” means the starting point of existence cannot be seen or known. That is called the beginningless round of rebirth. **“In perpetual hunger”** means you always want to have, to be, to see, to hear, *etc.* Without eradicating craving, you will never be satisfied. Even if you become a universal monarch or Sakka, the king of gods, you will still suffer from the hunger of desire. You will still be in perpetual hunger like a hungry ghost (*peta*).

“Without quenching the thirst of desire” is craving for pleasant forms, sounds, fragrance, flavours, touches, and thoughts. **“They’re just a pile of ash in fragility”** means the eleven kinds of fire are scorching the bodies of humans, *devas*, and *brahmās*. Their bodies are only piles of ash. They have no hard core and are fragile. They are in fragility as they have no essence.

A lunatic chooses and picks up things he likes from a rubbish heap abandoned outside the village gate. He finds many things that he thinks are good and enjoyable, collecting them with pleasure. Similarly, the luxury and wealth of men, *devas*, and *brahmās* are only a pile of ash or rubbish forsaken by the Noble Ones.

“A villager’s swine in sty.” The fatter a pig becomes due to abundant food, the more the villager thinks to sell it for slaughter. The pig does not know that it will be displayed on the butcher’s stall in the market tomorrow, so it enjoys happiness for the moment as the leader of a brood of pigs. Similarly, the achievements of wealth and social status are prone to destruction, but you cannot see the reality, though you will definitely be on the stall of the cemetery market for the dinner of

death before your hundredth birthday. That is why you can enjoy official status and society without any anxiety until now. You are like **General Bandhula**, who could not see the weapon aimed at him from a tree. You do not see the destructive weapon of death aimed at you because you are screened by friends and enjoyable property. Being tied to a post, you think it is better to die with your face covered, so that you cannot see the weapon aimed at you. Likewise, people fear to face the weapon of death aimed at them, and think it better to die without noticing, so they cover their faces.

Giving no chance for mindful trepidation (*saṃvega*) to arise, they collect and enjoy sensual objects and companions, concealing their fear with them. The screen is so good that they are not alarmed by impending repeated deaths. They are not afraid of death in the present life. They meekly accept it as a natural solace. Since they are not afraid of death, there is no chance for them to be free from *saṃsāra*. If the fear of death is only slight due to the good screen they do not think of final liberation. This is the meaning of “**screened.**”

“**The truth or reality**” is the true nature of death and destruction. “**Society**” is association with relatives, friends, and society. “**Pride, society, and glory**” are the various forms of delusion that cover and conceal the truth. “**Custom**” means the polite manners and customs in society, which also conceal the truth or reality.

A powerful *deva* can see five signs of death a week in advance. Then, he is shaken and afraid, so the other *devas* take him to the Nandavana garden, which is so pleasant that the frightened *deva* forgets his fear and anxiety. The screens for *devas* and *brahmās* are very good and powerful.

“**The total loss**” means that in the endless round of rebirth, sentient beings try their best to get the best screens. The screen is to forget the good deeds. Forgetful of doing good deeds, they do not dare to think of final liberation from death. The duration of seeking screens for each portion of a day, month, year, or life-span is “**total loss at last.**”

“**To mingle with common ash and earth**” means the bodies of beings in the eleven sensual realms and sixteen realms of form are like earth. The bodies of *devas* and *brahmās* are composed of subtle earth

elements and the heat guarding them is very powerful. The body of a *deva* or *brahmā* disappears totally at death like an extinguished flame with the expiration of the earth elements produced by consciousness and nutrition. There is no corpse after death. The *devas* and *brahmās* are beings of spontaneous birth and death. There is no chance of treatment — they expire suddenly as if vaporised. However, the bodies of men and animals remain after death and the disappearance of earth elements generated by kamma. Their dead bodies add to the earth and ash in the cemetery. Thus, the living bodies of men are going “to mingle with common ash and earth.”

Fourth Verse

“The empire of ‘I’ is very large” means that there is the wide sphere where the conceptual ‘I’ wanders. That concept is the banner of craving, the true cause of suffering. It is like saying “there’s no smoke without fire.” The aggregates of the eleven planes of desire are created and governed by sensual craving. The aggregates of the sixteen planes of form are made and governed by craving for form. Similarly, the aggregates of the four formless planes are created and governed by the craving for formlessness.

If you tease or test someone the word ‘I’ will always arise. A king or government will not tolerate any insult or invasion by another because of that egocentric pride. Thirty-one existences, the sensual plane, the plane of form and the formless plane are included in “the empire of I.”

“That won’t leave even a tiny atom.” Billions of universes from the past no longer exist. Not even a tiny atom remains from the insentient oceans, rivers, forests and mountains, or the sentient *devas*, human beings, and animals. Contemplate each portion of a year, month, day, or hour that is consumed. Nothing remains forever. Contemplate the impermanent things that you have met during your lifetime.

“Perpetual” means that if you point your finger in any direction there will be countless dying beings there.

“Only fuel.” Throughout the thirty-one planes of existence in the “three eras” of the past, present, and future, sentient and insentient

aggregates are only fuel for the eleven kinds of fire. These eleven fires are the fires of greed, hatred, delusion, birth, aging, death, grief, lamentation, pain, sorrow, and despair.

The sentient aggregates are divided into the three cycles of defilements, volitional activities, and resultants. Ignorance, craving, and attachment are included in defilements. Volitional activities includes mental formations (*saṅkhārā*), which are past activities, and becoming (*kammabhava*), which are present volitional activities or becoming for future existences. The five resultants are: rebirth-consciousness, psychophysical phenomena, six senses, contact, and feeling.

Because of ignorance, craving, and attachment, there are mental formations and becoming — good and bad actions that create resultants in the next existence as a human being or *deva*, which again produces defilements. Thoughts such as: “It is me,” “It is mine,” “I am,” “This is my soul,” “I am a king,” “I am a brahmin,” “I am rich,” “I am Sakka,” “I am Brahmā,” “I am a woman,” “I am a man,” *etc.*, appear in the minds of blind worldlings because of craving and attachment. Defilements cause kamma, which produces the resultant of another existence, which leads to more defilements. That vicious circle (*vaṭṭa*), will continue eternally until the realisation of things as they really are.

“Appearance and disappearance.” Beings and things in all universes are always permeated by appearance and disappearance.

“Death is the only monarch” means that although conditioned things and beings may be increasing, they cannot overcome death. Hence death is the universal monarch that cannot be conquered by any of them. Those conditional things and beings are destined to end in destruction, and none can remain forever.

“In cycles of world after world” means that at every cycle of the world system, conditioned things are seen to be only the fuel of death, which will consume them all, not leaving a single atom.

“You can’t have the knowledge of reality.” A king thought that an ogress was the most beautiful princess, and took her to the royal palace, appointing her as his chief queen. The king was tricked and dominated by the pretentious princess until he got the power of clairvoyance that helped him to see the ugly and fearful

appearance of the ogress. When he saw the truth, he executed her and regained his power.

Similarly, beings are deceived and controlled by conditioned things as long as they cannot see things as they really are. Psychophysical phenomena are not a person, a being, a man, or a woman. They beguile beings who regard them as persons, beings, men, or women. Blind worldlings love and adore pretty, beautiful, and handsome persons because of attachment. Love and adoration are the strong iron fetters and chains of Māra and the king of hell. Worldlings cannot escape from the clutches of Māra and the king of hell because they are tightly bound by those fetters. Thus they are dominated and controlled by conditioned things.

When knowledge of things as they really are is attained by virtuous worldlings and lesser stream-winners, they begin to escape from the control of conditioned things, which they can contemplate as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self. They can realise that psychophysical phenomena are not a person, a being, a man or a woman. The defect, harm, and danger of psychophysical phenomena can be known by seeing things as they truly are. This is the victory of virtuous worldlings and lesser stream-winners over psychophysical phenomena. However, Kinwun Mingyi has not found the escape from bondage by gaining that knowledge.

“When will you be able to extinguish the fire?” refers to the fire of death and the other ten kinds of fire that are consuming all the planes of existences. When, and in which Buddha’s dispensation, will Kinwun Mingyi gain final liberation from the endless cycle of existences (*saṃsāra*)?

