VATTHŪPAMA SUTTA

VATTHŪPAMA SUTTA, the "discourse on the simile of the cloth", is the seventh discourse in the Majjhima Nikāya (M I, 36-40). Altogether three Chinese parallels to this discourse are extant (T I, 575a-576a; T I, 843c-844b; T II, 573c-575a). The final part of the Vatthūpama Sutta, which is concerned with ritual bathing in a river, has additional counterparts in another two Chinese discourses (T II, 321a-b; T II, 408b-c).

The Vatthūpama Sutta begins by illustrating how the presence of mental defilements in the mind will lead to an unhappy destination with the example of trying to dye a dirty cloth. To attempt to do so is bound to result in the cloth not taking the colour properly. The discourse continues by listing a set of sixteen mental defilements, upakkilesa, whose removal leads over to the development of firm confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha. Next the Vatthūpama Sutta depicts aloofness from the attraction of food and then turns to the practice of the four divine abodes, brahmavihāra. These in turn are followed by a succinct insight contemplation that leads to final liberation.

At this point a Brahmin intervened, asking the Buddha about purification by bathing in sacred rivers. The Ekottarika Āgama version provides additional information about this Brahmin, narrating that he had been quite convinced of his own purity when compared to the Buddha, as the food he took was quite simple, whereas the Buddha sometimes partook of quite succulent and rich food (T II, 573c5). The Ekottarika Āgama discourse reports that it was after the Buddha had become aware of the Brahmin's train of thought that he delivered the present discourse.

In reply to the Brahmin's inquiry about purification by bathing in sacred rivers, according to the D. Vatthūpama Sutta and its Chinese parallel the Buddha explained that bathing in rivers considered to be sacred will not lead to purification. Instead, to purify oneself requires observing moral conduct.²

The simile of the cloth, which provides the title for the Vatthūpama Sutta, has at times been understood to stand for the existence in early Buddhism of the notion of an originally pure mind. Yet, a close inspection of the simile does not support such an interpretation, as the imagery of the clean cloth that takes dye well illustrates the conditions for rebirth in a happy destination. This falls short of what early Buddhism reckons to be real purity, which will result in transcending any type or rebirth.

Another passage sometimes quoted in support of an originally pure mind in the early discourses is a reference in the Abhutattara Nikāya to the luminous mind, pabhassara citta, which is defined by adventitious defilements, āgantukhehi upakkilesahi upakkiliṭṭhami (A I, 10). Other occurrences of the pabhassara citta, however, make it clear that this term refers only to a concentrated state of mind, not to an originally pure mind (S V, 92; A I, 257; A III, 16; see also KILESA). Thus, similar to the imagery of the clean cloth in the Vatthūpama Sutta, the pabhassara citta is only concerned with a relative type of purity.

The idea of a return to an original purity could be found in relation to the development of deeper states of concentration. According to Buddhist cosmology, when the world-system goes through a period of contraction beings are reborn in the Ābhassarā realm (D I, 17; D III, 84), from which they eventually depart to be reborn on earth once the world-system has re-expanded. The Ābhassarā realm is the cosmological counterpart to the attainment of the second jhāna. Hence one who in the human realm succeeds in attaining this level of concentration could indeed be reckoned to be returning to an original purity of the mind, a degree of purity experienced a long time ago when living in the Ābhassarā realm during a time when this world-system had contracted.

Yet, the mental purity achieved with the second jhāna is only an interim step in the process of mental development envisaged in early Buddhism, which covers considerably more refined and profound states of concentration than the second jhāna and, more important than any level of concentration, the development of liberating insight. From an early Buddhist perspective, it is only with such liberating insight that true purity has been achieved. Such liberating insight requires the removal of ignorance, not a reversal to an original purity. In fact, according
to the discourses a beginning point of the faring on in
sāṃsāra under the influence of ignorance can not be
found (S. II, 178; S. III, 149; A. V, 113). This leaves
little scope for speaking of a mind that is originally
pure in the true sense of the term. The task to reach
real purity, which is the central theme of the
Vatthūpama Sutta, is thus not to revert to some original
condition, but rather to gradually purify the mind
from the beginningless influence of defilements and
ignorance until the purity of total liberation from
bondage has been accomplished.

Anālayo

References

1 T. stands for the Taishō edition.

2 A criticism of the belief in purification through
bathing in sacred rivers can also be found in the
verses of bhikkhuni Paññikā, who points out that
if such practices were able to purify, fishes and
other animals living in such rivers should all go
straight to heaven, Thīg. V241.

VEDANĀ, "feeling" or "sensation", is the second of
the five aggregates and the seventh link in the patiṭṭha
samuppāda series, the link that leads to the arising
of craving. Its role in these two contexts reflects the
importance of vedanā in the early Buddhist analysis
of reality. In fact, according to a dictum found in several
discourses, all phenomena converge on feeling,
vedanā sāsanaṁ sabbbe dhāmanā (A. IV, 339; A. V,
107; cf. also A. IV, 385, which makes the same
statement for thoughts and intentions, sāṅkappā-
vitakka). Hence an appraisal of vedanā and its
implications is certainly a desideratum for an
understanding of early Buddhism in general and of the
path to liberation in particular. For this reason, the
theme of vedanā will be treated in two successive
articles. While the present article focuses on the topic
of vedanā from the perspective of its nature and types,
a subsequent entry on VEDANĀNUPASSANĀ takes
up vedanā from the perspective of insight, delineating
the main aspects of vedanā that need to be understood
during actual practice of the path to liberation.

The term vedanā can be derived from the root ṣvad, whose
range of meaning covers both "to feel" and "to
know". Vedanā can thus be understood to represent
the affective aspect of the process of knowing, the
"how" of experiencing, so to say. Though due to its
affective role vedanā has a strong conditioning impact
on emotions, vedanā does not include emotion in its
range of meaning, which would perhaps find its closest
Pāli counterpart in citta. Vedanā, however, just refers
to feelings, one of the building blocks of such complex
phenomena as emotions. As such, vedanā stands in an
intimate relationship with the cognitive type of input
provided through sādhanā "perception", since what one
feels, that one perceives, yaṁ vedeti taṁ satijānāti (M.
I, 293). According to the standard definition given in
the discourses, feeling 'feels' in the sense that it feels
such affective tones as pleasure, displeasure and
hedonic neutrality, sukkha, dukkha, adukkhāmasukkha
(S. III, 86).

The basic distinction between pleasant, unpleasant
and neutral feelings can be expanded further by
combining this triad with each of the six senses, by
distinguishing between feelings that are related to the
household life and those that are related to renunciation,
and by taking into account whether feelings are past,
present or future. In this way, a total count of one-
hundred-and-eight types of feelings can be obtained
(S. IV, 232). Such different modes of analysis are,
however, merely complementary perspectives on the
phenomenon feeling, and none of them should be
grasped dogmatically as the only right way of
reckoning feelings (M. I, 398).

In addition to analysing feelings into different
types, the discourses illustrate the nature of feeling
with a range of similes. One simile indicates that the
different types of feelings are like winds in the sky,
which come from different directions and can at times
be dusty, hot or cold, mild or strong (S. IV, 218). This
imagery illustrates the somewhat accidental character
of feelings, whose nature is to manifest in ways that
are mostly out of the control of the one who experiences
them. This simile highlights that, just as it
is meaningless to contend with the vicissitudes of the
weather, similarly the arising of unwanted feelings is
best born with patience. Of a similar import is another
simile that compares feelings to various types of
visitors that come to a guesthouse from any of the
four directions (S. IV, 219). Feelings are just like such
visitors, they come and go, hence no need to become
agitated and obsessed with the particular way in which
a feeling might manifest at present.