

Lives of the Disciples I

I. The Upāsaka Citta

II. The Bhikkhu Citta

III. Father and Mother Nakula

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List of Abbreviations:

AN:	Aṅguttara Nikāya (Sutta)
Cv:	Culla Vagga = Vinaya Piṭaka II (Chapter and paragraph)
DN:	Dīgha Nikāya (Sutta)
J:	Jātaka (Story)
MN:	Majjhima Nikāya (Sutta)
S:	Saṃyutta Nikāya (Sutta)
Th:	Theragāthā (Verse)
Ud:	Udāna (Chapter and Sutta)

Lives of the Disciples

The Upāsaka Citta

On one occasion the Buddha enumerated for the benefit of his Bhikkhus the names of twenty-one upāsakas (lay disciples) who had attained to Stream-entry. Fourth on this list we find Upāsaka Citta of Macchikāsaṇḍa, near Sāvattihī (AN 6:120). At another time the Blessed One said to his Bhikkhus:

“Should a devoted mother wish to encourage her beloved only son in a proper way, she may tell him: ‘Try to become like the Upāsaka Citta, my dear, and like Hatthaka, the upāsaka from Āḷavi.’” These two, Citta and Hatthaka, Bhikkhus, are models and guiding standards to my lay disciples. The mother may then continue: ‘But if you should decide for the monkhood, my dear, then try to imitate Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna.’ These two, Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna, Bhikkhus, are models and guiding standards for my ordained Bhikkhus (SN 11:23). ”

Again, the Buddha said that a devoted lay disciple should foster the wish to become like Citta and Hatthaka, while devoted Bhikkhus should aspire to equal Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna. Here model standards are set for lay people and monks. A lay follower is not to choose a Bhikkhu for his guiding example, but an upāsaka; and a Bhikkhu should not choose an upāsaka for guiding example, but Bhikkhus, because the modes of living are quite different and an example taken from one’s own background is bound to prove more potent. An upāsaka trying to live like Sāriputta should take the robe; but if he wishes to fill and permeate his life with Dhamma while still living as a householder, he is wise to look up to householders like Citta and Hatthaka.

Who was this Citta? The enumeration of foremost disciples (AN 1:14) begins with three persons who excelled in expounding the Law: the Bhikkhu Puṇṇa, the Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā and the upāsaka Citta. There is no record of any other upāsaka so well gifted in that respect. This Citta, a teacher of the Good Law living the family life, the model of upāsakas, was a very wealthy merchant. He owned a whole hamlet, Migapathaka, and nearby a large wood, Ambātakavana. This he presented to the Sangha, building a spacious monastery there, where many Bhikkhus and saints often dwelt. His devotion to the Blessed One is explained by the fact of his having been a servant to the Bodhisatta in a former life and having followed him into homelessness (J 488). There are no less than eleven accounts of the life of this devoted upāsaka, from which may be gathered a distinct outline of his personality.

Citta particularly appreciated a certain Bhikkhu, Sudhamma, and always consulted him before offering an invitation to other Bhikkhus. One day, Sāriputta, Moggallāna, Anuruddha, Ānanda and some more of the wisest and most learned Bhikkhus happened to come to Macchikāsaṇḍa while travelling. At once Citta approached them, and Sāriputta granted him a Dhamma talk of such profundity that Citta attained to the second stage of sanctity, that of once-returner (*sakadāgāmi*). Citta immediately invited the illustrious gathering for the next day’s meal. Afterwards it occurred to him that in this one instance he had forgotten to let Sudhamma know first, and he hastened to inform him of his act.

Sudhamma grew jealous and grossly reprimanded Citta for not having told him before. Because of this, he said, he did not see his way to partaking of the meal, and he declined Citta’s invitation with scorn. Citta repeated his civil request twice more, but in vain. So, thinking in his heart that after all, Sudhamma’s obstinacy had no bearing on his deed and the deed’s fruit, he went home and joyfully began preparations for the auspicious event.

The next day, however, Sudhamma could not bring himself to stay away. He joined the gathering as if nothing had happened, and praised the bounty and refinement of Citta's hospitality. But "real consummation," he remarked, "would be brought about by serving cream cakes to round off the meal."

Citta replied that his friend's ill-advised behaviour reminded him of a story he had heard. Some people known to him once bred a hybrid from a crow and a hen, but the resulting chick was afflicted with a grotesque defect. Whenever it wanted to crow like a cock, it cawed like a crow; and when it tried to caw like a crow, it crowed like a cock.

By this, Citta intended to say that Sudhamma not only failed in correct behaviour as a Bhikkhu but in proper civility as a layman, too. Refusing an invitation out of jealousy was hardly right for a monk, and criticizing the food was poor manners for a worldlyling. Sudhamma was deeply offended by these words and wanted to leave. Thereupon, Citta offered to support him for the rest of his life, but the Bhikkhu rejected his offer. The upāsaka then kindly asked him to visit the Buddha and relate what had occurred to him. Pointedly he said: "Till we meet again," when Sudhamma left.

The Buddha said to Sudhamma: "You foolish man, what you did was unseemly, not in accord with the rules, an act forbidden and not to be done. How could you meanly insult and show disdain for a devoted, faithful upāsaka, a benefactor and supporter of the Sangha?"

And at a meeting of the Sangha it was decided that Sudhamma was to call on the Upāsaka Citta and ask his forgiveness.

Sudhamma accordingly set out, but on reaching Macchikāsaṇḍa he felt so deeply embarrassed that he could not force himself to do what he had come for, and turned back without having seen Citta. When his fellow Bhikkhus asked him whether he had performed his duty, and learned that he had not, they informed the Buddha. He then advised that another Bhikkhu should accompany Sudhamma on his difficult errand, and so it was done. Sudhamma asked Citta for his forgiveness and Citta pardoned him (Cv 1:18-24).

Of the ten instructive discourses contained in the Citta Saṃyutta, three deal with questions posed by Citta to Bhikkhus, three with queries put to Citta by Bhikkhus, and four refer to personal events.

At one time Citta invited a group of Theras from the monastery he had founded for a meal, and requested the senior Thera to give an exposition of what the Buddha had said on the variety of elements. The Thera was not able to do so, and after he had been requested in vain a second and third time the youngest Bhikkhu, named Isidatta, asked for permission to reply to Citta's request. The Thera consented, and Isidatta lucidly explained that all elements arise on the basis of eighteen phenomena; that is, the six inner domains, the six outer ones, and the six domains of perception.

The Bhikkhus then took their leave. On the way back to the monastery the senior Thera commended the junior Bhikkhu for his excellent exposition, and said that next time he should not hesitate to speak up in a similar situation. There was no envy in the Thera's heart, but on the contrary, he felt sympathetic joy (*mudita*) over his young brother's accomplishments and depth of understanding. Isidatta on his part felt no pride, so both complied with the ideals of the Bhikkhu-life. (SN 41:2).

On another occasion Citta posed the question: "From what do wrong views on the world and the self originate?" and asked for an exposition of what the Buddha had taught on this subject in the great Brahmajāla Sutta. Again the senior Bhikkhu was ignorant of the matter and once more Isidatta offered his services. "Wrong views," he said, "invariably originate from the belief in a

self (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*).” Citta then went on to ask from what the belief in a self originates, and Isidatta replied that the ordinary man, not instructed by the Buddha or his disciples, takes the five khandhas, the psycho-physical aggregates of personality, as being ‘I’ and ‘mine,’ and so is continually creating the illusion of selfhood (*atta-diṭṭhi* or *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*).

Citta was delighted with the discourse, and asked Isidatta from where he came. “From the township of Avantī,” Isidatta replied. Citta, who did not know his name, then asked whether he knew a certain Isidatta there, with whom he used to correspond, explaining the Dhamma to him and encouraging him to take the robe. As he did not know what had been the outcome, he wished to learn of it. He had never seen Isidatta, and now to his great joy he learned that his former pen-friend had indeed decided upon ordination and was now sitting before him. He asked for the favour of supporting him, but Isidatta, though appreciating the generous offer, declined and took his leave, never to return.

There is no commentary to explain Isidatta’s motives. He attained to Arahatsip and all we hear further of him is a short stanza, ‘the Fivefold Group,’ dealing with the five aggregates (Th 120).

On the third occasion when Citta was the questioner, it was a monk called Kāmabhū who made reply. Citta put to him no less than eleven abstract questions—the same which the nun Dhammadinnā answered when questioned by Visākha the householder (MN 44). These questions concerned the three types of formations (*saṅkhāra*) and their cessation (SN 41:6).

The first talk in which Citta is found replying to the questions of Bhikkhus or upāsakas occurs as follows:

Some senior monks (*Theras*) were sitting together on the porch of the monastery after the alms-round and discussing the problem of whether the fetters (*saṃyojana*) and the alluring objects of the senses are the same or not. Some answered affirmatively, while some denied it. Citta happened upon the scene and joined the gathering. When invited to comment, he declared that to the best of his knowledge and belief the fetters and the alluring objects are different, not only in word but in meaning too. As in a yoke of oxen, the white one is not the fetter of the black and the black one not the fetter of the white, but both are fettered by a single rope or yoke-strap, so the sense-organs had no power to bind the external objects and the external objects had no power to bind the sense organs, but they were yoked by craving to a burden of suffering. The Bhikkhus rejoiced at the learned upāsaka’s answer and expressed their opinion that Citta must be in possession of the wisdom-eye (SN 41:1).

This same simile is used on two other occasions by Sāriputta and Ānanda (SN 35:191 and 192). Its exact import as lucidly explained by the Buddha (SN 35:109 and 122) when he said that the six double sense domains are the things fettered and that *chandarāga* (craving or lustful desire) alone is the fetter which binds them. This is an important point to take into consideration in order to avoid a futile fight against the outer sense-objects and the inner sense-faculties, since it is our willed relationship only that binds. The simile is apt; it assigns black to the six inner domains, since the subject is what is unknown. The outer domains are white, because the objects are evident. The same line of thought is pursued by the Venerable Nandaka, an Arahāt, with the simile of the flayed cow (MN 146).

The second talk showing Citta as a teacher starts with Kāmabhū Bhikkhu reciting a stanza of the Buddha’s, a solemn utterance (Ud 7.5) and requesting Citta to elucidate it:

The faultless chariot with its one axle
And white canopy rolls.
See him coming, without blemish,
Without ties, the one who has crossed the stream.

*Neḷaṅgo setapacchādo,
ekāro vattati ratho
Anīghaṃ passa āyantaṃ
chinna-sotaṃ abandhanaṃ.*

First of all, Citta requested to know whether it was an utterance of the Buddha, which Kāmabhū confirmed. Obviously, to Citta, only a saying of the Buddha's was worthy of deep reflection. Then he asked for a short time to reflect, and finally said: "The carriage (*ratho*) is the bodily form which moves round (*vattati*); the axle (*ekāro*) is mindfulness (*sati*); the smooth, frictionless holding together of the parts is virtue; the white silken canopy (*seta-pacchāda*) is emancipation. So the Arahāt (indicated by *āyantaṃ*) without blemish (*anīgho*) or tie (*abandhanaṃ*) crosses the stream (*chinna-sotaṃ*); he has done away with greed, hatred and nescience and is safe from the ocean of craving."

Kāmabhū then told Citta the householder that he could well be called 'happy' and 'blessed,' as the eye of wisdom had come to him in explaining that profound saying of the Buddha (SN 41:5).

The third incident relates a conversation in the course of which the Bhikkhu Godatta (Th 659-672) challenged Citta to expound on the controversy whether limitless, unattached (*akiñcana*), void and signless liberation of mind are the same, or different from one another. This question is answered by Sāriputta in MN 43 in the same way as Citta treats of it here: namely that they may be considered the same or different according to the point of view. They are different as to type of emancipation, but alike in both being liberation from greed, hatred and delusion. (SN 41:7).

Elsewhere, more personal events are also related. At one time Citta accompanied some Bhikkhus, who had taken their alms-meal at his house, back to the monastery. It was very hot and they were perspiring freely. The youngest of the Bhikkhus, Mahaka, remarked to the senior one that wind or rain would certainly be welcome now. The observation sounds banal and not worth mentioning, but its import lies in the fact that Mahaka could exercise paranormal powers and was asking permission to do so. When he actually did procure rain to refresh his companions, Citta was deeply impressed, particularly since Mahaka was still very young.

At the monastery, therefore, he asked the Bhikkhu to display his powers once more. Perhaps it was the first time Citta had seen a paranormal feat of this kind and he felt a natural curiosity about it. Mahaka complied. A coat and a bundle of hay were placed on the porch, after which Mahaka went inside and closed the door. Creating a beam of tremendous heat he directed it through the keyhole and turned the bundle of hay to ashes without harming the coat.

Filled with enthusiasm, Citta offered to support Mahaka for life, but the Bhikkhu preferred to leave the place and never return. (SN 41:4). Bhikkhus are forbidden to impress lay people by the exhibition of paranormal powers (Cv. V. 15). Mahaka was young, and these powers were still new and titillating to him, so he could not resist Citta's request; but he recollected himself immediately after and did the right thing by leaving for good.

Citta's town was visited not only by Bhikkhus but also by ascetics of other persuasions. One of these was the leader of the Jinas, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta. Citta called upon him as well, for he did not look down on those of other sects and was courageous enough to take up the challenge of dispute.

Nātaputta wanted to know whether Citta believed the Buddha's statement that there is a meditative absorption (*jhāna*) void of thought conception and discursive thinking.

Citta's answer was that he did not believe there is such a thing, and Nātaputta, eager to enlist the renowned Citta in support of his views, was quite pleased with the reply, having failed to catch Citta's exact meaning.

"Well said!" he extolled, and went on to expound his own belief that stilling the flow of thought formations would be paramount to stopping the Ganges with one's bare hands: "Impossible it is to make the verbal formations (*vacī-sankhāra*) cease," he declared.

Citta now countered with the query, what did Nātaputta think more excellent, belief or knowledge? 'Knowledge,' was the answer, whereupon Citta explained that he himself had experienced all the jhānas (MN 4) of which the last three are actually without thought conception and discursive thinking. Hence for him it was no longer a matter of *belief* but of knowledge from direct experience that the Buddha's statement was correct.

Thereupon, Nātaputta blamed him severely for the form of his first reply. Citta protested that first he had been praised for being a wise man, and now he was called a fool. Only one of the two opinions could be true, so what did Nātaputta really think of him?

But Citta was not to receive an answer, for Nātaputta preferred to remain silent (SN 41:8). This incident shows how even famous philosophers may fall into inconsistencies, especially when their pride is involved, and Nātaputta claimed to be more than a mere philosopher. He had always failed to attain to the higher jhānas, so he conveniently concluded them to be a myth. Now, when an entirely trustworthy man told him that he had actually attained to these jhānas, the baselessness of his theory was proved, and at the same time the inferiority of his own status. Nātaputta's chagrin must have been increased by the fact that whereas he himself had been for so long a practiser of extreme asceticism, Citta was not even one who had gone forth from the household life. It is scarcely to be wondered at that Nātaputta withdrew in confusion.

The third personal encounter related is between Citta and the naked ascetic, Kassapa. This ascetic was a friend of Citta's family and so he visited Citta when he went to his old home town many years after leaving it. Citta asked him how long he had been leading the ascetic life. "Thirty years," he was told. Citta next inquired whether he had attained to superhuman states of bliss or supernormal insight. Kassapa answered: "No," he had just been going naked, shaving his head and dusting his seat. That was his life.

Now it was Kassapa's turn to ask questions: "How long had Citta been an upāsaka?" "Thirty years," Citta replied. "Had he attained to supernatural states?" was Kassapa's next question.

Well, certainly he had experienced the four jhānas, Citta said, and should he die before the Blessed One did, the Buddha would say of him that no fetter bound him any more to the worlds of sensual pleasure.

This, as Kassapa knew very well, meant that Citta was a non-returner (*anāgāmi*), one who had attained to the third of the four stages of holiness. The ascetic, worn by painful austerities, was stunned by the idea that a layman could reach such a high attainment. Justly considering that since this was possible for a layman in the Buddha's dispensation, even more could be gained by a Bhikkhu, he asked Citta to help him in taking the robe. He was duly admitted to the holy Sangha and attained Arahantship shortly after (SN 41:9).

Three other friends of Citta also turned Bhikkhus after discussions of that kind. They were Sudhamma, Godatta and the Isidatta who, as related before, had been in correspondence with

Citta. All three of them attained to ultimate emancipation, leaving Citta, the householder, behind.

The last account we have of Citta relates the circumstances of his death. When he fell ill, Devas appeared to him and urged that he should set his heart upon becoming a world-ruler (*cakkavatti*) in his next life. “No,” Citta answered; he was aiming at something higher, more noble and peaceful than that. He was seeking the unconditioned—Nibbāna. In recommending Citta to be a world-ruler, the Devas must have been unaware of his attainment, which made it impossible for him. He had already gone beyond it.

His relatives, not being able to see the Devas, imagined that Citta was in delirium. He reassured them, explaining that he was conversing with invisible beings. Then, at their devout request he gave them his last advice and admonition. They were to repose trust in the Buddha and his Dhamma always, and were to remain unswervingly generous donors to the holy Sangha (SN 41:10).

Thus this noble lay follower of the Buddha passed on to his successors the pattern of conduct which he himself had followed throughout his life with such brilliant success, and which had brought him to a state of liberation from the miseries of the sensuous realm and within sight of the final end of all suffering.

The Bhikkhu Citta

This Citta was the son of an elephant trainer. When he was still a youth he met an elderly Bhikkhu who was returning from his alms-round with a particularly tasty item of food in his bowl. The Bhikkhu had no desire for it, so he gave it to the young lad. Citta was greatly pleased, and under the impression that as a Bhikkhu he would be fed like that every day without having to fatigue himself with work, he joined the Sangha. But with such a motivation no ascetic life is possible, and shortly afterwards he discarded the robe to return to his old life.

All the same, the spirit of the holy Sangha had left a deep and indelible impression on his mind. Soon he felt dissatisfaction with the life of a householder, and asked for ordination once more. Having obtained it, after a time he deserted the Sangha again. A third, a fourth and a fifth time this happened.

The fifth time, when he was living a married life he was unable to sleep one night, and while he was looking at his wife, who was pregnant, the wretchedness of sensual pleasures was driven home to him so forcefully that he seized a yellow robe and hastened to the monastery at once. On his hurried way through the silent night all the good seeds planted during his previous monkhood burst into blossom and he attained to Stream-entry there and then.

At the monastery, however, his former fellow monks had just agreed among themselves to refuse a possible sixth request for ordination from Citta. They felt that they had been forbearing to a praiseworthy degree, and considered Citta totally unfit for the holy life and a disgrace to the Sangha.

Even while they were so deliberating, they saw Citta himself approaching. His features were aglow with a new bliss, and his manner was so calm and mild that they found it impossible to refuse him another ordination. This time he quickly succeeded in the four jhānas and signless unification of mind.

This filled him with joy, and he felt a great urge to talk about it. On one occasion some Arahats were sitting together in conversation and Citta interrupted them again and again. The senior Bhikkhu of the gathering, the Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita, advised him to wait until the senior monks had finished what they had to say. Thereupon, Citta's friends said that he ought not to be reprimanded, because he was wise and capable of explaining Dhamma from his own experience.

Mahākoṭṭhita answered that he could see Citta's heart. Then he went on to explain, by similes, that there are states of mind which may be excellent as long as they last, but are still unable to prevent a Bhikkhu giving up the monkhood again. In this connection he gave the following similes:

A cow securely tied up in the byre seems peaceable enough, but turned loose it quickly tramples down the green crops. Likewise, a Bhikkhu may be humble and well-behaved in the presence of the Master or saints, but left on his own he tends to relapse and leave the Sangha. Again, a person may be in possession of the four jhānas and signless unification of mind, and as long as these abide he is safe; but as soon as the bliss wanes he goes among people, talkative and unrestrained and bursting with pride to announce his achievement. Then his heart becomes filled with greed and he gives up the monk's training. He may feel secure in the jhānas, but it is precisely this which leads to his ruin.

While a king and army, with drums and chariots, are camping in the woods, nobody can hear the crickets chirping and everybody might think they had been silenced. But after the troops have moved on the crickets can easily be heard again, although one might have been quite sure there were none (AN 6:60).

Later on, Citta actually did leave the Sangha for a sixth time to return to family life. His Bhikkhu friends then asked the Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita whether he had himself foreseen that Citta would act thus, or whether Devas had told him. He replied that it was both. In astonishment those friends went to the Buddha and related the matter to him. The Blessed One dispelled their apprehensions by telling them that Citta would soon return.

One day Citta went to see the Buddha, accompanied by Poṭṭhapāda, a wandering ascetic of another sect. Poṭṭhapāda posed some deep questions regarding the different modes of arising in the three worlds. Citta followed up with further questions as to differentiation between these forms of becoming, since, having experienced the jhānas he was familiar with some of them. The Blessed One's answers satisfied him fully and he requested admission to the Sangha for the seventh time, which turned out to be the last.

The Buddha gave his consent, and in a short time Citta too became one of the Arahats (DN 9).

In subsidiary books of the scriptures as well as in unrelated and later tradition we often find significant hints as to how the actions of past lives affect a man's present experiences. Thus we are told just why it was that the Bhikkhu Citta, in his last life which was to bring forth Arahantship, had to defect from the Sangha so many times. It appears that a long, long time ago, when the Buddha Kassapa was teaching Dhamma, there were two friends who joined the Sangha. One of them became dissatisfied with the hardships of a Bhikkhu's life, and contemplated returning to his family. His friend encouraged him to make this decision, because in his heart he longed to be able to feel himself superior. This ugly motive had its result much, much later during the life-time of the Buddha Gotama. It subjected this false friend, now become the Bhikkhu Citta, not less than six times to the humiliation of leaving the Sangha and having to petition for acceptance again.

This shows that there are some karmas so strong that their results (*vipāka*) cannot be resisted; they can only be lived through with patience, towards which understanding helps. But since we do not know whether certain influences in our lives are the results of such karma or not, or, if they are, how close we may be to the exhaustion of their force, it behooves us nevertheless to strive against them. Apart from everything else, such striving has its own value. It may appear in this life to be futile, but in reality it will bear fruit for our good at some future time. The immutable law of cause and effect ensures that no effort is wasted. Here as elsewhere the Dhamma urges us to set our face against every form of fatalism, that most enervating and paralysing view of life, even in its most subtle guises. It encourages us to rise from our failures undaunted and ever ready to try again. Defeats there may be—bitter and heartbreaking setbacks in the battle against craving and ignorance—but the true follower of the Buddha is one who will never admit any defeat to be final. He is prepared, like an old and tried warrior, to lose every battle except the last, for he knows that if he perseveres the final victory will be his.

Nakula, the Couple Without Blemish

The Country of the Bhaggas was in the Ganges valley, and it was there that they had their town called Crocodile Hill (Sumsumāragiri), where Prince Bodhi resided (MN 85). Here the Blessed One spent one of the forty-five rainy seasons of his ministry (MN 15).

Once, when the Buddha was walking through the streets of the town a citizen prostrated himself at his feet and cried: “O, my dear son, why have you never called on us? Now, please honour our home, so that your aged mother may lay her eyes on you, too!”

The man was not out of his mind. The fact is that he and his wife had been the Bodhisatta’s parents not once but a hundred times in former births. A faint memory of this had lingered on, and at the sight of the Blessed One full recollection had broken forth and overpowered the old man. Occurrences of this kind still happen sometimes in Asian countries even today.

This old man was the householder Nakulapitā (Father Nakula), whose wife was known as Nakulamātā (Mother Nakula). They are mentioned together by the Buddha as being among the foremost of his lay disciples, particularly for their unfaltering faithfulness to each other. The brief account of them in the Canon depicts a divine love of each for the other, accompanied by absolute trust, based upon their common faith in the Buddha.

When the Buddha received an invitation to their home, Father Nakula gave him an account of their marriage. Although he had been married very young, he said, he had not once broken faith with his wife throughout the years, not even in thought, let alone in deed. And Mother Nakula made the same declaration on her part. Neither husband nor wife had ever deviated for a moment from their fidelity to one another.

In their devotion both of them expressed a longing to be together again in their next lives, and asked what they could do to ensure that they got their wish (AN 4:55). The Buddha did not reject the question, nor did he reprove their aspiration. He replied, “Should a husband and wife wish to enjoy each other’s company in this life and afterwards to meet again in the next, they should cultivate true faith, true virtue, true renunciation and true wisdom. Then they will meet again in their next lives.” And the Buddha added these stanzas:

Pure in life and faithful both,
Virtuous and self-restrained,
Consort ever consort meets,
Courteous and full of love.

So is highest blessing theirs,
So in joys untold they dwell,
While the Evil One slinks back
Beaten by a couple pure.

Living here praiseworthy life,
Virtuous, upright, without blame,
Leads them up to Devas’ realm
Where in pleasure they abide.

How a man of lofty aspirations may live with a woman his peer, guarded by virtue, is explained by the Blessed One elsewhere. There he says that not only do both consorts abide by the five precepts (*sīla*), but over and above that they are virtuous and noble-minded; when asked for help they never refuse, and they never despise or insult ascetics and holy men (AN 4:54). In the light of these words it can easily be seen how much is expected of a couple like that: not

religious piety only, but also a heart staunch enough to be detached from the petty events of everyday life and everything that is low and base. It is frequently said of the white-clad upāsaka that he does not refuse requests, and easily forgoes his own wishes or pleasures. This shows a detachment from men and things, a capacity for letting things go instead of clinging to them. From this comes inner freedom, the only sound basis for the cultivation of wisdom. Virtue in action, renunciation of things in the heart, wisdom in the mind—these factors make for harmonious and gentle life together.

Knowledge concerning rebirth and of ways to obtain a favourable one was common in India at that time. In the case of the couple Nakula, since they actually remembered some of their previous lives it was not necessary to enlarge on the subject. The Blessed One's concise reply was all they needed.

Prerequisites for harmonious married life are given by the Buddha in more detail in DN 31 (Advice to Sigāla). There we read that if the husband—who is responsible for taking the initiative—observes five courses of action, he will reap wellbeing. He is to treat his wife respectfully, and not with disdain; he should be faithful to her; he should allow her authority in the household and he should provide her with all necessities and adornments according to his means. If he conducts himself in that way, his wife will take pride in looking after his needs; the household will run smoothly, she will treat callers and servants politely. She will be faithful, will protect his property and carry out her tasks skilfully and dutifully.

The Nakulas were not solely concerned with a favourable rebirth: they also took interest in the lawfulness governing the lives of men and in the deeper problems of existence. Once, Father Nakula asked the Blessed One why it is that some people attain to emancipation and others do not. The answer was: "Whosoever goes on grasping at the objects perceived by the senses cannot gain liberation. Whoever stops grasping will be liberated." (SN 35, 131). This is a reply which in its concentrated terseness only one well versed in the Dhamma could be expected to comprehend fully, but Nakula understood its implications at once.

On another occasion Father Nakula went to pay his homage to the Buddha. He was now aged and infirmed, he said, and only on rare occasions could he see the Blessed One. Would the Buddha out of compassion give him a word of spiritual guidance to hold and treasure? The Buddha replied, "The body is subject to sickness and decay. The bodily form being a burden even in the best circumstances, one should train himself thus: 'Though my bodily frame is ill, my mind should not be ill.'"

Soon afterwards, Nakula met the Venerable Sāriputta, who addressed him with the words, "Your deportment is calm, householder, and your features serene. Is it that you have today talked with the Master?"

"Thus it is," Nakula answered. "The Blessed One has this very day comforted me with his ambrosial words." Upon hearing this, the Venerable Sāriputta gave a full explanation of the Buddha's concise words, expounding on the way to overcome physical sickness by not identifying with the five khandhas. When the time comes—as it inevitably does—that the perishableness of things becomes evident, the man who is well trained does not despair, he coolly looks on. His body may wither, but his heart remains sound (SN 22:1).

It was not only Nakula the father who strove for wisdom to overcome death. His wife resembled him in this also, as can be seen by another report. When husband Nakula fell dangerously ill she consoled him, saying, "Do not harbour distress at the thought of my being left behind. To die like that is agonizing, so our Master has advised against it. For six very good reasons you need not be concerned about me: I am skilled at spinning, and so shall be able to support the children; after having lived chastely with you for sixteen years I shall never consider

taking another husband; I shall never cease seeing the Master and his Bhikkhus, but rather visit them even more frequently than before; I am firmly established in virtue and have attained to peace of mind, and lastly I have found firm footing in the Dhamma and am bound for final deliverance.”¹

Encouraged by these words, Father Nakula recovered from his illness. As soon as he was able to walk he presented himself before the Buddha and recounted his wife’s words. The Lord thereupon confirmed that the possession of such a wife was indeed a blessing. He said: “You are truly blessed, householder, in having Mother Nakula as a mentor and adviser who is solicitous and concerned for your welfare. Of the white-clad female devotees who are perfect in virtue, stilled of mind and firmly established in Dhamma, not relying upon anybody else in the Master’s dispensation, Nakula is one (AN 6:16).”

Here a solution is given for reconciling the seemingly opposite tendencies of life: the deep affection between husband and wife on the one hand, and the striving for deliverance on the other. Looking sympathetically at this story of the Nakula couple one may come to think that a life of renunciation may not be necessary if a married life is led in such an exemplary way; or that one can even combine attachment and detachment. But if one looks more closely one will see that it is far from easy to follow faithfully the life led by that noble couple. It is not enough that there is concern and solicitude for one another. The conditions for a married life in chaste companionship must not be overlooked.

The spouses who in their youth had led a married life of sensual fulfilment, did not abstain from physical contact only in old age when the senses were quietened; but they voluntarily lived a celibate life much earlier. In the case of the Nakula couple, they had lived without physical contact for sixteen years, as their words to the Master testify.

Hence the individual wishing to take the first steps on the road to emancipation should ask himself which is easier: to remain in the home environment and try to outgrow its sensual temptations, or to overcome worldliness as a member of the Sangha in the congenial company of brothers in the Holy Life. While the Enlightened One himself, the incomparable Knower and Guide of men, was at the head of the Order, the decision was not so difficult. But even today one is inclined to think that one who does not feel himself fitted for life in a monastic community may also lack the strength of character to renounce sexual relations in a married life devoted to progress on the Path. Both ways of life will demand acts of renunciation.

¹ By that she indicated her attainment of Stream-entry.

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