

(Uggata,sarīra) Aggi Sutta
The Discourse to Uggata,sarīra on the Fires
[The three fires reinterpreted]
Āṅguttara Nikāya 4.44

Abridged with notes by
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Introduction

Many of the Buddha's teachings are in direct response to what he sees as wrong in the brahminical religion. One of his most common approaches is to use the very same brahminical terms and give them a new spirit. For example, the Buddha speaks of "the three fires" (*aggi*) that correspond to the three permanently burning fires of the *āhitāgni* (the brahmin who follows the ritual prescription of the Vedic *śrauta* tradition and keeps fires burning for the purposes of his obligatory daily rites). As Gombrich notes,

There could after all have been some other numbers; were the reference less specific, the same message could have been conveyed by talking of one, generalized fire, or maybe two, eg *taṇhā* and *avijjā*. To reach three, *taṇhā* has to be split into *rāga* and *dosa*, positive and negative. (Gombrich, 1987:16)

In this interesting discourse, the Aggi Sutta, whose interlocutor is the brahmin Uggata,sarīra ["Big Man"],¹ the Buddha makes an allegory of the three fires that is very similar to the much later idea expressed in the Manu,smṛti: "Tradition holds that one's father is in fact the *gārhapatya* fire, one's mother the *dakṣiṇā*, one's teacher the *āhavanīya*; that triad of fires is the most important" (Manu,smṛti 2,231).

EM Hare's translation (A:H 4:24-27) is highly unsatisfactory. R Gombrich has done his own abridged translation in "Recovering the Buddha's Message" (1987:17-20).

This sutta should be studied in connection with two others: **the Kūṭadanta Sutta** (D 5) and **the (Pasenadi) Yañña Sutta** (S 3.9/1:75-76). In the former, 700 of each of the animals mentioned here were prepared for sacrifice; in the latter, king Pasenadi of Kosala prepared 500 of each animal for sacrifice but was dissuaded by the Buddha. TW Rhys Davids is of the opinion that "[t]he whole legend [of the Kūṭadanta Sutta] is obviously invented *ad hoc*" (D:RD 1:162 f) since it was highly unlikely that a brahmin would have consulted the Buddha about how to perform a sacrifice, which was supposed to be their specialty. Walshe thinks that the Saṃyutta story is historical and "[p]erhaps the Buddha told the king this story on that occasion, and the incident was later tactfully transferred from the King of Kosala to an imaginary Brahmin 'with royal favours' living in the neighbouring kingdom of Magadha" (D:W 550 n171).

¹ *Uggata,sarīra*, lit "large-bodied". Comy says that he was so called because of both his person (*attabhāva*) and his wealth.

The Discourse to Uggata,sarīra on the Fires

1 Once the Blessed One was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika’s Park in the Jeta,vana near Sāvathī. At that time the brahmin Uggata,sarīra [“Big Man”] had prepared a great sacrifice: 500 each of bulls, steers, heifers, goats and rams had been brought together at the sacrificial post for sacrifice.

Then the brahmin went up to the Blessed One, greeted him and after an exchange of courtesies, sat down at one side.

Then Uggata,sarīra said this to the Blessed One:

“Good Gotama, I have heard it said that it is of great reward and great benefit to light² a sacrificial fire and set up a sacrificial post.”

The Blessed One assented.

Thrice the brahmin asked the same question and thrice the Blessed One gave the same reply.

“Well then, good Gotama, you and I agree³ here!”

2 When this was said, the venerable Ānanda said this to Uggata,sarīra:

“Brahmin, you should not have questioned the Tathagata in this way. You should instead tell him that you wish to light a sacrificial fire and set up a sacrificial post, and ask him to advise and instruct you for your benefit and happiness for a long time.”

3 The brahmin then asked the Blessed One:

“Good Gotama, I wish to light a sacrificial fire and set up a sacrificial post. Advise and instruct me, good Gotama, for my benefit and happiness for a long time.”

The three doors of action

“Brahmin, when you light a sacrificial fire and set up a sacrificial post, even before the sacrifice takes place, you are setting up **three knives that are unwholesome**,⁴ that bring pain, that result in pain.

What are the three?

4 The knife of the body (*kāya,sattha*), the knife of speech (*vācī,sattha*), the knife of the mind (*mano,sattha*).

(1) Just before the sacrifice, you think: ‘Let this many animals be slaughtered for sacrifice!’ You think that you are purifying⁵ (yourself), but you are not purifying (yourself); you think that you are doing something wholesome, but you are doing something unwholesome. You think that you seek a good rebirth, but you seek a bad rebirth.

² Reading *ādhānam* (Hardy) instead of *ādānam* in other MSS & Comy.

³ Comy: *sabbena sabbān ti sabbena sutena sabbam sutam, sameti saṃsandati*. Gombrich notes that the word *suta* recalls *śruti*, “sacred texts” (of the brahmins) (1987:18d).

⁴ “Unwholesome” (*akusala*), morally wrong and evil, not conducive for the attainment of Nirvana. See foll n.

⁵ “Purifying” (*puñña*). Gombrich notes “This is one of the fundamental puns or reinterpretations of Buddhism: for the Buddhist the term is virtually a synonym of *kusala*.” (1987:18g). His latter remark however is not entirely correct: although *apuñña*=*pāpa* and *akusala* often mean the same thing (ie what is morally unwholesome or evil), *puñña* (merit) is usually used in a “worldly” sense (good as it may be, but it keeps one within *saṃsāra*) (Sn 431), but *kusala* (wholesome), on the other hand, is the spiritual tool to liberate one for Nirvana (A 5:240 ff, 273 ff). See Karunadasa 1994:25.

So, brahmin, when you prepare for such a sacrifice, you are first setting up **the knife of the mind**.

5 (2) Just before the sacrifice, you say: ‘Let this many animals be slaughtered for sacrifice!’ You think that you are purifying (yourself), but you are not purifying (yourself); you think that you are doing something wholesome, but you are doing something unwholesome. You think that you seek a good rebirth, but you seek a bad rebirth.

So, brahmin, when you prepare for such a sacrifice, you are secondly setting up **the knife of speech**.

6 (3) Just before the sacrifice, you yourself initiate the slaughter: ‘Let this many animals be slaughtered for sacrifice!’ You think that you are purifying (yourself), but you are not purifying (yourself); you think that you are doing something wholesome, but you are doing something unwholesome. You think that you seek a good rebirth, but you seek a bad rebirth.

So, brahmin, when you prepare for such a sacrifice, you are thirdly setting up **the knife of the body**.

So, brahmin, when you light a sacrificial fire and set up a sacrificial post, even before the sacrifice takes place, you are setting up three knives that are unwholesome, that bring pain, that result in pain.

The three unwholesome fires

7 There are these three fires that you should abandon, avoid, not serve.
What are the three?

8 The fire of passion (*rāg’aggi*), the fire of hate (*dos’aggi*), the fire of delusion (*moh’aggi*).
Why should these three fires be abandoned, avoided, not served?

9 (1) Brahmin, when a person is overcome and mentally controlled by **passion**, he does evil through the body, through speech, through the mind. And after death, when the body has broken up, he re-appears in a state of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell.
As such, this fire of passion should be abandoned, avoided, not served.

Why, brahmin, should the fire of hate be abandoned, avoided, not served?

10 (2) Brahmin, when a person is overcome and mentally controlled by **hate**, he does evil through the body, through speech, through the mind. And after death, when the body has broken up, he re-appears in a state of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell.
As such, the fire of hate should be abandoned, avoided, not served.

Why, brahmin, should this fire of delusion be abandoned, avoided, not served?

11 (3) Brahmin, when a person is overcome and mentally controlled by **delusion**, he does evil through the body, through speech, through the mind. And after death, when the body has broken up, he re-appears in a state of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell.
As such, the fire of delusion should be abandoned, avoided, not served.

These, brahmins, are the three fires that should be abandoned, avoided, not served.

The three wholesome fires

12 Brahmin, there are these three fires you should honour, respect, worship and look after properly and happily.

What are the three?

13 The fire fit for oblations (*āhuneyy'aggi*), the fire of the householder (*gahapat'aggi*), the fire of religious offerings (*dakkhiṇeyy'aggi*).⁶

14 (1) Here, brahmin, whoever is your mother or father⁷ is what is called **the fire fit for oblations**.

Why is that so?

From that source, brahmin, have you been offered (*āhuta*),⁸ have you come into existence (*sambhūta*). Therefore, you should honour, respect, worship and look after properly and happily.⁹

And what, brahmin, is the householder's fire?

15 (2) Here, brahmin, whoever are your children, wives,¹⁰ slaves, servants or workers, they are what is called **the householder's fire**. Therefore, that fire, too, you should honour, respect, worship and look after properly and happily.

And what, brahmin, is the fire worthy of religious offerings?

16 (3) Here, brahmin, the recluses and brahmins who abstain from intoxication and heedlessness, who keep to patience and restraint,¹¹ each taming himself, each calming himself, each cooling himself¹²—they are **the fire worthy of religious offerings**.¹³ Therefore, that fire, too, you should honour, respect, worship and look after properly and happily.

Brahmin, these are the three fires that you should honour, respect, worship and look after properly and happily.

⁶ There are puns on these three names but they are untranslatable. The first, *āhuneyya*, is the Pali cognate of the Skt *āhavanīya*, where the reference is changed, but not the meaning. The second, *gahapat'aggi* (*gahapati aggi*), meaning “the fire of the householder”, is slightly modified from the original Skt *grhy' agni*, “the fire of householdership”. The third, *dakkhiṇā* and Skt *dakṣiṇā* both mean “south=right hand direction, the right,” that is, the right hand, the giving hand, and by extension, “gift”, especially fees donated to a teacher.

⁷ See Gombrich 1987:19k for reconstruction of this passage.

⁸ *Āhuta*, means (1) “offered, sacrificed,” as in *āhut'aggi*, offered to the fire, keeping the sacrificial fires (J 6:199, 518); (2) “produced, coming from” (A 4:45): clearly a pun is intended here.

⁹ “Happily,” *sukham*, Gombrich renders as “well”, and notes a possible pun: “I suspect a corruption and venture the suggestion that what was intended was another pun, on *sukkam*, “dry”, which is what [sic] fires should be kept.” See Gombrich 1987:18i.

¹⁰ “Children, wives,” *puttā dārā*, lit “sons, women”. The Pali *dārā* is a collective term for the women of the house.

¹¹ “Patience and restraint” (*khanti,soracca*), called the things that beautify one or gracing virtues (V 1:349; A 1:94).

¹² “Cool themselves,” (*parinibbāpentī*), lit “he brings to complete coolness,” that is, extinguishing or cooling the three fires [8]. See Gombrich 1987.

¹³ See Ādiya S (A 5.41) where offerings may be made to such holy men (A 5.41(5)).

But, brahmin, **this wood fire** should from time to time be lighted, from time to time be cared for, from time to time be put out¹⁴, from time to time be stored away.¹⁵

17 At these words, Uggata,sarīra said to the Blessed One:

“Excellent, good Gotama! Excellent, good Gotama! May the Blessed One remember me as a lay follower who has gone to him for refuge from this day forth, for life. I free all these 500 bulls, 500 steers, 500 heifers, 500 goats and 500 rams, and grant them their lives! Let them eat grass and drink cool water, and let cool breezes blow upon them!”

—evam—

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¹⁴ “To be put out,” *nibbāpetabbo*. Here, an allusion to the attainment of Nirvana.

¹⁵ “To be stored away,” *nikkhipitabbo*. Comy: The flame should be removed and set aside (in a sheltered place or shelter).