

(Saṅgha) Paññā Bala Sutta

The Discourse on the Powers

Beginning with Wisdom (together with Solidarity)

[How to free oneself from five common fears]

(Aṅguttara Nikāya 9.5/4:363-365)

Translated (partly abridged) by Piya Tan ©2003

Introduction

The four powers mentioned in this sutta are simply listed without any elaboration in the **Paññā Bala Sutta** (so called in the Burmese canon) at A 4.153/2:142.¹ The complete sutta here, called **(Saṅgha) Bala Sutta**, is found in the Book of Nines (*navaka nipāta*), the “nine” coming from the 5 powers and the 4 bases of solidarity (*saṅgha, vatthu*). Traditionally, **the five powers** (*bala*) are: faith (*saddhā*), energy (*virīya*), mindfulness (*sati*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*), all of which are the “unshakable” (*akampiya*) or spiritually stable form of the five faculties (*indriya*) (Pm 1:16 f). This means that each of the five powers are not shaken by their opposites, that is to say by lack of faith, by laziness, by forgetfulness, by distraction and by ignorance respectively.

However, **the Sāketa Sutta** (S 48.43) clearly states that “that which are the five faculties are the five powers; that which are the powers are the five faculties” (*yāni pañc’indriyāni tāni pañca, balāni, yaṇi pañca, balāni tāni pañc’indriyāni*, S 48.43/5:219 f). This explanation clearly has nothing to do with degrees of intensity. In fact, the Nikāyas tell us nothing more about the difference between the two sets. However, from the canonical Abhidhamma, the general impression one gets is that the faculties (*indriyā*) are weaker than the powers (*balā*) (eg Dhs 10.3). The **Netti-p, pakaraṇa**, a para-canonical work (regarded as canonical in Myanmar) states that “these same faculties under the influence of energy (*virīya, vasena*) become powers” (Nett 100).

In **the Indriya Saṃyutta** of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the explanations of the faculties and the powers do not seem to differentiate them in terms of intensity. However, “[a] little reflection reveals that, in fact, this has to be the case,” suggests **Gethin**,

[The] commentarial explanations take as their ideal point of reference the transcendent (*lokuttara*) mind at the moment of path when all thirty-seven *bodhipakkhiya-dhammas* can be said to be present in a single arising of consciousness (*cittuppāda*). Thus it is precisely the same *saddhā* that is considered as both *indriya* and *bala*, not the two different arisings of *saddhā*, the first of which is weak and the second strong. Accordingly the commentaries appear to see the difference between *indriya* and *bala* essentially in terms of the former being active and the latter being passive: as an active force the *indriya* acts as a lord and overcomes or displaces its opposite force: conversely as a passive force the *bala* as a result of its strength cannot be overcome by its opposite.

(*The Buddhist Path of Awakening*, 2001:144)²

In the Nikāyas, however, the term *indriya* is more technical, and “in its wider application the term *bala* is much less technical than *indriya*” (Gethin 2001:140) and as such, “[a] *bala*, then, can be any kind of power, strength or strong point” (op cit 141). This sutta here is an example of a non-technical application of the term *bala*. In fact, it is applied in this manner—as the **four powers** (*catu bala*)—only twice, once in the Book of Fours (as the **Paññā Bala Sutta** at A 4.153/2:142) and here in its elaborate 9-factored form with the “four bases of solidarity” (*saṅgha, vatthu*). Here we see a social application of the powers, but underlying which are clearly the spiritual strength that they promise. ○

¹ See the CSCD.

² See R Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 2001:140-145.

The Discourse on the Powers

Beginning with Wisdom (Together with Solidarity)

[363]

The four powers

1 Monks, there are these four powers. What are the four?

2 The power of wisdom, the power of energy, the power of blamelessness, and the power of solidarity.

(a) And what, monks, is **the power of wisdom** (*paññā, bala*)?

3 As to those things that are unwholesome and are regarded as unwholesome, those things that are wholesome and are regarded as wholesome; blameless and regarded as blameless, blameworthy and regarded as blameworthy; dark and regarded as dark, bright and regarded as bright; what one should practise and regarded so, what one should not practise and regarded so; worthy of the noble ones and regarded so, unworthy of the noble ones and regarded so—having clearly seen³ them, having fully (mentally) investigated⁴ them: this is called the power of wisdom.

(b) And what, monks, is **the power of energy** (*virīya, bala*)?

4 As to those things that are unwholesome and are regarded as unwholesome, those things that are wholesome and are regarded as wholesome;...[364] worthy of the noble ones and regarded so, unworthy of the noble ones and regarded so—he brings forth the desire, makes the effort, arouses the energy, exerts and directs his mind towards the winning of these states: this is called the power of energy.

(c) And what, monks, is **the power of blamelessness** (*anavajja, bala*)?

5 Here, monks, a noble disciple is blameless in his deeds, blameless in his words, blameless in his thoughts: this is called the power of blamelessness.

(d) And what, monks, is **the power of solidarity** (*saṅgha, bala*)?

The 4 bases of solidarity

6 Monks, there are these four bases of solidarity (*saṅgha, vatthu*):⁵ generosity, pleasant speech, beneficent conduct, impartiality [freedom from bias].

(a) **The gift of the Dharma**: monks, this is the foremost of generosity.⁶

(b) **Teaching the Dharma** again and again to those who desire for it and listen attentively: monks, this is the foremost of pleasant speech.

(b) To rouse, instill, establish **faith** (*saddhā*) in the faithless; to rouse, instill, establish **moral virtue** (*sīla*) in the immoral; to rouse, instill, establish **charity** (*cāga*) in the miser; to rouse, instill, establish **wisdom** (*paññā*) in the foolish [ignorant]: monks, this is the foremost of beneficent conduct.⁷

(c) A stream-winner's **impartiality** towards a stream-winner, a once-returner's impartiality towards a once-returner, a non-returner's impartiality towards a non-returner, an Arhant's impartiality towards an Arhant: monks, this is the foremost of impartiality.

³ "Having clearly seen," *voditṭha* (fr *vi* + *ava* + *diṭṭha*).

⁴ "Having fully (mentally) investigated them," *vocarita* (fr *vi* + *ocarita*).

⁵ These are the four conditions (*dāna, peyya, vajja, attha, cariya, samān'attatā*) for the integration of a group or of society, or consolidating friendship, partnership and unity. (D 3:152, 232; A 2:32, 248, 4:218, 363)

⁶ This sentence is clearly the root of Dh 354a.

⁷ These four qualities—faith, moral virtue, charity and wisdom—are in fact an abridgement of **the 7 noble treasures** (*ariya, dhana*): faith, moral virtue, moral shame (*hiri*), moral fear (*ottappa*), great learning (*bāhu, sacca*), charity, wisdom (D 3:163, 267; A 4:5), so called because they are spiritual treasures that, unlike material wealth, cannot be lost. Moral shame and moral fear are what motivates one to cultivate moral virtue, are so can be included in moral virtue. Great learning is elaborated into generosity and pleasant speech, the first two bases of solidarity here. These noble treasures are also called "**the virtues of great assistance**" (*bahu, kāra dhamma*) (D 3:282) since they provide one with the tools for personal development and for people-helping.

This is called the power of solidarity.
These, monks, are the four powers.

The five fears

7 Monks, the noble disciple accomplished in these four powers overcomes five fears. What are the five?

8 The fear of livelihood, the fear of disrepute, the fear of nervousness before an assembly, [365] the fear of death, the fear of a bad destiny [rebirth].

Such a noble disciple will consider thus:

9 (a) “I have no fear for my **livelihood**. Why should I fear for my livelihood? I have the four powers: the power of wisdom, the power of energy, the power of blamelessness, the power of solidarity.

The foolish should fear for his livelihood; the lazy should for his livelihood; the one of blameworthy deeds, words and thoughts should fear his livelihood; one showing no solidarity should fear for his livelihood.

(b) I have no fear of **disrepute**. Why should I fear disrepute? I have *the four powers*...

The foolish...the lazy...the blameworthy... one showing no solidarity should fear disrepute.

(c) I have no fear of **nervousness before an assembly**. Why should I fear nervousness before an assembly? I have *the four powers*...

The foolish...the lazy...the blameworthy... one showing no solidarity should fear nervousness before an assembly.

(d) I have no fear of **death**. Why should I fear death? I have *the four powers*...

The foolish...the lazy...the blameworthy... one showing no solidarity should fear death.

(e) I have no fear of **a bad destiny**. Why should I fear a bad destiny? I have the four powers: the power of wisdom, the power of energy, the power of blamelessness, the power of solidarity.

The foolish should fear a bad destiny; the lazy should a bad destiny; the one of blameworthy deeds, words and thoughts should fear a bad destiny; one showing no solidarity should fear a bad destiny.

Monks, the noble disciple accomplished in these powers have overcome the five fears.

—evaṃ—