

(Uggata,sarīra) Aggi Sutta

The Discourse on the Fires (to Uggata,sarīra)

[The three wholesome fires]

Ānguttara Nikāya 4.44/4:41-46

Translated with notes by Piya Tan ©2003

1 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, or what scholars of religion call "demythologization."¹ In the (Uggata,sarīra) Aggi Sutta, we see another compassionate attempt by the Buddha at demythologizing a Vedic sacrifice—the fire sacrifice (*agni, hotra*)—transforming it from a class ritual of ritual purification to a universal act of purifying one's body, speech and mind, and of spiritual liberation. 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 (Uggata,sarīra) Aggi Sutta—whose interlocutor is the brahmin Uggata,sarīra ["Big Man"],² 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).³

EM Hare's translation of the (Uggata,sarīra) Aggi Sutta (A:H 4:24-27) is not only dated but highly unsatisfactory. R Gombrich's abridged translation is found in his book, "Recovering the Buddha's Message" (1987:17-20).

The fire simile used in this sutta is a very common one. In other suttas, it is variously used in the positive as well as in the negative senses. The three unwholesome roots (greed, hate, delusion) [7-8] are found in **the Āditta,pariyāya Sutta** (S 35.28),⁴ listed in **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33)⁵ and

¹ "Demythologization" (v demythologize) means looking beyond the mere symbolic, ritual or external aspects of religion, towards a personal and inner experience of true reality leading to spiritual liberation: see **Sigāl'ovāda S** (D 31/3:180-193) = SD 4.1 Intro (2).

² *Uggata,sarīra*, lit "large-bodied." Comy says that he was so called because of both his person (*attabhāva*) and his wealth.

³ **The Manu,smṛti** ("Tradition of Manu"), properly Mānava,dharma,śāstra, the most authoritative of the books on the Hindu code (Dharma,śāstra) is attributed to the first man and lawgiver, but actually dates any time between 200 BCE and 200 CE (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manusmṛti> for refs). The period of uncertainty following the collapse of the Maurya and Śuṅga empires led to renewed interest in traditional social norms (Kulke & Rothermund 1986:85). Thapar notes that "The severity of the Dharma-shastras was doubtless a commentary arising from the insecurity of the orthodox in an age of flux" (2002:279). A significant section of the book refers to *varṇāśrama,dharma*, codes pertaining to the caste system (*varṇa*) and discuss the stages of life (*āśrama*) for the "twice-born" males (Flood 1996:61-65, 202). The *āśrama* system is of special interest as it was an attempt to counter and replace the popularity of Buddhist renunciation (A Sharma 1992:184). The Manu,smṛti has become the key basis for the Indian caste system and morality.

⁴ S 35.28.3-8/4:19.

are the subject of a poem in **the Aggi Sutta** (It 3.5.4/92). Similarly, the three fires to be tended (*aggi pāricariyā*) [12-13] are also listed in the Saṅgīti Sutta (D 33.1.10 (33)/3:217). **The Sigāl’-ovāda Sutta** (D 31) expands these three fires to be tended into the six directions of social relationships and reciprocal responsibilities:⁶

East	—	parents	
South	—	teachers	
West	—	wife and children	
North	—	friends and colleagues	
Nadir	—	slaves, servants, workers	
Zenith	—	recluses and brahmins.	(D 31.27/3:189 f).

The three fires are also found in the ten admonitions (*dasa ovādā*) given to the lady Visākhā by her father Dhanañjaya before her marriage and which she later explains to her father-in-law Migāra [and her explanations given in square brackets below] (DhA 4.8):

- **“The indoor fire is not to be carried outside.”** [If one sees any fault in one’s mother-in-law or father-in-law or your husband, do not spread it about in other houses.]
- **“The outdoor fire is not to be carried inside.”** [If anyone in one’s neighbours’ houses speaks ill of one’s mother-in-law or father-in-law or your husband, do not repeat them in the house.]
- **“Tend the fire.”** [A wife should regard her mother-in-law, father-in-law and her husband as a blazing fire or as a serpent king.] (DhA 4.8/1:402-404)⁷

This sutta should be studied in connection with two others: **the Kūṭadanta Sutta** (D 5)⁸ and **the (Pasenadi) Yañña Sutta** (S 3.9).⁹ In the former, 700 of each of the animals are prepared for sacrifice; in the latter, king Pasenadi of Kosala prepares 500 of each animal for sacrifice but is dissuaded by the Buddha. TW Rhys Davids thinks 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 Samyutta 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

⁵ D 33.1.10(32)/3:217.

⁶ See **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31) = SD 4.1.

⁷ The 10 admonitions are: (1) **“The indoor fire is not to be carried outside.”** [If one sees any fault in one’s mother-in-law, father-in-law or your husband, do not spread it about in other houses.] (2) **“The outdoor fire is not to be carried inside.”** [If anyone in one’s neighbours’ houses speaks ill of one’s mother-in-law, father-in-law or one’s husband, do not repeat them in the house.] (3) **“Give only to him who gives.”** [One should give only to those who return borrowed articles.] (4) **“Give not to him who gives not.”** [One should not give to those who do not return borrowed articles.] (5) **“Give both to him who gives and to him who gives not.”** [When poor relatives seek help, one should give to them, even if they are unable to repay.] (6) **“Sit happily.”** [When a wife sees her mother-in-law or her father-in-law or her husband, she should stand up.] (7) **“Eat happily.”** [A wife should see that her mother-in-law or father-in-law or her husband has eaten first before she does so.] (8) **“Sleep happily.”** [A wife should complete all her household duties and turn in only after her mother-in-laws, father-in-law and husband have done so.] (9) **“Tend the fire.”** [A wife should regard her mother-in-law, father-in-law and her husband as a blazing fire or as a serpent king.] (10) **“Honour the household deities.”** [A wife should regard mother-in-law, father-in-law and her husband as deities.] (DhA 1:402-404). It should be noted that these admonitions have pre-Buddhist roots and reflect the ancient Indian social context.

⁸ D 5/1:127-149 = SD 22.8.

⁹ S 3.9/1:75 f = SD 22.11.

of Kosala to an imaginary Brahmin ‘with royal favours’ living in the neighbouring kingdom of Magadha.” (D:W 550 n171)

2 The seven fires

The (Uggata,sarīra) Aggi Sutta is included in the Book of Sevens (*sattaka,nipāta*). From the Sutta itself, it is difficult to figure out what the “seven” is about that merits its inclusion therein. From preceding (**Satta**) **Aggi Sutta** (A 7.43) we are told what the seven fires are, and in fact that is all the Sutta tells, thus:

(Satta) Aggi Sutta The Discourse on the Seven Fires Aṅguttara Nikāya 7.43/4:41

- 1 Bhikshus, there are these seven fires. What are the seven?
- 2 The fire of lust, the fire of hate, the fire of delusion, the fire fit for oblation, the householder’s fire, the fire worthy of offerings, and the wood fire.
These, bhikshus, are the seven fires.¹⁰

— evam —

The key teachings of the (Uggata,sarīra) Aggi Sutta are as follows:

- | | |
|---|----------|
| (A) The three knives (the three knives) | §§3b-6 |
| (B) The three unwholesome fires | §§7-11 |
| (C) The three wholesome fires | §§12-16a |
| (D) The wood fire | §§16b |

These seven fires are detailed in the (Uggata,sarīra) Aggi Sutta consists of B, C, and D.

3 The wood fire

A, B, and C [2] are fully explained in the Sutta, except for D, which is simply explained as: “Now, brahmin, this wood fire (*kaṭṭh’aggi*) should from time to time be lighted, from time to time be cared for, from time to time be put out,¹¹ from time to time be stored away.”¹²

This wood fire definitely cannot refer to the brahminical fire, which is kept burning all the time as an eternal fire, with offerings being made precisely at sunrise and sunset, and put out only when the person passes away. Neither the suttas nor the Commentaries elaborate on *kaṭṭh’aggi*, except for two general comments.¹³

However, it becomes meaningful when we take the Buddha’s statement on a Dharma level, thus:

¹⁰ Cf D 3:217; It 92; S 4:19; Dh 202.

¹¹ “To be put out,” *nibbāpetabbo*. Here, an allusion to the attainment of nirvana.

¹² “To be stored away,” *nikkhipitabbo*. Comy: The flame should be removed and set aside (in a sheltered place or shelter).

¹³ AA on (Satta) Aggi Sutta says “Wood fire is fire that naturally arises only from wood” (*kaṭṭhato nibbatto pākatiko va aggi kaṭṭh’aggi nāma*, AA 4:29) & **VbhA** simply says thus, “In the description of the external fire element, it is the fire that burns due to wood, which has wood as fuel” (*bāhira,tejo,dhātu,nid-dese kaṭṭham paṭicca pajjalito kaṭṭh’upādāno aggi kaṭṭha nāma*, VbhA 70). Other Comy refs only list it as one of the types of fires.

- “(it) should from time to time be lighted” (C) wholesome deeds (such as offerings);
- “from time to time be cared for” (A) the three doors should be guarded;
- “from time to time be put out” (B) the three poisons should be extinguished;
- “from time to time be stored away” we should spend time in spiritual solitude.

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The Discourse on the Fires (to Uggata,sarīra) (A 4.44/4:41-46)

[41]

Uggata,sarīra meets the Buddha

1 Once the Blessed One was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika’s Park in the Jeta,vana near Sāvattihī. At that time a great sacrifice of the brahmin Uggata,sarīra [“Big Man”] was being prepared. Five hundred bulls, five hundred bullocks, five hundred heifers, five hundred goats and five hundred rams had been brought together at the sacrificial post¹⁴ 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 being said that it is of great reward and great benefit to light¹⁵ a sacrificial fire and set up a sacrificial post.”

“Brahmin, I too have heard it being said that it is of great reward and great benefit to light a sacrificial fire and set up a sacrificial post.”¹⁶

For the second time... *the brahmin asked the same question and the second time the Blessed One gave the same reply.*

For the third time... *the brahmin asked the same question and the third time the Blessed One gave the same reply.*

“Well then, good Gotama, [42] you and I agree on everything¹⁷ here!”

Ānanda intercedes

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.”

3a 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.”

¹⁴ “Brought together to the sacrificial post” (*thūnūpanitāni*): D 1:127 ≠ S 1:76 ≠ DhA 2:7; J 3:45.

¹⁵ Reading *ādhānam* (Hardy) instead of *ādānam* in other MSS & Comy.

¹⁶ It is important to note the Buddha’s answer here is cordial and simply following the trend of Uggata,sarīra’s talk.

¹⁷ Comy: *sabbena sabbān ti sabbena sutena sabbān sutān, sameti samsandati*. Gombrich notes that the word *suta* recalls *śruti*, “sacred texts” (of the brahmins) (1987:18d). Uggata,sarīra is of course being presumptuous that the Buddha agrees with his bloody sacrifice.

The three doors of action

3b “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**,¹⁸ 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) Even before the sacrifice, you think: ‘Let this many animals be slaughtered for sacrifice!’

You think you are doing a purifying deed [doing merit],¹⁹ but it is not a purifying deed.

You think that you are doing a wholesome deed, but you are doing an unwholesome deed.

You think that you seek a good rebirth, but you are seeking a bad rebirth.

So, brahmin, even before you light a sacrificial fire and set up a sacrificial post, **[43]** you are, first, setting up **the knife of the mind**.

5 (2) Furthermore, brahmin, even before you light a sacrificial fire and set up a sacrificial post, you say: ‘Let this many animals be slaughtered for sacrifice!’

You think that you are doing a purifying deed, but you are not doing a purifying deed.

You think that you are doing a wholesome deed, but you are doing an unwholesome deed.

You think that you seek a good rebirth, but you are seeking a bad rebirth.

So, brahmin, even before you light a sacrificial fire and set up a sacrificial post, you are, secondly, setting up **the knife of speech**.

6 (3) Furthermore, brahmin, even before you light a sacrificial fire and set up a sacrificial post, you yourself initiate the slaughter: ‘Let this many animals be slaughtered for sacrifice!’

You think that you are doing a purifying deed, but you are not doing a purifying deed.

You think that you are doing a wholesome deed, but you are doing an unwholesome deed.

You think that you seek a good rebirth, but you are seeking a bad rebirth.

So, brahmin, even before you light a sacrificial fire and set up a sacrificial post, 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, should avoid, should not serve.

What are the three? **[44]**

8 The fire of lust (*rāg’aggi*), the fire of hate (*dos’aggi*), the fire of delusion (*moh’aggi*).

Why should these three fires be abandoned, should be avoided, should not be served?

9 (1) Brahmin, when a person is overcome and mentally controlled by **lust**, he does evil through the body, through speech, through the mind. And after death, with the body’s breaking up, he re-appears in a state of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell.

As such, this fire of lust should be abandoned, should be avoided, should not be served.

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

¹⁸ “Unwholesome” (*akusala*), morally wrong and evil, not conducive for the attainment of nirvana. See foll n.

¹⁹ “Purifying deed” (*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 *samsāra*) (Sn 431), but *kusala* (wholesome), on the other hand, is the spiritual tool for liberating ourselves to attain nirvana (A 5:240 ff, 273 ff). See Karunadasa 1994:25.

10 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, with the body's breaking up, he re-appears in a state of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell.

As such, this fire of hate should be abandoned, should be avoided, should not be served.

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

11 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, with the body's breaking up, he re-appears in a state of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell.

As such, this fire of delusion should be abandoned, should be avoided, should not be served.

These, brahmins, are the three fires that should be abandoned, should be avoided, should not be 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? [45]

13 The fire fit for oblation (*āhuneyy'aggi*), the fire of the householder (*gahapat'aggi*), the fire of religious offering (*dakkhiṇeyy'aggi*).²⁰

14 (1) Here, brahmin, your mother or father²¹ is called **the fire fit for oblation**.

Why is that so?

From that source, brahmin, you have been offered life (*āhuta*),²² you have come into being (*sambhūta*).²³ Therefore, you should honour, should respect, should worship and should look after properly and happily.²⁴

(2) And what, brahmin, is the householder's fire?

15 Here, brahmin, your children, wives,²⁵ slaves, servants or workers are called **the householder's fire**. Therefore, that fire, too, you should honour, should respect, should worship and should look after properly and happily.

(3) And what, brahmin, is the fire worthy of religious offering?

16 Here, brahmin, the recluses and brahmins who abstain from intoxication and heedlessness, who keep to patience and restraint,²⁶ each taming himself, each calming himself, each cool-

²⁰ There are puns on these three names but they are fully translatable. The first, *āhuneyya*, is the Pali cognate of the Skt *āhavanīya* (the offertorial fire), 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), or *gārha.patya* (the householder's fire). The third, *dakkhiṇā* and Skt *dakṣiṇā* both mean "south = right hand direction, the right," ie, the giving hand, and by extension, "gift," esp an honorarium donated to a teacher, ie, the *anvāhāryapacana*, or more simply, *dakṣiṇāgni*. See P Olivelle (tr), *Upaniṣads*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996:xliv-xlv.

²¹ See Gombrich 1987:19k for reconstruction of this passage.

²² *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.

²³ Cf the well known passage, prob a gnomon: "Parents are God [Brahma], the first teachers they say; | they are worthy of oblations from children, people should be compassionate to them" (*brahmā ti mātā,pitā-ro, pubb'ācariyā ti vuccare | āhuneyyā ca puttānaṃ, pajāya anukampakā*) (A 1:132 = 2:70 = It 110 = J 5:331 = Vism 523 = VbhA 130).

²⁴ "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 *sukham*, "dry," which is what fires should be kept." (Gombrich 1987:18i).

²⁵ "Children, wives," *puttā dārā*, lit "sons, women." The Pali *dārā* is a collective term for the women of the house.

²⁶ "Patience and restraint" (*khanti,soracca*), called the things that beautify one or gracing virtues (V 1:349; A 1:94).

ing himself²⁷—they are **the fire worthy of offering**.²⁸ Therefore, that fire, too, you should honour, should respect, should worship and should look after properly and happily.

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

(4) Now, brahmin, **this wood fire** should from time to time be lighted, from time to time be cared for, from time to time be put out,²⁹ from time to time be stored away.”³⁰

17 When this was said, Uggata,sarīra said this to the Blessed One:

“Excellent, master Gotama! Excellent, master Gotama! May the Blessed Gotama remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth, [46] 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!”

— evaṃ —

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²⁷ “Cool themselves,” *parinibbāpentī*, lit “he brings to complete coolness,” that is, extinguishing or cooling the three fires [8]. See Gombrich 1987.

²⁸ See **Ādiya S** (A 5.41) where offerings may be made to such holy men (A 5.41(5)).

²⁹ “To be put out,” *nibbāpetabbo*. Here, an allusion to the attainment of nirvana.

³⁰ “To be stored away,” *nikkhipitabbo*. Comy: The flame should be removed and set aside (in a shelter or sheltered place). See Intro (3).