

# An Exposition of The Salla Sutta

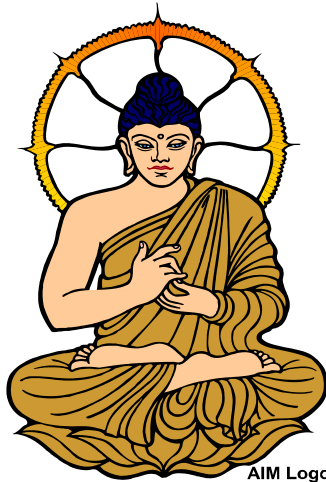


by  
Bhikkhu Pesala



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Association for Insight Meditation

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# The Salla Sutta

The Salla Sutta is found in the Suttanipāta. An excellent translation by Venerable Dr Hammalawa Saddhātissa, published by Curzon Press, is available from Wisdom Books. The Suttanipāta contains the three most popular Paritta Suttas: Metta Sutta, Maṅgala Sutta, and Ratana Sutta, and many other important Suttas, such as the Dhaniya Sutta, Khaggavisāṇa Sutta, Kasībhāradvāja Sutta, Hemavata Sutta, the Āḷavaka Sutta, Āmagandha Sutta, Parābhava Sutta, Vasala Sutta, and Vāseṭṭha Sutta.

The Buddha taught the Salla Sutta for the benefit of a certain householder whose son had died. Unable to abandon his grief, the householder had not eaten for seven days.

Although the three main protection discourses are frequently recited, and the Parābhava Sutta is taught in Sri Lankan schools, I have never heard the Salla Sutta taught before. It is the most appropriate when performing memorial services.

## The Pāli Text

579. *Animittamanaññātamaṃ, maccānaṃ idha jīvitaṃ.  
Kasirañca parittañca, tañca dukkhena saṃyutaṃ.*
580. *Na hi so upakkamo atthi, yena jātā na miyyare.  
Jarampi patvā maraṇaṃ, evaṃdhammā hi pāṇino.*
581. *Phalānamiva pakkānaṃ, pāto patanato bhayaṃ.  
Evaṃ jātāna maccānaṃ, niccaṃ maraṇato bhayaṃ.*
582. *Yathāpi kumbhakārassa, katā mattikabhājanā.  
Sabbe bhedanapariyantā, evaṃ maccāna jīvitaṃ.*
583. *Daharā ca mahantā ca, ye bālā ye ca paṇḍitā.  
Sabbe maccuvasaṃ yanti, sabbe maccuparāyaṇā.*
584. *Tesaṃ maccuparetānaṃ, gacchataṃ paralokato.  
Na pitā tāyate puttaṃ, ñātī vā pana ñātake.*
585. *Pekkhatamaṃ yeva ñātīnaṃ, passa lālapataṃ puthu.  
Ekamekova maccānaṃ, govajjho viya nīyati.*

586. *Evamabbhāhato loko, maccunā ca jarāya ca.  
Tasmā dhīrā na socanti, veditvā lokapariyāyaṃ.*
587. *Yassa maggaṃ na jānāsi, āgatassa gatassa vā.  
Ubho ante asampassaṃ, niratthaṃ paridevasi.*
588. *Paridevayamāno ce, kiñcidatthaṃ udabbahe.  
Sammūlho hiṃsamattānaṃ, kayirā ce naṃ  
vicakkhaṇo.*
589. *Na hi ruṇṇena sokena, santiṃ pappoti cetaso.  
Bhiyyassuppajjate dukkhaṃ, sarīraṃ cupahaññati.*
590. *Kiso vivaṇṇo bhavati, hiṃsamattānamattanā.  
Na tena petā pārenti, niratthā paridevanā.*
591. *Sokamappajahaṃ jantu, bhiyyo dukkhaṃ nigacchati.  
Anutthunanto kālaṅkataṃ, sokassa vasamanvagū.*
592. *Aññepi passa gamine, yathākammūpage nare.  
Maccuno vasamāgamma, phandantevidha pāṇino.*
593. *Yena yena hi maññanti, tato taṃ hoti aññathā.  
Etādiso vinābhāvo, passa lokassa pariyāyaṃ.*
594. *Api vassasataṃ jīve, bhiyyo vā pana māṇavo.  
Ñātisaṅghā vinā hoti, jahāti idha jīvitaṃ.*
595. *Tasmā arahato sutvā, vineyya paridevitaṃ.  
Petaṃ kālaṅkataṃ disvā, neso labbhā mayā iti.*
596. *Yathā saraṇamādittaṃ, vārinā parinibbaye.  
Evampi dhīro sapañño, paṇḍito kusalo naro.  
Khippamuppatitaṃ sokaṃ, vāto tūlaṃva dhamsaye.*
597. *Paridevaṃ pajappañca, domanassañca attano.  
Attano sukhamesāno, abbahe sallamattano.*
598. *Abbuḷhasallo asito, santiṃ pappuyya cetaso.  
Sabbasokaṃ atikkanto, asoko hoti nibbutoti.*

## **Translation**

579. There is no indication of the life-span of mortals. Life is difficult, short, and bound up with suffering.
580. Once born, one is going to die, and there is no avoiding this. When old age or another cause arrives there is death. That's how it is for living beings.
581. Once they are ripe, fruits are always in danger of falling. It is the same for mortals, who live in constant fear of death.
582. Like clay pots, which once made, are liable to be broken. All will break up in the end, thus it is with mortals too.
583. The young and the old, the foolish and the wise too. All are trapped by death, and all face death in the end.
584. When overcome by death, they go to the other world. Neither a father can save his children, nor relatives their kin.
585. See how, while their relatives are lamenting, men are carried off by death. Like cattle led to slaughter.
586. Since the world is thus afflicted with aging and death, the wise do not sorrow, having understood the nature of the world.
587. You do not know the path from where he came, nor where he has gone. Both are hidden from you, so there is no benefit in grieving.
588. One who laments gains nothing. A fool only harms himself, a wise man would lament if it was beneficial.

589. From weeping and grieving, no mental peace can come. It will only lead to greater pain, and bodily harm.
590. He becomes pale and thin, and only harms himself.  
He cannot raise the dead, so his lamentation is fruitless.
591. One who cannot abandon grief, is dragged further into sorrow. Bewailing the dead, one becomes a slave to grief.
592. Look at others who are reaping the results of their kamma. When under the power of death, beings tremble with fear.
593. Whatever one expects, the result is something different. From this comes disappointment, see, that's how the world is.
594. If one lives a hundred years, or even longer than that. Finally he is separated from relatives, and leaves this life behind.
595. Therefore, having heard the Arahant, the Buddha, give up lamenting. Having seen one passed away, reflect, "He will not be seen by me again."
596. As a house that is on fire is extinguished by water, Likewise, a resolute, wise, intelligent, and skilful man, quickly extinguishes his grief, as the wind blows away a tuft of cotton.
597. Lamentation, longing, and sorrow, that is of one's own making, one desiring happiness should extract the arrow he has stuck into himself.
598. Having extracted the arrow, he attains mental peace. Transcending all grief, he is sorrowless and stilled.



## **Explanation of the Discourse**

### **579. There Is No Indication of Life-span**

Life expectancy varies in different countries. It depends on multiple factors such as genetics, health care, nutrition, and life-style. The Buddhist texts state that the life-span of human beings is declining since the time of the Buddha, when some monks lived to the ripe age of 160 years, whereas nowadays no one lives beyond 120 years. The increase in life-span in modern times compared to mediaeval times is due to better health care and nutrition, which was very poor until recent centuries. In ancient China and in India at the time of the Buddha, medical knowledge was advanced. The texts tell the story of Jivaka, the Buddha's physician, as being an expert in herbal treatments. He also carried out surgery.

Nevertheless, whatever the average life-span may be in one's country or immediate family, and however much care one takes regarding diet and exercise, anyone can die at any moment due to an accident, disease, or violent assault. The variation in the life-span of individuals is determined by kamma. The Lesser Discourse on the Analysis of Kamma states that killing living beings is the cause of having a short life-span when reborn as a human being, while abstaining from killing is the cause of a long life. Although one's past kamma may be a dominant factor, nevertheless it is vital to take proper care of one's health by avoiding smoking, drinking, and junk food.

Although astrologers may predict a person's longevity from their birth chart or physical signs, it is dubious whether their predictions can be trusted, or how accurate they are.

When one buys long-life milk from the supermarket it has an expiry date on it, as well as its manufacture date. When a baby is born we know only its birth date, no expiry date is given on its birth certificate. If only we knew beforehand our expected expiry date, we might use our precious time more wisely.

**580. Death Is Inevitable**

No matter how long one lives, death is the final outcome for everyone. The manner of death is also unknown. When someone dies, a doctor or coroner pronounce a cause of death such as pneumonia, heart-attack, or cancer. Instead, they should write the cause of death as “birth,” because that is the root cause in every case. If we were not born in the first place, we would not have to face our inevitable death in many possible ways.

**581. Kamma Can Bear Fruit at Any Time**

Unripe fruits can fall early when dislodged by animals or storms, and ripe fruits are liable to fall at any time. No one can say when it will happen, so gathering fruits by sitting under a tree with a basket is not an efficient method. In the case of human beings, most do not live until the end of their full life-span, but usually die some years earlier due to the extremes of climate, an accident, or some infection such as ‘flu. Whenever death occurs, the relatives feel that it happened suddenly and without warning, but they would not be surprised at all if they had contemplate the nature of life properly.

**582. Life Is Fragile**

Although a young person may be fit and healthy, it doesn’t take much to cause death. Healthy people sometimes die from a single blow to the head, from the effects of drugs or freak accidents. Heart-disease or allergies can also lead to sudden death. Accidents while driving, climbing, skiing, or swimming may cause death before reaching a mature age because young people often like to engage in risky activity. For the elderly, it is even easier to die from a minor fall or an infection that would have barely any effect on a healthy person.

The plates and glasses that are used daily will shatter at once if they fall onto a tiled floor, and a human body is similar, though it seems to be strong and resilient, it doesn’t take very much to cause death.

**583. Everyone Is Subject to Death**

Death doesn't only affect the immoral or foolish, the poor or the frail. Innocent bystanders may be killed by robbers, terrorists, or careless drivers. Wise and moral people who take no risks can be killed by accidents in their own homes, or while going about their daily business. Diseases can strike down the wealthy and the young, as well as the poor and elderly. Kings, Presidents, and Prime Ministers, although surrounded by body-guards, cannot be protected from all dangers. Those who are envious of their wealth and power may assassinate them, or they may fall prey to diseases and accidents, just like a homeless person who has no protection at all.

**584. No One Can Prevent Death**

When children see their parents getting old, or when parents see their children sick with life-threatening diseases, even though they may be willing to sacrifice their own lives, they can do nothing to prevent the death of their relatives. Of course, doctors can often find ways to prolong life, and relatives can make sure they get suitable food and care, but if the time has come for someone to die, no one can prevent it.

**585. Relatives Have to Watch Helplessly**

The relatives have to remain behind, while their relatives pass on to the next life, and no one knows where their relatives have gone. Even if they could see the destiny of their relatives, they would be powerless to change it, since one's destiny after death depends on the results of one's own kamma.

People often say, "He has gone to heaven," or "She is now in a better place," though they have no psychic powers by which they might know where their relatives have been reborn. Few would care to contemplate that their loved one has been reborn as a ghost, an animal, or in hell. However, according to the Jambudīpa repetition of the gradual sayings (A.i.36), rebirth in the lower realms is far more likely than a fortunate rebirth.

At one time,<sup>1</sup> Queen Ubbarī, the much loved wife of the king of Kāsi, died. The king was so grief-stricken that he could not bear to part with her body, which he kept in a coffin under his bed. He could not eat for seven days. Eventually, he went to the Bodhisatta who took him into the palace gardens to show him where his beloved queen had been reborn as a beetle. The queen now had a beetle for a husband, and had no love for her former husband, the king of Kāsi. The king abandoned his attachment to his former queen, and overcame his grief.

### **586. The Wise Do Not Grieve**

Those who reflect well on the transient nature of existence are not surprised when death occurs, and do not distress themselves needlessly by wishing for what is impossible.

In the time of the Buddha, a stingy millionaire was reluctant to pay for physicians to treat his dying son. He made inquiries about what medicine was used to treat such and such a condition, and treated his son himself. Before long, due to not getting the proper treatment, his son died. While on his death-bed, the son saw the Buddha pass by on his way for alms, and dying with thoughts of devotion for the Buddha, he was reborn as a celestial being.

The distraught father went to the cemetery daily, weeping over the loss of his son. The deity appeared in the cemetery, taking on the appearance of the millionaire's son, and stood by a tree, weeping. The millionaire, seeing the young man weeping, felt compassion for him and asked why he was so sad. The deity replied that he needed new wheels for his chariot, but could not get them. The millionaire told him not to weep, that he would buy him a new pair of chariot wheels. The deity said that he wanted the sun and the moon as wheels for his chariot. The millionaire then laughed at him, saying that it was impossible to get the sun and the moon. The deity then admonished his former father, asking who was more foolish,

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<sup>1</sup> The story is told in the Assaka Jātaka, No.207.

himself for weeping about something he could see, or the millionaire for weeping about something that he could not see. The millionaire then realised his folly in weeping for the return of his son, who was now reborn as that deity.

This story is from the Commentary to the second verse of the Dhammapada, which teaches the great benefits of wholesome thoughts:

“Mind is the forerunner, mind is chief, all things are mind-made. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like one’s own shadow. (Dhp v 2).”

### **587. The Past and Future Lives Are Unknown**

Since one does not know the destiny of the departed, it makes no sense to grieve. If they were truly virtuous people, who have been reborn in celestial realms, one should rejoice for them, since a life in heaven is surely easier than a human existence. If they have been reborn in a realm of suffering as an animal, hungry ghost, or in hell, one may well grieve and lament for them, but it would still be of no avail. Everyone must inherit the results of the kamma that they have done, and no one can prevent kamma from giving its due results. The best that anyone can do is to perform meritorious deeds in the name of one’s departed relatives and share the merits with them.

### **588. Lamenting is Unwholesome Kamma**

Lamenting and grieving is unwholesome kamma that arises dependent on craving and attachment, which are also unwholesome. A wise person should avoid doing such unwholesome deeds as far as possible. A foolish person should heed the advice of the wise, and give up their futile grieving, which brings no benefit. Instead, one should do wholesome deeds to make the mind positive again.

If one is in debt, the only way to escape from it is to stop spending, and earn some more money, not to borrow more money and incur further interest repayments.

**589. Grieving Has No Benefit**

The longer that one grieves and laments, the more that one suffers. Many brave women who lost a husband while still young, put aside their grief, realising that they are now the main support for their children who need their time and care all the more now that their father is dead. If they just remained grieving and lamenting, the family would get into debt, the children would be neglected, and all would suffer even more than before.

In the time of the Buddha, a farmer used to go daily to the fields to work with his son. Having cooked their meals, his wife would send the food to her husband and son. One day, while they were working, the son was bitten by a snake and died on the spot. The farmer sent a message to his wife to cook only one meal. On receiving the message she understood the meaning, and did not weep. She took the meal to the field, together with flowers and incense to perform the funeral rites.

**590. Grieving Only Harms Oneself**

Wise people should perform due funeral rites and memorial services, then continue with their lives without longing for things to be as before. If they fall prey to sorrow they will only make themselves ill, but still they cannot bring the dead back to life.

**591. Grieving Leads to Greater Sorrow**

Grieving and crying not only harms oneself, it also makes others sad. Even those who were close friends may become weary of one's company, since they are also helpless to change the circumstances of one afflicted by grief.

**592. See How Beings Fear Death**

The newspapers and television news channels are full of stories of sorrow and disaster. It seems that ordinary people find some comfort by seeing that they are better off than others.

However, that is just an illusion. Although one may not be suffering loss, danger, and death at the moment, there is no security for one who is born into this world. Seeing how others tremble with fear and grieve over their loss, one should do no harm to any living being. A wise person should seek for the only escape from aging, disease, and death, which is nibbāna.

### **593. Disappointment Comes From Vain Hopes**

People always hope for long life, health, and happiness — that is only natural. However, disappointment is inevitable if craving and attachment are not restrained by wisdom. One who lives in the present without longing for the past or future, and who delights in the Dhamma, seeing danger is the pursuit of sensual pleasures, is easily contented. Great disappointment comes from great expectations, while learning to accept things as they really are bring mental stability and peace.

### **594. No One Is Immortal**

If one lives for eighty or ninety years, one is said to have lived until a ripe age. Rarely does anyone enjoy life after 100 years, when debilitating diseases cause constant pain and discomfort. Unable to walk far, eat regular food, and with the mind also failing, life may become so unbearable that some only wish to die. A human life is precious if one uses it to acquire merit and wisdom, but a waste if spent merely in the pursuit of sensual pleasures. Most people try to live as long as possible. When their duty to children has been done, they should spend all of their time to cultivate merits for the next existence. The property accumulated during life will be left behind for one's children or other relatives, but the kamma that one has done will give results in future lives.

Therefore, one should try to live long, but only for the sake of performing wholesome deeds such as charity, morality, propagation of the Dhamma, and the cultivation of wisdom through tranquillity and insight meditation.

**595. Heed the Buddha's Advice to Give Up Grief**

Heeding the advice given by the Buddha in this Salla Sutta, give up your grief by reflecting wisely that the departed will not be seen again.

**596. Extinguish Grief At Once**

If a fire were to start in your house, you would extinguish it at once by any means, knowing that failing to do so would lead to the destruction of the house and everything in it. When afflicted by grief, extinguish it at once. The sooner you can do so, the less you will suffer. If you can see the way things truly are, you will also see that you have no better choice than to dispel your grief and sorrow at once.

**597. Extract the Arrow**

Someone shot in battle by a poisonous arrow would naturally wish to remove it. Although pulling it out may hurt, it must be done at once for the wound to heal.

**598. Having Extracted the Arrow One Is Sorrowless**

The wise person who can extract the arrow of grief and despair, can abide in equanimity, remaining completely free from sorrow. Right understanding of the First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering, enables one to remove the craving that is the cause of suffering, which is the Second Noble Truth. The cessation of suffering that results from the removal of craving and attachment is the Third Noble Truth. Developing the skill to guide one's own mind in the right direction is the Fourth Noble Truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

The Buddha taught this Sutta to a householder whose son had recently died, and who could not abandon his grief. With the help of the Buddha's compassionate miracle of instruction, the householder abandoned his grief and became a Stream-winner, realising the cessation of suffering, which is *nibbāna*.