

# **The Fire Sermon**

*The Third Sermon of the Buddha  
as compiled and edited by*

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It is often good to start off with a story as a way of getting into the topic:

## **Conversion of Kassapa, the Fire-Worshiper**

“At that time there lived in Uruvela the Jatilas, Brahman hermits with matted-hair, worshiping the fire and keeping a fire-dragon; and Kassapa was their chief. ([www.sacred texts.com](http://www.sacred texts.com))

Kassapa was renowned throughout all India, and his name was honored as one of the wisest men on earth and an authority on religion.

And the Blessed One went to Kassapa of Uruvela the Jatila, and said:

"Let me stay a night in the room where you keep your sacred fire."

Kassapa, seeing the Blessed One in his majesty and beauty, thought to himself:

"This is a great muni and a noble teacher. Should he stay overnight in the room where the sacred fire is kept, the serpent will bite him and he will die."

And he said:

"I do not object to your staying overnight in the room where the sacred fire is kept, but the serpent lives there; he will kill you and I should be sorry to see you perish."

But the Buddha insisted and Kassapa admitted him to the room where the sacred fire was kept. And the Blessed One sat down with body erect, surrounding himself with watchfulness. In the night the dragon came, belching forth in rage his fiery poison, and filling the air with burning vapor, but could do him no harm, and the fire consumed itself while the World-honored One remained composed.

And the venomous fiend became very wroth so that he died in his anger. When Kassapa saw the light shining forth from the room he said:

"Alas, what misery! Truly, the countenance of Gotama the great Sakyamuni is beautiful, but the serpent will destroy him."

In the morning the Blessed One showed the dead body of the fiery fiend to Kassapa, saying:

"His fire has been conquered by my fire."

And Kassapa thought to himself.

"Sakyamuni is a great samana and possesses high powers, but he is not holy like me."

There was in those days a festival, and Kassapa thought:

"The people will come hither from all parts of the country and will see the great Sakyamuni. When he speaks to them, they will believe in him and abandon me." And he grew envious. When the day of the festival arrived, the Blessed One retired and did not come to Kassapa. And Kassapa went to the Buddha on the next morning and said: "Why did the great Sakyamuni not come?"

The Tathagata replied:

"Didst thou not think, O Kassapa, that it would be better if I stayed away from the festival?"

And Kassapa was astonished and thought:

"Great is Sakyamuni; he can read my most secret thoughts, but he is not holy like me."

The Blessed One addressed Kassapa and said:

"Thou seest the truth, but acceptest it not because of the envy that dwells in thy heart. Is envy holiness? Envy is the last remnant of self that has remained in thy mind. Thou art not holy, Kassapa; thou hast not yet entered the path."

And Kassapa gave up his resistance. His envy disappeared, and, bowing down before the Blessed One, he said:

"Lord, our Master, let me receive the ordination from the Blessed One."

And the Blessed One said:

"Thou, Kassapa, art chief of the Jatilas. Go, then, first and inform them of thine intention, and let them do as thou thinkest fit."

Then Kassapa went to the Jatilas and said:

"I am anxious to lead a religious life under the direction of the great Sakyamuni, who is the Enlightened One, the Buddha. Do as ye think best."

The Jatilas replied:

"We have conceived a profound affection for the great Sakyamuni, and if thou wilt join his brotherhood, we will do likewise."

The Jatilas of Uruvela now flung their paraphernalia of fire-worship into the river and went to the Blessed One.

Nadi Kassapa and Gaya Kassapa, brothers of the great Uruvela Kassapa, powerful men and chieftains among the people, were dwelling below on the stream, and when they saw the instruments used in fire-worship floating in the river, they said:

"Something has happened to our brother. And they came with their folk to Uruvela. Hearing what had happened, they, too, went to the Buddha.

The Blessed One, seeing that the Jatilas of Nadi and Gaya, who had practiced severe austerities and worshiped fire, were now come to him, preached a sermon on fire, and said:

"Everything, O Jatilas, is burning. The eye is burning, all the senses are burning, are thoughts burning. They are burning with the fire of lust. There is anger, and there is ignorance, there is hatred, and as long as the fire finds flammable things upon which it can feed, so long will it burn, and there will be birth and death, decay, grief, lamentation, suffering, despair, and sorrow.

“Considering this, a disciple of the Dharma will see the four noble truths and walk in the eightfold path of holiness. He will become wary\* of his eye, wary of all his senses, wary of his thoughts. He will divest himself of passion and become free. He will be delivered from selfishness and attain the blessed state of Nirvana.”

And the Jatilas rejoiced and took refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

\*[The word “wary” in the above has the meaning of watching-out and being aware and careful and mindful of how the dangers of contact and dependent attraction arising through sense consciousness and an unmindful thought processes can become the cause of craving, dissatisfaction and suffering.]

Now, as the above-cited text of the sutta story may seem somewhat

informal, let's look at the renderings of another translation to compare the texts to see what we can learn from that exercise:

## *Āditta Sutta*

Translation and commentary by Ledi Sayadaw

### **The Fire Sermon**

At one time, the Blessed one was living near Gayā, at Gayā's head, with a thousand bhikkhus. Then the Blessed One addressed them:

“Everything, monks, is burning. What, monks, is everything that is burning? The *eye*, monks, is burning, form is burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning. The *feeling* that arises dependent on eye-contact, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, that also is burning.

With what is it burning? It is burning with the fire of passion, the fire of hatred, the fire of delusion. I declare that it is burning with the fire of birth, decay, death, grief, lamentation, pain, sorrow, and despair.

The ear, monks, is burning, sound is burning, ... and despair.

The nose, monks, is burning, odour is burning, ... and despair.

The tongue, monks, is burning, taste is burning, ... and despair.

The body, monks, is burning, touch is burning, ... and despair.

The mind, monks, is burning, thought is burning ... and despair.

Seeing thus, monks, the well-informed noble disciple is *disgusted* with the eye, is *disgusted with forms*, disgusted with eye-consciousness, disgusted with eye-contact.

He is *disgusted*\* [See editorial comment below] with the feeling that arises dependent on eye contact, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

He is *disgusted* with the ear ... with the nose ... with the tongue ... with the body ... with the mind, with thoughts, with mind-contact, with the feeling that arises dependent on mind-contact, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Being *disgusted*, he is dispassionate, being dispassionate he is freed. Being freed, he knows he is free, and he knows,

“Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been fulfilled, what should be done has been done, there is no more of this.”

Thus spoke the Blessed One. Those monks delighted in what the Blessed One had said. And while this discourse was being delivered the minds of those one thousand monks were liberated from defilements without any remainder.”

*Samyuttanikāya (S.iv.19), Saḷāyatana-samyuttam, Sabbavaggo, Ādittasuttam*

\*While “disgusted” sounds a bit strong, in the above rendering, the meaning is that, once one sees that the senses arise out of sense-contact and resultant sense-attachment, (which may be low and base), one becomes disenchanted

and one turns away from such sense consciousnesses and desires which also lead to false expectations dependent upon ignorance.

### **What Ledi Sayadaw says about the Fire Sutta:**

“This important discourse was given by the Buddha to a thousand fire-worshipping ascetics early in his dispensation.

The account of the Buddha’s meeting with the Kassapa brothers at Uruvela is told in the Vinaya Mahāvagga.

After giving his first discourse, the Dhammacakka Sutta, and the Anattalakkhana Sutta, the discourse on not-self, to his first five disciples they all attained Arahantship after the first Rains Retreat.

The Buddha spent the second Rains Retreat at Uruvela, during which time he performed numerous feats of psychic power to humble the pride of the fire-worshipping ascetics, so that they gained faith in him and became his disciples. After the Buddha taught the Āditta Sutta, all one thousand of these bhikkhus became Arahants.

The Ādittapariiyāya Sutta or Āditta Sutta is found in the Saḷāyatanavagga of the Samyuttanikāya, as well as in the Vinaya Mahāvagga. “Pariiyāya” means “instruction.”

All six sense spheres — the eye and forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and odours, the tongue and tastes, the body and touches, the mind and thoughts — are the basis for *contact, feeling, and craving*.

*Craving is like a fire* that burns everything with which it comes into

contact. If we are mindful of the feeling at the moment of sense contact, before feeling gives rise to craving, we can break the link between feeling and craving.

See also the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw's Discourse on the Mālukiyaputta Sutta. The knowledge of disgust (*nibbida ñāna*) is an advanced stage of insight knowledge where the mind sees nothing desirable in any sense object. This leads on to the higher stage of equanimity about formations or *dispassion* regarding pleasant and unpleasant sense objects, and finally to the realisation of nibbāna.

The early discourses like the Dhammacakka, Anattalakkhana, and Āditta Sutta, seem very simple, but only those with well developed insight knowledge were able to gain the final goal on listening to them. Nowadays, meditators will need to practise insight meditation diligently for many months or years to gain similar realisations. For most of us, the objects of the six senses do not seem to be on fire, nor disgusting.

On the contrary, our mind still takes delight in them, pursues them, and clings to them constantly. Unless we can change our perception through gaining insight, we cannot become aware of the danger that lies dormant therein.”

Thus we come to see that craving and attachment to the sense objects is, the problem to be overcome.

## Reference

Conversion of Kassapa, the Fire-Worshiper <[www.sacred texts.com](http://www.sacred texts.com)>