



The Burden Sutra

by Mu Soeng

Creative expressions of the dharma have long been an element of Buddhist traditions. Mu Soeng—who served as scholar in residence for almost three decades at BCBS—has been experimenting with articulating the dharma in the style of classical Buddhist suttas. Here, inspired by “The Bhara (Burden) Sutta” (SN 22.22), Mu Soeng explores the image of the oxen as craving, and their oil-tiller as clinging, and taking up the burden and putting down the burden.

“Friends, I will tell you about the burden and the beast of burden. I will tell you about the taking up of the burden and the putting down of the burden.

“Friends, an oil-tiller extracts oil from the seeds by using a pair of oxen as the beast of burden to crush the seeds. He makes a neck yoke consisting of a beam and a bow that rests on the necks of the oxen. It is carved and rounded to fit in the animals’ necks. The oxen push with the top of their neck directly against the beam and push with their shoulders against the upper part of the yoke.

“The oil-tiller uses a goad to make the oxen go around and around turning a wooden pole set up in the middle of his large tub. The churning of the pole crushes the seeds in the tub and the oil comes out. The oxen are driven from the first dawn of the day to the beginning of the dark in the evening, going round and round.

“Friends, you should ask what in the human condition are the oxen and who is the oil-tiller. The Tathagata has taught that the five sense-aggregates (khandas) are the oxen and craving (tanha) and clinging (upadana) are their oil-tiller. Driven by an endless craving for gratification, the human beings, with their six sense doors, get conditioned to go around and around by their own lust for more and more. The never-ending craving is their becoming in the endless round of samsara—the round of birth, death, rebirth. Their wandering around in samsara is like the oxen going around and around in the oil-tiller’s mill.

“Friends, you should ask why the oxen keep going around and around in the oil-tiller’s mill. It is because the oil-tiller periodically gives them grass to chew on. It becomes their motivation, and their reward.

“Friends, you should ask why beings keep going round and round in samsara. You should know that your own endless craving—yearnings for food, sex, sleep, fame, and wealth—is the driver and your conditioned mind is the beast that carries the burden, like the oxen in the oil-tiller’s mill. What the conditioned mind does not realize is that gratification is fleeting and does not offer any respite from endless craving. But the conditioned mind continues to perpetuate this feedback loop in the same way that the wheels driven by the oxen create ruts in the yard of the oil-tiller’s mill.

“Friends, the burden that the beast of the conditioned mind carries all day long is the burden of insecurities, anxieties, unresolved issues, instability, uncertainty,

confusion, unsatisfactoriness, and a general sense of unease. The Tathagata has called this burden the dukkha of human condition.

“Friends, the oxen go around and around all day long in placidity because they do not have the mental cogitations that beset a human being. They are not mentally stressed by the burden carried on their neck all day long. But the conditioned mind of a human being always gets stressed by its mental cogitations, by the burden it carries, by its dukkha.

“Now this, friends, is the noble truth of dukkha-burden: Birth is dukkha-burden; aging is dukkha-burden; dying is dukkha-burden; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are dukkha-burden; association with the unbeloved is dukkha-burden; separation from the loved is dukkha-burden; not getting what is wanted is dukkha-burden. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are dukkha-burden. (SN 56.11)

“Which five? Form (rupa), feelings (vedana), perceptions (sanna), concoctions (sankhara), and thought-formation (vinnana) are the five clinging-aggregates. Why are they a burden? Because each of the aggregates has its own clinging proclivity. When all five come together as nama-rupa [the mind-body continuum], their combined clinging proclivities become exponential.

“And which, friends, is the burden-bearer? It should be said it is the individual person who identifies with such and such name, identifies with such and such ancestry, identifies with such and such title, takes delight in the proliferation of I, me, mine. This, friends, is the burden-bearer.

“And what, friends, is the taking up of the burden? It is the craving [tanha] of the burden-bearer, leading to rebirth, connected with delight and passion, finding delight here and there: namely, craving for sensual pleasure, craving for being,

and craving for extinction. This, friends, is called the taking up of the burden. (SN 22.22)

“Friends, you should inquire deeply into the nature of burden itself to understand its chief characteristic as dukkha. Whatever has come to be, has come into existence, is a burden. Whatever has become is like a house, a cart, a flower. Its becoming is a construction, and it is constructed by causes and conditions. It does not sustain itself. The characteristic of any construction is its manifestation, its momentary stability, its imperceptible decay, and its ultimate dissolution. This is the dukkha of what has come to be.

“Friends, each of the five aggregates is a construction, a becoming, a burden. It is not different in its construction from that of a house, a cart, a flower. Friends, the decay and dissolution of a flower, a cart, or a house is not burdensome to them, but it is burdensome to one having a human body. The decay and dissolution of a human body is always dukkha for its carrier.

“Friends, the taking up of the burden should be understood as the fact that having a body—any body—is fundamentally an ungovernable experience. It is ungovernable because the five aggregates of which the body and mental processing are made up are constantly changing. Each aggregate’s core molecules are rearranging themselves in each microsecond. The entire process is beyond conscious control or thought. That’s why it is ungovernable.

“And when it is ungovernable, there is the proclivity to wish to have control over it. With the longing for control comes craving and clinging for the nama-rupa to be not dukkha, to be not burdensome. Friends, you should ask why the clinging proclivity is there in the first place. It is because each aggregate and all five aggregates together are consuming entities. Their survival need is the most basic structure of their consumption need. The nama-rupa is an organism, and each organism struggles to survive.

“Friends, in the human organism, the clinging proclivity goes beyond the survival need to morph into endless wanting and not wanting. The Tathagata has called proclivity craving, *tanha*. It is endless, I tell you. This endless craving is the *mara* of the human world.

“Friends, the Tathagata teaches that the body, with its 84,000 moving parts is a burden; the mind, with its 84 million cogitations is a burden. The nature of the body is disease; the nature of the mind is dis-quiet. The body is an inheritor of genetic dispositions and diseases from parents and grandparents.

“Friends, the physicians of the future will be able to better understand the genetic transference of body’s burden and diseases from one generation to the next. The Tathagata has known in his own mortal body the fragility of the contraption that has been stitched together by bones, flesh, sinews, vessels, nerves, blood, and other liquids. The Tathagata has also known the sense of wonder of the body when in the flush of youth. He has also seen the brittleness of bones and the drying up of the skin in old age.

“Friends, I tell you, the mentality is an even greater cluster of disquiet than the body. The Tathagata has taught that mentality is the forerunner of all things (*mano-pubbanga-dhamma*), and it remains the dominant source of disquiet in the mind-body continuum. Friends, this is all burdensome.

“The taking up of the burden has far-reaching consequences. The carrier of the burden wanders around in *samsara* lifetime after lifetime without learning how to put down the burden. That is why the Tathagata teaches the putting down of the burden. And what, friends, is the putting down of the burden? It is the ending of craving, the cessation that brings about the absence of desire without remainder: the abandoning, the forsaking, the freedom, the non-attachment. It is the giving up of consumership by the bearer of the

burden. This, friends, is called the putting down of the burden.

“Friends, you should know that casting off the burden is bliss. The Tathagata speaks of the bliss of casting off the burden as the absence of stress, dukkha. You can experience it for yourself: investigate for yourself what it is like when your mind is completely free of any wanting of any kind.

“Friends, the Tathagata teaches further that a liberated person, a noble person, a disciple of the Buddha, does not take up another burden after casting off the heavy burden. Why is this so? Because she has pulled up the craving along with its root. Having done so, she is free from yearnings and is totally unbound. She is free now, and she is free in the future with the uprooting of craving.