16

(Magga) Nāvā Sutta
The Discourse on the Ship (on the Way) | S 45.158/5:51
Theme: The noble eightfold path leads to awakening
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2006

Introduction
The short Nāvā Sutta is actually one of numerous parables (totaling some 32) in the Magga Sānyutta, all of which deal with the noble eightfold path. This saṃyutta is part of the Mahā Vagga (of the Saṃyutta Nikāya), where the viveka,nissita ("dependent on solitude") formula is systematically applied to the factors of the noble eightfold path, the awakening factors, the spiritual faculties and the spiritual powers.¹

The viveka,nissita formula runs thus:²

dependent on solitude,³ dependent on fading away (of lust) [dispassion],⁴ dependent on cessation (of suffering),⁵ ripening in letting go (of defilements).⁶

viveka,nissita

This well known formula states the true purpose of the religious life—that of spiritual liberation. As such, the formula is applied to the awakening-factors (bojjhangā), as in the Ānāpāna,sati Sutta (M 118).⁷ Here, in the Nāvā Sutta, the viveka,nissita formula qualifies the noble eightfold path [83].

As the Sutta title suggests, it contains the well known parable of the ocean-going ship (nāvā). The same parable is found in the Vāsijaṭa Sutta (S 22.101)⁸ and the Bhāvanā Sutta (A 7.67), and explained in detailed in the Sānyutta Commentary.⁹

---

¹ As noted by Gethin (2001:163 n87), here the sections referred to are common to all the seven sets (see Bodhi,pakkhiyā Dhammā = SD 10.1(1)) and the dhyanas (cf Gethin 2001 ch 7.5). The viveka,nissita formula, however, is applied in these only to the items named; see S 5:29-31, 32-34, 35 f, 38-42, 45-62, 134-140, 239-243, 249-253.
² For the viveka,nissita formula, see SD 20.4.
³ Here "solitude" (viveka), or seclusion, has a special reference to the overcoming of the 5 mental hindrances (patīca nīvaraṇā). This whole phrase, beginning with "dependent on solitude is called the viveka,nissita formula. See Gethin 2001:162-168. According to Paṭisambhidā, magga, there are 5 kinds of "solitude" (viveka), ie overcoming of the hindrances: (1) solitude through suppression (vikkhabhāna viveka); (2) solitude through the substitution of opposite or displacement by opposites (tad-ānāa viveka); (3) solitude through cutting off (samuccheda viveka); (4) solitude through tranquillization (patipassaddhi viveka); and (5) solitude through escape (nissaraṇa viveka) (Pm 1:27, 2:219-224; Vism 13.12/410, 22.110/693). See also “Introduction to the Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas” = SD 13.1 §4.2c.
⁴ Vīraṇa, also tr as “dispassion.”
⁵ Nirodha, ie, “cessation of suffering.”
⁶ MA says that there are 2 kinds of letting go or relinquishment (of suffering) (vossagga): “giving up” (pariccāga), ie the abandonment of defilements, and “entering into” (pakkhandana), ie culminating in nirvana. Gethin notes that this phrase is not unique to the 7 bojjhangā, but is also found in connection with the factors of the noble eightfold path, the indriyā and balā (2001:162 f). This formula shows that that each bojjhangā is to be developed successively “as dependent on solitude, dispassion [fading away] and cessation” (Gethin 2001:166).
⁷ M 118.42/3:88 = SD 7.13.
⁸ The parable occurs in Vasiṭṭa S (S 22.101/3:155) = Bhāvanā S (A 7.67.3/4:127). See Vasiṭṭa S Intro (2.3) = SD 15.2a (2.3).
⁹ SA 2:330 f: see SD 15.2a (2.3).
The Discourse on the Ship (on the way)
S 45.158/5:51

Parable of the ship
2.1 Suppose, bhikshus, an ocean-going ship, rigged with masts and stays,\(^{10}\) having been worn out by the water for six months, were to be hauled up onto dry land for the cold season.\(^{11}\) The ropes that have been worn out by the wind and sun, thoroughly soaked by the rains, would easily weaken and waste [rot] away.\(^{12}\)

Cultivation of the noble eightfold path
2.2 Even so, bhikshus, it is with the monk who cultivates, continuously develops, the noble eightfold path—his fetters would easily weaken and waste [rot] away.
2.3 And how, bhikshus, does the monk cultivate, continuously develop, the noble eightfold path\(^{13}\) so that his fetters would easily weaken and waste [rot] away?
3 Here, bhikshus, he cultivates
(1) right view,
(2) right thought,
(3) right speech,
(4) right action,
(5) right livelihood,
(6) right effort,
(7) right mindfulness,
(8) right samadhi,
that is dependent on solitude, on letting go (of craving) [dispassion], on ending (of suffering), ripening in release.

In this way, bhikshus, the monk cultivates, continuously develops the noble eightfold path so that his fetters would easily weaken and waste [rot] away.

— evaṁ —

051026; 060208; 090111; 121124; 130523

\(^{10}\) “Rigged with masts and stays,” *vetta,bandhana,bandhanāya*. Here I follow S:W 5:40.
\(^{11}\) “The cold season,” *hemantikena*. See Intro (2.3) above.
\(^{13}\) For an insightful study of the eightfold path, see Gethin 2001:190-226 (ch 6).