

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 Saṃyutta**, 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,nissitaṃ virāga,nissitaṃ nirodha,nissitaṃ vossagga,pariṇāmin

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 (*bojjhaṅga*), as in **the Ānāpāna,sati Sutta** (M 118).⁷ Here, in the Nāvā Sutta, the *viveka,nissita* formula qualifies the noble eightfold path [§3].

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 Saṃyutta 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 (*pañca 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 (*vikkhambhana viveka*); (2) solitude through the substitution of opposite or displacement by opposites (*tad-aṅga viveka*); (3) solitude through cutting off (*samuccheda viveka*); (4) solitude through tranquillization (*paṭipassaddhi 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 *Virāga*, 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 *bojjhaṅgā*, 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 *bojjhaṅga* 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 **Vasi,jaṭa S** (S 22.101/3:155) = **Bhāvanā S** (A 7.67.3/4:127). See Vāsijaṭa 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 path¹³ 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.

— evaṃ —

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.

¹² The parable occurs in **Vāsi, jaṭa S** (S 22.101/3:155) = **(Nāvā) Bhāvanā S** (A 7.67.3/4:127). See Intro.

¹³ For an insightful study of the eightfold path, see Gethin 2001:190-226 (ch 6).