(Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhmaṇa Sutta 1
The First Discourse on Recluses and Brahmins
(On the Elements)
[Gratification, danger and escape regarding the elements]
(Saṁyutta Nikāya 14.37/2:175 f)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2009

1 Assāda, ādīnava, nissaraṇa
The three terms—assāda, ādīnava and nissaraṇa—on which the (Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhmaṇa Sutta 1 is based, often appear as a set in the Nikāyas. The Commentaries relate them to the four noble truths, thus:

danger (ādīnava) the first truth, that is suffering;
gratification (assāda) the second truth, that is, the arising of suffering, craving; and
escape (nissaraṇa) the third truth, that is, the ending of suffering, nirvana.
(DA 2:512; MA 2:11)

It is interesting to see that the sequences of the first two terms (assāda and ādīnava) are reversed here. In fact, understandably, the “gratification” or assāda model is an experiential one, used to show suffering as cause or condition first: we seek various forms of gratification, and this leads to suffering.

The sacca model, on the other hand, is a sort of therapeutic list: the ailment, the cause, the cure, and the prescription. Although the fourth truth, that of the path, is not directly mentioned here, it is implied as the means of escape.¹

2 Related discourses
The three discourses—the (Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhmaṇa Suttas 1-3 (S 14.37-39)—closes the Dhātu Saṁyutta or “connected sayings on the elements” (S 14). They are simple summaries of teachings showing the importance understanding the four primary elements (dhātu), based on the “gratification” (assāda) model or paradigm—that is, the “gratification, danger and escape” (assāda, ādīnava, nissaraṇa)—regarding the four elements, thus,

(Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhm,aṇa Sutta 1 (S 14.37) gratification, danger, and escape;
(Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhm,aṇa Sutta 2 (S 14.38) arising, passing away, gratification, danger, escape;
(Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhm,aṇa Sutta 3 (S 14.39) the element, arising, ending, the way to the ending.

Although the terms, assāda, ādīnava and nissaraṇa, are not used in the third discourse, their senses are implicitly applied.

The (Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhmaṇa Sutta 1 (S 14.37) defines a spiritual person—a “recluse or brahmin” (samaṇā vā brāhmaṇā vā)—as one who understands “the gratification, the danger, and the escape in regard to these four elements.”²

The Aṅguttara Nikāya contains two consecutive suttas—the Pubbe Sambodha Sutta (A 3.101) and the Assāda Sutta (A 3.102)—build on the “gratification” formula to reflect on the world as a whole.³ These two discourses are elaborations of the three (Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhmaṇa Suttas, and should, as such, be studied together. Begin with the third (Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhmaṇa Suttas as they are very basic. Then go on to the Pubbe Sambodha Sutta, ending with the Assāda Sutta.

¹ For the “gratification, danger, escape” with regards to the 5 aggregates, see Mahā Puṇṇama S (M 109.12/-3:18).
² Imāsaṁ catunnaṁ dhātūnaṁ assādaṁ ca ādīnavaṁ ca nissaraṇaṁ ca yathā, bhūtāṁ pujānti.
³ Respectively: A 3.101/1:258 f = SD 14.6; A 3.102/1:260 = SD 14.2. See Intros to both trs.
The related discourses are here listed in the sequence they are recommended to be studied:\textsuperscript{4}

1. \textit{(Saṅkhitta) Dhātu Sutta} (S 14.30) the four elements (basic list).\textsuperscript{5}
2. \textit{(Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhm,āṇa S 1} (S 14.37) gratification, danger, and escape.
3. \textit{(Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhm,āṇa S 2} (S 14.38) arising, passing away, gratification, danger, escape.
4. \textit{(Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhm,āṇa S 3} (S 14.39) elements, arising, ending, the way to the ending.
5. \textit{(Assāda) Pubbe Sambodha S} (A 3.101) the world can never satisfy us completely.\textsuperscript{6}
6. \textit{Assāda Sutta} (A 3.102) escape from suffering is possible.\textsuperscript{7}
7. \textit{(Dhātu) Pubbe Sambodha Sutta} (S 14.31) the elements have to be properly understood.\textsuperscript{8}
8. \textit{Acariṁ Sutta} (S 14.32) the Buddha understands the four elements.\textsuperscript{9}

It is helpful to note that pairs of discourses (5)-(6) and (7)-(8) are each a sequential set. Either pair can be studied first followed by the other.

\textsuperscript{4} For a fuller list of refs, see \textit{Pubbe Sambodha S} (A 3.101) = SD 14.6 Intro (2).
\textsuperscript{5} S 14.30/4:169 = SD 29.15.
\textsuperscript{6} A 3.101/1:258 f = SD 14.6.
\textsuperscript{7} A 3.102/1:260 = SD 14.7.
\textsuperscript{8} S 14.31/4:170 f = SD 29.16.
\textsuperscript{9} S 14.32/4:171 f = SD 29.17.
The First Discourse on Recluses and Brahmins
(On the Elements)
(S 14.37/2:175 f)

1 (The Blessed One was) residing at Sāvatthī.

The four elements
2 “Bhikshus, there are these four elements. What are the four?
The earth element, the water element, the fire element, the wind element.

Not understanding the four elements
3 Bhikshus, those recluses and brahmins who do not understand, according to reality,
the gratification, the danger, and the escape in regard to these four elements—[176]
I do not regard them as recluses amongst recluses or brahmins amongst brahmins,
and these venerable ones do not, by realizing it for themselves with direct knowledge, attain and
dwell, here and now, in the goal of recluseship or the goal of brahminhood.

Understanding the four elements
4 But, bhikshus, those recluses and brahmins who understand, according to reality,
the gratification, the danger, and the escape in regard to these four elements—
I regard them as recluses amongst recluses or brahmins amongst brahmins,
and these venerable ones, by realizing it for themselves with direct knowledge, attain and dwell, here
and now, in the goal of recluseship or the goal of brahminhood.

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