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(Rāja) Nāga Sutta

The Discourse the (Royal) Bull Elephant | A 4.114
(Catukka) Nāga Sutta The (Fours) Discourse on the Bull Elephant
 Theme: The 4 qualities of a truly worthy monastic
 Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2014

1 Introduction

1.1 The (Rāja) Nāga Sutta (A 4.114) gives a list of **4 qualities** of a truly worthy monastic, that is, one who is “worthy of offerings, worthy of hospitality, worthy of gifts, worthy of salutation with the lotus-palms, a supreme field of merit for the world” [§7]. More specifically, this refers to an arhat [§12].

1.2 The Sutta is divided into two almost equal sections. The first section is about the 4 qualities of a royal bull elephant that is “worthy of the king, of service to the king, and is reckoned as a limb [an emblem] of the king” [§1]. The 4 qualities are described as those of “a listener, a destroyer, a forbearer, and a goer” [§1.2]. Each of these qualities are then elaborated [§§2-6]. This is the parable section of the Sutta.

In the Dharma section, we see, “in the same way” (*evam eva*), the 4 qualities of a monastic or renunciant who is truly worthy [§7; 1.1]: he is also one who is “a listener, a destroyer, a forbearer, and a goer” [§8].

2 Related sutta

2.1 The (Nāga) Sotā Sutta (A 5.140) has 4 same qualities as the (Rāja) Sota Sutta (A 4.114), plus an additional one—that of “the warder” (*rakkhita*)—as the third.¹ Otherwise, the rest of the two suttas are identical, dealing with the qualities of a truly worthy monastic.²

2.2 Another parable on elephant-training is found in **the Danta,bhūmi Sutta** (M 125).³ The elephant parable here, however, has a different emphasis from that of the (Rāja) Nāga Sutta. While the elephant parable of the (Rāja) Nāga Sutta refers to self-training and personal qualities, the parable of the Danta,-bhūmi refers to how a teacher (the elephant forester and the elephant tamer) trains a disciple. While the former centres on the pupil, the latter centres on the teacher. In this sense, they complement each other with regards to teaching and learning the Dharma-Vinaya.

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The Discourse on the (Royal) Bull Elephant

A 4.114

THE ROYAL BULL ELEPHANT PARABLE

The 4 qualities of a royal bull elephant

1 Bhikshus, a royal bull elephant that possesses 4 qualities is worthy of the king, of service to the king, and is reckoned as a limb [an emblem] of the king.⁴

What are the four?

¹ A 5.140/3:161-164 @ SD 46.9.

² For details of this missing 3rd figure and quality, see **(Nāga) Sotā S** (A 5.140), SD 46.9 (2.1).

³ M 125,12 @ SD 46.3.

⁴ *Catūhi bhikkhave aṅgehi samannāgato rañño nāgo rājā,raho hoti rāja,bhoggo rañño aṅgan't'eva saṅkham gacchati*. The phrase *rājāraho hoti rāja,bhoggo rañño aṅgan't'eva saṅkham gacchati* recurs (with a minor variation) at **M 125,12.14/3:133**, **A 3.94,1/1:244**, **3.131,1/1:284**, **4.112,2/2:113**, **4.181,1/2:170**.

1.2 Here, bhikshus, the royal bull elephant is a listener, a destroyer, a forbearer, and a goer.⁵

(1) The royal elephant that listens

2 And how, bhikshus, is the royal bull elephant **a listener?** (*sotā*)

Here, bhikshus, whatever task the elephant trainer gives it, whether it has done it before or not, the royal elephant makes that its purpose,⁶ pays attention to it, fully directs its mind to it, with ready ear, listens to it.⁷

2.2 Here, bhikshus, whatever the elephant trainer gives the royal bull elephant, whether or not it has done it before, it listens, with all ears, and makes it its purpose, sets its mind to it, directs its whole mind to it.⁸

Thus, bhikshus, is the royal bull elephant a listener.

(2) The royal elephant that destroys

3 And how, bhikshus, is the royal elephant bull **a destroyer?** (*hantā*)

Here, bhikshus, when the royal bull elephant has gone into battle [in the midst of battle], it destroys elephant and mahout [elephant-rider], [117] it destroys chariot and charioteer, it destroys the infantry.⁹

Thus, bhikshus, is the royal bull elephant a destroyer.

(3) The royal elephant that forbears

4 And how, bhikshus, is the royal elephant bull **a forbearer?** (*khantā*)

Here, bhikshus, when the royal bull elephant has gone into battle, it endures being hit by spears, by swords, and by arrows; and endures the sounds and din of the bheri [conical drum], cymbals, conchshells, and the dindima [small drum].¹⁰

Thus, bhikshus, is the royal bull elephant a forbearer.

(4) The royal elephant that goes rightly

5 And how, bhikshus, is the royal elephant bull **a goer?** (*gantā*)

Here, bhikshus, in whichever direction the elephant trainer sends the royal bull elephant, whether or not it has gone there before, it quickly goes there.¹¹

Thus, bhikshus, is the royal bull elephant a goer.

6 A royal bull elephant, bhikshus, that possesses these 4 qualities is worthy of the king, of service to the king, and is reckoned as a limb [an emblem] of the king.

⁵ *Idha bhikkhave rañño nāgo sotā ca hoti hantā ca khantā ca gantā ca.*

⁶ “Make that its purpose,” Ce Ee Se **aṭṭhi, katvā**; Be *aṭṭhim katvā* (Comy: *aṭṭhiko hutva*, “become receptive”): cf D 2:204; M 3:201; S 1:112, 141, 5:95; A 2:116, 3:162; U 80; J 522/5:151; V 4:144. See CPD, sv.

⁷ *Idha bhikkhave rañño nāgo yam enaṃ hatthi, damma, sārathi kāraṇaṃ kāreti yadi vā kata, pubbaṃ, yadi vā akata, pubbaṃ, taṃ aṭṭhi, katvā* [Ce Ee Se, A 3:162; Be *aṭṭhim katvā*] *manasi katvā sabbāṃ cetaso* [Be *sabba, cetasā*] *samannāharitvā ohita, soto suṇāti* (A 4.114, 2/2:116), SD 46.8 = (A 5.140, 3/3:161 f), SD 46.9.

⁸ *Idha bhikkhave rañño nāgo yam enaṃ hatthi, damma, sārathi kāraṇaṃ kāreti yadi vā kata, pubbaṃ, yadi vā akata, pubbaṃ, taṃ aṭṭhi, katvā* [Ce Ee Se, A 3:162; Be *aṭṭhim katvā*] *manasi katvā sabbāṃ cetaso* [Be *sabba, cetasā*] *samannāharitvā ohita, soto suṇāti.*

⁹ *Idha bhikkhave rañño nāgo saṅgāma, gato hatthim pi hanati* [Ee hanti throughout], *hatth’āruham pi hanati, assaṃ pi hanati, ass’āruham pi hanati, ratham pi hanati, rathikam pi hanati, pattikam pi hanati.*

¹⁰ *Idha bhikkhave rañño nāgo saṅgāma, gato khamo hoti satti-p, pahārānaṃ asi-p, pahārānaṃ usu-p, pahārānaṃ pharasa-p, pahārānaṃ*¹⁰ *bheri, paṇava, saṅkha, tiṇava, ninnāda, saddānaṃ.* This parable recurs in **Danta, bhūmi S** (M 125), where it forms part of a skill known as “the impeturbable,” ie, the ability to remain still against all odds and dangers in battle (M 125, 13/3:133), SD 51.12. On the various sounds, see **Samañña, phala S** (D 2, 92), SD 8.10.

¹¹ *Idha bhikkhave rañño nāgo yam enaṃ hatthi, damma, sārathi disaṃ peseti yadi vā gata, pubbaṃ, yadi vā agata, -pubbaṃ, taṃ khippam eva gantā hoti.*

THE MONASTIC WITH 4 WORTHY QUALITIES

The 4 qualities of a worthy monastic

- 7 In the same way, bhikshus, a monk who possesses 4 qualities is
 worthy of offerings,¹² *āhuneyyo*
 worthy of hospitality, *pāhuneyyo*
 worthy of gifts,¹³ *dakkhiṇeyyo*
 worthy of salutation with the lotus-palms,
 a supreme field of merit for the world.¹⁴ *añjali,karaṇīyo*
anuttaram puñña-k,khettaṃ lokassa.

What are the four?

- 8 Here, bhikshus, a monk is a listener, a destroyer, a forbearer, and a goer.

(1) The monk who is a listener

- 9 And how, bhikshus, is a monk **a listener**?

Here, bhikshus, when the Dharma-Vinaya [the teaching and discipline], declared by the Tathagata is being taught, it makes that its purpose, pays attention to it, fully directs its mind to it, with ready ear, listens to it.¹⁵

Thus, bhikshus, is the monk a listener.

(2) The monk who is a destroyer

- 10 And how, bhikshus, is a monk **a destroyer**?

Here, bhikshus, a monk does not tolerate any sensual thought that has arisen:

he abandons, dispels, destroys, makes an end of it, brings it to non-existence.¹⁶

he does not tolerate any thought of ill will that has arisen:

he abandons, dispels, destroys, makes an end of it, brings it to non-existence.

he does not tolerate any thought of violence that has arisen:

he abandons, dispels, destroys, makes an end of it, brings it to non-existence.

Thus, bhikshus, is the monk a destroyer.

(3) The monk who is a forbearer

- 11 And how, bhikshus, is a monk **a forbearer**?

Here, bhikshus, a monk bears heat, cold, hunger, thirst, the touch of mosquitoes, flies, the wind, the sun, and creeping creatures,¹⁷

endures the ways of words ill-spoken, unwelcome;¹⁸ **[118]**

¹² *Āhuneyyo*. That is, worthy of receiving sacrifices or offerings. The Skt cognate *āhavanīya* refers to that which was offered as an oblation as in *āhuneyy'aggī*, one of the 3 brahminical sacrificial fires (the one in the east).

¹³ *Dakkhiṇeyyo*. Specifically refers to offerings made for the benefit of the departed by way of dedication of merits to them.

¹⁴ These are the last 5 of the 9 qualities of the sangha of noble ones (awakened saints). For details on each of these qualities, see **Attha,puggala S** (A 8.59), SD 15.10a.

¹⁵ *Idha bhikkhave tathāgata-p,pavedite dhamma,vīnaye desiyamāne aṭṭhim katvā manasi katvā sabba,cetasā sam-annāharitvā ohita,soto suṇāti*. (A 4.114.7/2:117), SD 46.8 = (A 5.140.9/3:163), SD 46.9.

¹⁶ The above 2 lines: *Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu uppannaṃ kāma,vitakkaṃ nādhivāseti pajahati vinodeti hanati* [only Be] *vyantī,karoti anabhāvaṃ gameti*.

¹⁷ *Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu khama hoti sītassa uṇhassa jighacchāya pipāsāya ḍaṃsa,makasa,vātātapa,sarīsapa,-samphassānaṃ*.

¹⁸ *Duruttānaṃ durāgatānaṃ vacana,pathānaṃ*. Comy here is silent, but Comy at **A 5.140** gives these glosses. *Durutta* (*du-v-utta*, “badly uttered”) means the utterance of improper speech, rough words on account of anger (*duruttanan'ī na suṭṭhu vuttānaṃ dosa,vasena pavattitānaṃ pharusa,vacanānaṃ*). *Durāgata* means arriving at the ear-

and arisen bodily feelings that are painful, racking, sharp, piercing, repugnant, disagreeable, deadly.¹⁹
Thus, bhikshus, is the monk a forbearer.

(4) The monk who is a goer

12 And how, bhikshus, is a monk a goer?

Here, bhikshus, a monk arrives in that direction where, in this long journey, he has never been before, that is to say,²⁰

the stilling of all formations,	<i>sabba,saṅkhāra,samatha</i>
the relinquishing of all substrates [acquisitions], ²¹	<i>sabbūpadhi,paṭinissagga</i>
the destruction of craving,	<i>taṇhā-k,khaya</i>
the fading away (of lust), ²²	<i>virāga</i>
the ending (of suffering),	<i>nirodha</i>
nirvana—	<i>nibbāṇa</i>

he quickly himself arrives at this.

Thus, bhikshus, is the monk a goer.

13 A monk, bhikshus, who possesses these 4 qualities is worthy of offerings, worthy of hospitality, worthy of gifts, worthy of salutation with the lotus-palms, a supreme field of merit for the world.”

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door because of the arising of unsatisfactoriness (*durāgatānan'ti dukkh'uppādan'ākārena sota,dvāraṃ āgatānaṃ*). (AA 3:287)

¹⁹ *Uppannānaṃ sārīrikānaṃ vedanānaṃ dukkhānaṃ tikkānaṃ kharānaṃ kaṭukānaṃ asātānaṃ amanāpānaṃ pāṇ'aharānaṃ adhvāsaka,jātiko hoti*. A person under 20 is unlikely to be able to endure these hardships, and is therefore not allowed to be ordained (V 4:130). The passage (beginning “bears heat...” to here) recurs in **Sabb'āsava S** (M 2/1:10), SD 30.3; **Kāya,gata,sati S** (M 119,35/3:97), SD 12.21; **Danta,bhūmi S** (M 125,30/3:136 f), SD 46.3; **(Rāja) Nāga S** (A 4.114/2:117 f), SD 46.8; **Ātappa,karaṇīya S** (A 3.49/1:153) ×2; **(Rāja) Nāga S** (A 4.114/2:118), SD 46.8; **(Dve) Roga S** (A 4.157/2:143), SD 42.16; **Khama Paṭipadā S 2** (A 4.165/2:153) ×2; **Upaṭṭhāka S 1** (A 5.123/3:144); **(Pañcaka) Sota S** (A 5.140(5)/3:163), SD 51.13; **(Chakka) Āsava S** (A 6.58(3)/3:389). SD 62.1; **Ākaṅkha S** (A 10.71(6)/5:132), SD 82.12; **Nm 2:487**; **V 1:78×2, 302+303** (*uppannānaṃ...etc*), 3:321, 322×2, 327, 4:130. See **Sabba,kamma,jaha S** (U 3.1.4/21), SD 37.3 n, for detailed refs.

²⁰ The full passage is stock: V 1:5; D 2:36; M 1:136; S 1:136; A 5:8. Here, this passage is a description (as far as words go) of nirvana: see also **(Āsava-k,khaya) Jhāna S** (A 9.36), SD 33.8. It is also called the “solitude from the substrates” (*upadhi,viveka*), ie, liberation from those factors that hold us back in samsara: see SD 20.4 (4.2.2). In meditative terms, it defines the perception of cessation (*nirodha,saññā*): A 10.60/5:110 f @ SD 19.16). The terms of this formula, esp the latter ones, are discussed in **Viveka,nissita**, SD 20.4.

²¹ Nm 27, 140, 157, 341; DA 169; MA 2:142; UA 163, 206, 231, 396; SA 3:122; DhA 2:103, 3:129. See SD 29.6a (1.5) & **Viveka,nissita**, SD 20.4 esp (4). “Acquisitions” here refer to “the 5 cords of sense-pleasures” and our attachment to them, while “substrates” refers to the substrates of existence, whatever keeps us in samsara and suffering, ie, the 5 aggregates, sensual desire, mental defilements, and karma (Sn 33c, 33d || 364a, 34c, 374c546a = 572a, 728ce = 1051ac).

²² *Virāga* also “fading away of lust” or “dispassion” (see §21).