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(Nāga) Sotā Sutta

The Discourse on the Listener (Elephant) | A 5.140

Theme: The 5 qualities of a truly worthy monastic

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2014

1 Introduction

1.1 The (Nāga) Sotā Sutta (A 5.140) gives a list of **5 qualities** of a truly worthy monastic, that is, one who 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” [§8]. 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 5 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 5 qualities are described as those of “a listener, a destroyer, a warder, a forbearer, and a goer” [§1.2]. Each of these qualities are then elaborated [§§2-7]. This is the parable section of the Sutta.

In the Dharma section, we see, “in the same way” (*evam eva*), the 5 qualities of a monastic or renunciant who is truly worthy [§8; 1.1]: he is also one who is “a listener, a destroyer, a warder, a forbearer, and a goer” [§9].

2 Related suttas

2.1 THE (RĀJA) NĀGA SUTTA

2.1.1 The (Rāja) Nāga Sutta (A 4.114) has 4 same qualities as the (Nāga) Sotā Sutta (A 5.140), except it is without the third quality (that of “the warder,” *rakkhita*).¹ Otherwise, the rest of the two suttas are identical, dealing with the qualities of a truly worthy monastic.

2.1.2 The third parable describes how a war-elephant protects all its body and limbs, including its trunk and the rider [§4]. This figure illustrates a monastic or practitioner who is “a warder” (*rakkhita*), that is, one who guards his sense-faculties by nipping any unwholesome sense-experience in the bud, that is, “he grasps neither its sign nor its details” [§12].

2.2 THE AMBA,LAṬṬHIKĀ RĀHUL’OVĀDA SUTTA

2.2.1 This third quality is also found in **the Amba,laṭṭhikā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 61) where the war-elephant is said to use all its limbs mentioned here, except its trunk which it guards by putting it in its mouth. The (Nāga) Sotā Sutta adds that the war elephant also guards its rider (*hatth’āruha*).

2.2.2 The Amba,laṭṭhikā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta parable highlights the Buddha’s advice to Rāhula to guard the tongue and not to lie, even in jest (which is that sutta’s theme).² While the (Nāga) Sotā Sutta deals with the qualities of a truly worthy monastic, the Amba,laṭṭhikā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta focuses on not lying (for the benefit of the 7-year-old novice, Rāhula).

2.3 THE DANTA,BHŪMI SUTTA. 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 (Nāga) Sotā Sutta. While the elephant parable of the (Nāga) Sotā 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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¹ A 4.114/2:116-118 @ SD 46.8.

² M 61,7/1:414 f @ SD 3.10, & MA 3:128.

³ M 125,12 @ SD 46.3.

The Discourse on the Listener (Elephant)

A 5.140⁴

THE ROYAL BULL ELEPHANT PARABLE

The 5 qualities of a royal bull elephant

1 Bhikshus, a royal bull elephant that possesses 5 qualities is worthy of the king, of service to the king, and is reckoned as a limb [an emblem] of the king.⁵

What are the five?

1.2 Here, bhikshus, the royal bull elephant is a listener, a destroyer, a warder, a forbearer, and a goer.⁶

(1) The royal elephant that listens

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

Here, bhikshus, whatever task the elephant trainer⁷ gives it, whether it has done it before [162] or not, the royal elephant makes that its purpose,⁸ pays attention to it, fully directs its mind to it, with ready ear, listens to it.⁹

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.¹⁰

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], it destroys chariot and charioteer, it destroys the infantry.¹¹

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

(3) The royal elephant that guards

4 And how, bhikshus, is the royal bull elephant a **warder**? (*rakkhitā*)

Here, bhikshus, when the royal bull elephant has gone into battle [in the midst of battle], it protects its forepart and hindpart, fore legs and hind legs, head and ears, tusks and tail, trunk and rider.¹²

⁴ The internal numbering here does not follow that of PTS.

⁵ *Pañcahi 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.

⁶ *Idha bhikkhave rañño nāgo sotā ca hoti hantā ca rakkhitā ca khantā ca gantā ca.*

⁷ “The elephant trainer,” Be *hatthi,damma,sārathi*; Ce Ee Ke Se *hatthi,damma,sārathi*.

⁸ “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.

⁹ *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 sabbaṃ 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.

¹⁰ *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 sabbaṃ cetaso* [Be *sabba,cetasā*] *samannāharitvā ohita,soto suṇāti*.

¹¹ *Idha bhikkhave rañño nāgo saṅgāma,gato hatthim pi hanati* [Ee hanti throughout], *hatth'āruham pi hanati, assam pi hanati, ass'āruham pi hanati, ratham pi hanati, rathikam pi hanati, pattikam pi hanati*.

¹² *Idha bhikkhave rañño nāgo saṅgāmagato rakkhati purimaṃ kāyaṃ, rakkhati pacchimaṃ kāyaṃ, rakkhati purime pāde, rakkhati pacchime pāde, rakkhati sīsaṃ, rakkhati kaṇṇe, rakkhati dante, rakkhati sonḍaṃ, rakkhati vāladhiṃ, rakkhati hatth'āruham.* Cf **Amba,Jaṭṭhikā Rāhul'ovāda S** (M 61), where the war-elephant is said to use all

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

(4) The royal elephant that forbears

5 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, conch-shells, and the dindima [small drum].¹³

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

(5) The royal elephant that goes rightly

6 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.¹⁴

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

7 A royal bull elephant, bhikshus, that possesses these 5 qualities is worthy of the king, of service to the king, and is reckoned as a limb [an emblem] of the king.

THE MONASTIC WITH 5 WORTHY QUALITIES

The 5 qualities of a worthy monastic

8 In the same way, bhikshus, a monk who possesses 5 qualities is
 worthy of offerings,¹⁵ *āhuneyyo*
 worthy of hospitality, *pāhuneyyo*
 worthy of gifts,¹⁶ *dakkhiṇeyyo*
 worthy of salutation with the lotus-palms,
 a supreme field of merit for the world.¹⁷ *añjali, karaṇīyo*
anuttaram puñña-k, khettaṃ lokassa.

What are the five?

9 Here, bhikshus, a monk is a listener, a destroyer, [163] a warder, a forbearer, and a goer.

(1) The monk who is a listener

10 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.¹⁸

its limbs mentioned here, except its trunk which it guards by putting it in its mouth. This parable highlights the Buddha's advice to Rāhula to guard the tongue and not to lie, even in jest (M 61,7/1:414 f), SD 3.10 & MA 3:128.

¹³ *Idha bhikkhave rañño nāgo saṅgāma, gato khamo hoti satti-p, pahārānaṃ asi-p, pahārānaṃ usu-p, pahārānaṃ pharasu-p, pahārānaṃ¹³ 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 **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2,92), SD 8.10.

¹⁴ *Idha bhikkhave rañño nāgo yam enaṃ hatthi, damma, sārathi disaṃ peseti yadi vā gata, pubbaṃ, yadi vā agata, -pubbaṃ, taṃ khippam eva gantā hoti.*

¹⁵ *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).

¹⁶ *Dakkhiṇeyyo.* Specifically refers to offerings made for the benefit of the departed by way of dedication of merits to them.

¹⁷ 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.

Thus, bhikshus, is the monk a listener.

(2) The monk who is a destroyer

11 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.¹⁹

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 warder

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

²⁰(1) Here, bhikshus, when a monk sees a form with the eye, **he grasps neither its sign nor its details**.

So long as he dwells unrestrained in that eye-faculty,

bad, unwholesome states of covetousness and displeasure²¹ might overwhelm him,
to that extent, he therefore keeps himself restrained.

He practises the restraint of it. He guards the restraint of the eye-faculty, he commits himself to the restraint of the eye-faculty.

(2) When he hears a sound with the ear, **he grasps neither its sign nor its details**.²²

So long as he dwells unrestrained in that ear-faculty,

bad, unwholesome states of covetousness and displeasure might overwhelm him,
to that extent, he therefore keeps himself restrained.

¹⁸ *Idha bhikkhave tathāgata-p.pavedite dhamma,vinaye 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.

¹⁹ The above 2 lines: *Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu uppannaṃ kāma,vitakkam nādhivāseti pajahati vinodeti hanati* [only Be] *vyanti,karoti anabhāvaṃ gameti.*

²⁰ On *na nimitta-g,gāhī hoti nānuyyañjana-g,gāhī*, lit “he is not one who grasps at a sign, he is not one who grasps at a detail (feature).” Comys say that “**sign**”(nimitta) here refers to a grasping arising through one’s sensual lust (*chanda,rāga,vasena*) or on account of merely one’s view (*diṭṭhi,matta,vasena*); “**detail**” (*anuyyañjana*) here refers to finding delight by mentally grasping at another’s limb or body part (eyes, arms, legs, etc) (Nm 2:390; Nc 141, 141; DhsA 400, 402; cf MA 1:75, 4:195; SA 3:4, 394; Nc 1:55; DhA 1:74). On other meanings of *nimitta*, see SD 13 §3.1a.

²¹ “Covetousness and displeasure,” *abhijjhā,domanassam*, which Walshe (1995:335 & n632) renders as “hankering and fretting for the world”; alt tr “covetousness and displeasure” or “longing and loathing.” MA says that longing and displeasure signify the first 2 hindrances—sensual desire and ill will—principal hindrances to be overcome for the practice to succeed. They thus represent the contemplation of mind-objects, which begins with the 5 hindrances. Cf M 1:274/39.13; see also **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22,13) and **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10,36) on how to deal with the hindrances in our meditation. The meditator effects the abandoning of the hindrances by the contemplations of impermanence, of fading away (of lust), of cessation (of suffering) and of letting go (of defilements), and thus comes to look upon the object with equanimity. On *abhijjhā,domanassa*, there is an interesting related passage from **Pubba or Pubb’eva Sambodha S** (A 3.101): “Bhikshus, before my awakening, when I was still a bodhisattva, this thought occurred to me... ‘Whatever physical and mental joy (*sukha,somanassa*) there is in the world, that is the gratification (*assāda*) in the world; that the world is impermanent, suffering and of the nature to change, that is the disadvantages (*ādīnava*) in the world—the removal and abandoning of desire and lust for the world, that is the escape from the world’.” (A 3.101/1:258).

²² This para and next 3 sentences are abridged in Be Ee; Se marks *peyyāla* with ellipsis markers (3 dots). Ce gives them in full.

He practises the restraint of it. He guards the restraint of the ear-faculty, he commits himself to the restraint of the ear-faculty.

(3) When he smells a smell with the nose, **he grasps neither its sign nor its details**.

So long as he dwells unrestrained in that nose-faculty,

bad, unwholesome states of covetousness and displeasure might overwhelm him,
to that extent, he therefore keeps himself restrained.

He practises the restraint of it. He guards the restraint of the nose-faculty, he commits himself to the restraint of the nose-faculty.

(4) When he tastes a taste with the tongue, **he grasps neither its sign nor its details**.

So long as he dwells unrestrained in that tongue-faculty,

bad, unwholesome states of covetousness and displeasure might overwhelm him,
to that extent, he therefore keeps himself restrained.

He practises the restraint of it. He guards the restraint of the tongue-faculty, he commits himself to the restraint of the tongue-faculty.

(5) When he feels a touch with the body, **he grasps neither its sign nor its details**.

So long as he dwells unrestrained in that body-faculty,

bad, unwholesome states of covetousness and displeasure might overwhelm him,
to that extent, he therefore keeps himself restrained.

He practises the restraint of it. He guards the restraint of the body-faculty, he commits himself to the restraint of the body-faculty.

(6) When he cognizes a mind-object with the mind, **he grasps neither its sign nor its details**.

So long as he dwells unrestrained in that mind-faculty,

bad, unwholesome states of covetousness and displeasure might overwhelm him,
to that extent, he therefore keeps himself restrained.

He practises the restraint of it. He guards the restraint of the mind-faculty, he commits himself to the restraint of the mind-faculty.²³

(4) The monk who is a forbearer

13 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,²⁴

endures the ways of words ill-spoken, unwelcome,²⁵

and arisen bodily feelings that are painful, racking, sharp, piercing, repugnant, disagreeable, deadly.²⁶

Thus, bhikshus, is the monk a forbearer.

²³ For citations, see SD 19.14 (1.1.2). This passage is analysed in detail in Vism 1.53-69/20-22.

²⁴ *Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu khamo hoti sītassa uñhassa jighacchāya pipāsāya daṃsa, makasa, vātātapa, sirimsapa-* [Ce Ee Ke Se; Be sarīsapa], *samphassānam*.

²⁵ *Duruttānam durāgatānam vacana, pathānam*. 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’ti na suṭṭhu vuttānam dosa, vasena pavattitānam pharusa, vacanānam*). *Durāgata* means arriving at the ear-door because of the arising of unsatisfactoriness (*durāgatānan’ti dukkh’uppādan’ākārena sota, dvāram āgatānam*). (AA 3:287)

²⁶ *Uppannānam sārīrikānam vedanānam dukkhānam tibbānam kharānam kaṭukānam asātānam amanāpānam pān’aharānam 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; **Ākañkha S** (A 10.71(6)/5:132), SD 82.12; **Nm 2:487**; **V 1:78** ×2, 302+303 (*uppannānam...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.

(5) The monk who is a goer**14** And how, bhikshus, is a monk **a goer**? [166]Here, bhikshus, a monk arrives in that direction where, in this long journey, he has never been before, that is to say,²⁷

the stilling of all formations,

the relinquishing of all substrates [acquisitions],²⁸

the destruction of craving,

the fading away (of lust),²⁹

the ending (of suffering),

nirvana—

he quickly himself arrives at this.

Thus, bhikshus, is the monk a goer.

*sabba,saṅkhāra,samatha**sabbūpadhi,paṭinissagga**taṇhā-k,khaya**virāga**nirodha**nibbāna***15** A monk, bhikshus, who possesses these 5 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.”

— evaṃ —

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²⁷ 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.

²⁸ 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).

²⁹ *Virāga* also “fading away of lust” or “dispassion” (see §21).