

11

Nadī,sota Sutta

(Be) The Discourse on River Current | It 109

Ce **Purisa,piya.rūpa Sutta** The Discourse on the Person and the Pleasant in Appearance

Theme: Our negative emotions are like a river current

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2011

1 Sutta highlights

1.1 SUTTA PARAPHRASE. The **Nadī,sota Sutta** (It 109) opens with a parable of a man carried away by a river-current. He is probably swimming or sitting on a raft, and finds the whole experiences of moving with the strong currents very exhilarating [§§1-2]. Then, a wise and kind person on the bank shouts to him, warning him of impending dangers: there are very dangerous waters ahead! [§3]

The good thing is that the man in the water heeds the warning, and quickly paddles his way to the safety of the banks [§§4-5]. The Sutta goes on to explain the various dangers that challenge the monastic renunciant. These teachings, on a simpler level, teaches mindfulness for the lay practitioner. Even when a layman is a good swimmer, he should not take chances with the swift and strong water currents —we have to be very mindful when enjoying sensual pleasures and know when to stop (swim to the safe shores).

1.2 WATER-CROSSING PARABLE

1.2.1 The Nadī,sota Sutta (It 109) gives three very similar parables, related to a river (*nadī*), “with the danger of waves, with whirlpools, with predators and monsters” (*sa,ūmi s’āvaṭṭa sa,gaha,rakkhasa*) [§§4+6]. All these elements of the parable are explained by the Sutta [§6].

The **Samudda Sutta 1** (S 35.228) applies these similes to the 5 senses in a single parable, that is, “the eye that is an ocean with its waves, whirlpools, crocodiles and demons.”¹ The two parables differ only slightly by way of emphasis. While the Nadī,sota parable stresses on the “external” aspects of our spiritual training, especially moral virtue as a basis for mental cultivation, the Samudda Sutta 1 parable highlights mindfulness, that is, avoiding whatever distracts or hinders us from mental cultivation.

The river parable of the Nadī,sota Sutta is expanded into **the ocean parable**, for example, in **the Rāga Sutta 2** (It 69).²

1.2.2 The man carried by the current.

1.2.2.1 In §2, the man who is “**carried away by a river-current**” lets this strong current carry him pleasantly downstream. The **Anusota Sutta** (A 4.5) refers to such a person as one “who flows with the current” (*anosota,gāmī*), that is, a worldly person who “enjoys sensual pleasures and creates bad karma” (*kāme ca paṭisevati pāpañ ca kammaṃ karoti*).³ He is depicted as someone who is unmindful of imminent dangers. [§4]

1.2.2.2 In §§3-4, a “**man with vision**” (*cakkhumā*) standing on the bank (that is, the Buddha) sees the man flowing with the current [1.2.2.1] and at once warns him of the impending dangers lurking down-

¹ *Cakkhu,samuddaṃ sa,ūmiṃ s’āvaṭṭaṃ sa,gāhaṃ sa,rakkhasaṃ* (S 35.228/4:157), SD 52.9.

² Further see SD 52.10b (1.3.1). On other elements of the water-crossing parable, see SD 52.10b (2.2.1).

³ A 4.5/2:5 (SD 78.15).

stream in a lake. We must imagine that he could be heading for a waterfall that plunges down into an immense and deep lake filled with various kinds of dangers.

Fortunately, the man in the stream heeds the man on the bank, and “**would exert effort with hands and feet against the stream**” (*hatthehi ca pādehi ca paṭisotaṃ vāyameyya*) [§5]. In the **Āsivisōpama Sutta** (S 35.197), the man paddling thus “with hands and feet” while on a self-made raft is said to represent “the exertion of efforts,” that is, the 4 right efforts:⁴ the effort to avoid and to abandon unwholesome states, the effort to cultivate and to maintain wholesome states.⁵

1.2.2.3 In doing so, he goes “**against the stream**” [§5+6], that is, he renounces sense-pleasures for the holy life. We see here the best and true reason for going forth. The benefit of such an endeavour is the attaining of awakening as an arhat like the Buddha.

The **Anusota Sutta** (A 4.5) describes such a person as one “who goes against the stream” (*paṭisota,-gāmī*). This, explains the Sutta, refers to renunciation, that is, giving up sensual pleasures for spiritual training in the holy life.⁶ For this reason—the Buddha Dharma is about renouncing the world—that the Buddha declares his teaching to be “against the stream” (*paṭisota,gāmī*).⁷

1.2.2.4 The Nadi,sota Sutta does not tell us anything more about what kind of person the *paṭisota,-gāmī* is. However, the internal commentary of the Sutta itself explains the other elements of the parable as follows: the “**river current**” (craving) that “**appears to be pleasant**” (the 6 sense-faculties) flows dangerously into “**the lake downstream**” (the 5 lower fetters), that is, self-identity view, spiritual doubt, attachment to rituals and vows, sensual lust, and aversion [§6 n].

Only the **non-returners** have abandoned the 5 lower fetters. We must surmise that we should at least work to break the 1st 3 fetters to become streamwinners; then, we should weaken the 3 unwholesome roots (greed, hate and delusion) to become once-returners; and, if possible, further exert ourselves to overcome all attachment to the 5 cords of sense-pleasures—represented by **the whirlpools**—to become non-returners.

1.2.2.5 The Sutta continues to explain the parable [§6]: In the lake lies “**the danger of waves**,” which refers to “anger and annoyance.” The **Cātumā Sutta** (M 67) details the meaning of the danger of “*anger and annoyance*,” represented by the imageries of waves (*ūmi*) or tides (*vīci*). In short, monks who have newly renounced the world, when instructed in personal decorum regarding their postures and conduct, react with *anger and annoyance*, recalling the laxity they had enjoyed before when they were laymen.⁸ They forget why they have renounced or that they have not been well trained.

1.2.2.6 The Nadi,sota Sutta contains another imagery—a pair of imageries actually—those of “**predators and monsters**” (*gaha rakkhasa*). The Sutta takes this dvandva (twin compound) as referring to “womenfolk” (*mātu,gāma*). This is a stern warning to monks to be mindful of women—not to socialize with them in any way—to prevent any kind of moral danger or mental distraction leading to the monks’ breaking the Vinaya rules or causing them to give up the training and return to lay life.

⁴ See **Āsivisōpama S** (S 35.197,20) + SD 28.1 (10). This is an element of the raft parable at **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22,13/1:134 f), SD 3.13; **Dāmalī S** (S 2.5/1:48), SD 49.10(2.7); **Āsivisōpama S** (S 35.238,9/4:178), SD 28.1; **Anusota S** (A 4.5/2:5), SD 78.15; **Udakūpama S** (A 7.15.8-9/4:13 f), SD 28.6.

⁵ See SD 10.2; pericope SD 51.21 (1.2). On *padhāna* and *virīya*, see SD 10.1 (4); SD 10.2 (1.3).

⁶ A 4.5,6 (SD 78.15).

⁷ Mv 1.5.3 (V 1:5); **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14/2:36,17 + 38,5), SD 49.8; **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26/1:168,7), SD 1.11; **Āyācana S** (S 6.1/1:136,23), SD 12.2.

⁸ **Cātumā S** (M 67,16), SD 34.7.

This is great foresight on the Buddha's part. Psychologically, women are often drawn to monks because of their celibate or "single" status. Such women tend to either mother or "own" such monks, especially when they are famous or influential. The twin negative effects of such socialization are that the woman's own marriage may suffer and the monk will easily be distracted from his own monastic life, even causing him to give it up.

The imageries of "the predators" and "the monsters" usually form a dvandva (twin compound), that is, as *gaha,rakkhasa*. Perhaps, this duality suggests the pairing between the sexes which portends disaster for the monastic life. In fact, when a monastic commits any kind of sexual intercourse with a woman or even an animal, it entails an offence of **defeat** (*pārājika*).⁹

1.2.2.7 In the closing "ocean verse" of the **Rāga Sutta 2** (It 69), however, the two elements, *gaha rakkhasa*, appear separately as *sa,gaham sa,rakkhasam*, "(the ocean) with its predators, its monsters." The disjunction of the elements of this compound is rare. If we attribute this to poetic licence, we can take the two words as simply referring to "womenfolk," that is, as a warning to monks against any kind of sexual activity. In the **Cātumā Sutta** (M 67) and the **Ūmi,bhaya Sutta** (A 4.122), the danger that womenfolk pose to the monks' celibate religious life is represented by a "river dolphin" (*susukā*).¹⁰ We must imagine that a river dolphin looks beautiful and often do not fear humans.

When the two elements of the dvandva are taken separately, we have *rakkhasa*, "monster," representing a danger to a monk's celibacy, but the word *gaha*, "predator," does not seem to signify anything. However, if we go by the commentarial tradition, we can take "predator" (*gaha*) as signifying "sexual lust in general, including homosexuality," which is termed, "wrongful act" (*micchā,dhamma*), which is forbidden for monastics, too.¹¹ Any kind of sexual act is clearly wrong and immoral for monastics.¹²

1.2.3 Kāma,bhogī

1.2.3.1 The Nadī,sota Sutta (It 109) explains the imagery of "the whirlpools" (*āvaṭṭa*) to "the 5 cords of sense-pleasures" (*pañca kāma,guṇa*) [§§4+6]. The practitioner is said to struggle "against the stream" (*paṭisota,gāmī*) [§§5+6], where the "stream" represents sensual desire. In other words, all sensual pleasures are rooted in sensual desire, flowing from it like the powerful currents of a stream. The figure of one going against the stream to reach the safety of dry land, represents one's working to renounce sense-pleasures for the sake of arhathood. [1.2.2.3]

1.2.3.2 Although the Nadī,sota Sutta warns us of the dangers of being sucked into the whirlpool of sensual pleasures, we should take note of at least two vital exceptions, that is, special cases where a pleasure can be wholesome and not to be feared. Firstly, the **Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36) records how, after 6 years of self-mortification, the Bodhisattva, having nearly perished from this extreme deprivation of his body, realizes that there is a "middle way," that is, there is "the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual desires and unwholesome states" (*sukhaṃ aññatt' eva kāmehi aññatra akusalehi dhammehi*).¹³

Specifically, this "pleasure, joy or happiness" (*sukha*) refers to the attainment of dhyana (*jhāna*), that is, when the mind is completely free of the body (the 5 physical senses) and is able to fully look at itself in all calm and clarity. This calm and clear mind is the tool with which we see true reality and attain the

⁹ The 1st defeat (*pārājika*) rule: Pār 1 (V 3:23,33-36).

¹⁰ On *susukā*, see **Cātumā S** (M 67,17), SD 34.7; **Ūmi,bhaya S** (A 4.122,37), SD 47.9.

¹¹ On "wrong act," *micchā,dhamma* (DA 3:853), see SD 31.7 (7.1). See SD 52.10b (2.2.1).

¹² See **Sexuality**, SD 31.7 (2), where note esp "the bonds of sexuality" (2.3).

¹³ M 36,32.2/1:246 f (SD 49.4).

liberation of nirvana. Through his mental liberation, the Bodhisattva awakens as the Buddha. All this is rooted in the pleasure that is free from desire and bad.

1.2.3.3 Secondly, there is the worldly joy of the senses enjoyed by lay practitioners. Technically, this is the kind of pleasure that is still rooted in desire (since the lay practitioner is still unawakened), but he is not deluded as to be caught up with it. Essentially, this means that, as lay practitioners, we know when to stop and we understand the nature of such pleasures.

Hence, **the Mahā Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 73) mentions a category of lay disciples who are said to be “those who enjoy sensual pleasures” (*kāma,bhogī*). In fact, they are streamwinners, “white-dressed householders who enjoy sense-pleasures” (*gihī odāta,vasano kāma,bhogī*).¹⁴ They are practitioners who understand, or work to understand, **the gratification, danger and escape** (*assāda ādīnava nissaraṇa*) of such pleasures, as taught, for example, in **the Pubbe’va Sambodha Sutta** (A 3:101a), where it is taught that:

- (1) “the gratification in the world” refers to whatever bodily pleasure and mental joy that arise in the world;
- (2) “the danger in the world” refers to the reality that the world (including its pleasures) is impermanent, unsatisfactory, subject to change; and
- (3) “the escape from the world” refers to the removal and abandoning of sensual lust.

(A 3.101a/1:258), SD 14.6a¹⁵

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Nadī,sota Sutta

The Discourse on River Currents

It 109

1 This was indeed spoken by the Blessed One, spoken by the arhat [worthy one], thus have I heard.¹⁶

Carried by a river current

2 “Suppose, bhikkhus, a man [114] were carried away by a river-current, which appears to be pleasant and enjoyable.¹⁷

3 Then, a man with vision standing on the bank sees him and says:

¹⁴ M 73,10/1:491), SD 27.4. See also SD 47.1 (1.1.2.4).

¹⁵ See **Assāda S** (A 3.101) + SD 14.6 (2); SD 47.4 (1.3.3). On the lay practitioner and sexuality, see SD 31.7 (4+5). On Ariṭṭha’s serious misconception of this latitude regarding sexuality and the streamwinner, see **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22), SD 3.12 esp (3.1.2.1 f).

¹⁶ *Vuttam h’etaṃ bhagavatā. Vuttam arahatā’ ti me sutam*. This is said to be spoken by the laywoman **Khujj’utarā**: see SD 16.14 (1).

¹⁷ *Seyyathā’pi bhikkhave puriso nadiyā sotena ovuyheyya piya.rūpa,sāta.rūpena. Ovuyheyya* is pot 3 sg of *ovuyhati* (passive of **ovahati*), “to be carried away (by)” with instr. Aor *ovuyhasi*. Both these words seem to occur on here. Comy says the current is a swift one (ItA 2:1`65,27). See (1.2.2).

*samma-p,pajāno suvimutta,citto
vimuttiyā phassaye tattha tattha*

The one seeing rightly, with mind well liberated,
should touch liberation in due time.

9 *Sa veda,gū vūsita,brahma.cariyo³⁰
lokanta,gū pāra,gato'ti vuccatīti*

The knowledge-master whose holy life is lived
has reached the world's end—he is called the one
who has crossed over.

10 This matter [meaning] too was spoken by the Blessed One. Thus I have heard.³¹

— evaṃ —

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²⁹ VII *patthamāno, patthayamāno*.

³⁰ Resolution of the 2nd last syllable. This and the next line (§9ab) as at **Anusota S** (A 4.5,11cd/2:6), SD 78.15, = **Samudda S 1** (S 35.187,22cd/4:157), SD 52.9.

³¹ *Ayam pi attho vutto bhagavatā. Iti me sutan ti*. The foll verse is quoted at Kvu 477 (Kvu:SR 273); cf V 2:205.