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Accenti Sutta

The Discourse on “They Rush On” | S 1.4 of the **Nala Vagga**,¹ The Reed Group

Theme: Time flies; hit the path now

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2018

1 Sutta significance

1.1 SUTTA PARAPHRASE. The **Accenti Sutta** (S 1.4) records a short exchange on the brevity and uncertainty of life between a deity and the Buddha. The deity, representing the worldly bent, basically declares that since *life is brief, we should make merits*. The implication is that we would then *live happily and gain good rebirths*. [1.2.1]

Although the Buddha replies with a verse, he actually echoes the deity’s words, changing only the last line of the verse [S 6d*]. This is, in fact, where the Buddha’s teaching lies—life is brief; hence, giving up the brief and uncertain, we should seek true and lasting peace [1.2.2].

1.2 RECURRENCES OF THE SUTTA

1.2.1 The Accenti Sutta is practically identical in structure to **the Upanīya Sutta** (S 1.3), SD 54.2c, whose verses are identical to those of **the (Deva,putta) Uttara Sutta** (S 2.19), SD 53.2c(3). They differ only in lines ab (which reflects on aspects of impermanence).

Lines cd, identical in all 3 Suttas, apparently reflect *a common view* of the devas and theistic traditions—since life is brief and uncertain, we should “make merits that bring happiness.” Such merits will bring happy heavenly rebirths. This is the belief and practice of pre-Buddhist and extra-Buddhist society, especially those that believe in divine beings and look up to them for succour and salvation.

Besides these overlappings, there are others that share a common verse-line or more [3].

1.2.2 The Buddha’s response in such Suttas are alike in all cases. He teaches that since the world is impermanent and uncertain, we should not hold on to it: merits do not really help. Instead, we should fine-tune such merits skillfully into wholesome (kusala) action. This way, we will be able to free ourselves from cyclic life and attain full liberation, by attaining nirvana, the unconditioned.²

2 Key teachings

2.1 ACCENTI

2.1.1 Meanings

2.1.1.1 The verb **accenti** [S 359a*, 359b] is the 3rd person plural of *acceti* or *accayati* (Skt *aty-eti*, ie, *ati*, “beyond” + *vi*,³ to go). It is a polysemic word, with the following sense:⁴ (1) to pass beyond;⁵ (2) to

¹ *Naḷa*: A 4:169; J 1:392; VvA 43. Cf (1) *naḷī*, a hollow stalk, tube, pipe; a measure of capacity; (2) *nāḷikā*, a stalk, shaft; a tube, pipe or cylinder for holding anything; a small measure of capacity. On **Nala Vagga**, see SD 54.2a (1).

² On the significance between *puñña* of popular religion and *kusala* of early Buddhism, see SD 54.2c (2).

³ Also *vi* or *vāy*.

⁴ See CPD: ¹acceti.

⁵ J 6:359,23* (*velam*, “time”).

pass by, to be lost for (with accusative);⁶ (3) to neglect, to miss;⁷ (4) to pass away, elapse;⁸ (5) to die;⁹ (6) to surpass;¹⁰ (7) to get over, overcome.¹¹

2.1.1.2 One of the most familiar grammatical forms of *acceti*, “to pass on, away, beyond,” is its past participle, *atīta*, literally, “that which has passed”: that is, the past.

Also interesting is how the word for “future,” *anāgata*, “that which has not come,” is a past participle formed from:

a(n) (negative prefix, “not”) + *āgata* (*ā*, “near, towards” + √GAM, to go: *gacchati*), “to come”; hence, “not come,” that is, the future.

Paccuppanna, “the present,” is:

the past participle of *paṭi*, “to as in towards, together, today” (becomes *pacc-*) + *uppajjati*: *uppajjati* comes from *ud*, “out (in an upward direction)” + *pajjati*, “to come (forth), fall (away)”; hence, *paccuppanna* means “that which has arisen (just now),” that is, the present.

When the 3 times are combined as a compound, we get *ātītānāgata-p,paccuppanna*, “the past, the future and the present.”¹² The logic seems that the present is the vantage point from which we look at the *past*, then, the *future*, and return, as it were, to the *present*. We do, however, have the rare but late form *atītaṃ paccuppannaṃ anāgataṃ*, “the past, the present, the future.”¹³

2.1.2 Recurrence of *accenti* in other suttas

2.1.2.1 The verb *acceti* occurs as *accayanti* in an identical verse spoken by the Buddha in **the (Māra) Āyu Sutta 2** (S 4.9)¹⁴ and by the elder Joti,dāsa in **the Joti,dāsa Thera,gāthā** (Tha 145), thus:

<i>Accayanti aho,rattā</i> ¹⁵	Days and nights rush by,
<i>jīvitaṃ uparujjhati</i>	life comes to an end.
<i>āyu khīyati maccānaṃ</i>	The life of mortals is exhausted
<i>kunnadīnaṃ va odakaṃ</i> (S 466* = Tha 145)	like water in small streams.

2.1.2.2 The Hatthi,pāla Jātaka (J 509) records the Bodhisattva’s mother, the queen, uttering these 3 verses (out of 5) regarding her intention to renounce the world, following his son, prince Hatthi,pāla. These 3 verses are similar in tone to S 6* = 360*, thus:

⁶ D 3:185,14* (*atthā ~enti māṇave*, “opportunities slip by (these) youths”) ≈ Tha 231 (*khaṇā*, “(the) moment,” cf *khaṇ’atīta*, “the moment that has passed”).

⁷ J 4:165,22*, 166,9’ (*appam pi nācceti*, “not missing even a little”).

⁸ Tha 145 (*accayanti aho,rattā*, “night and day pass away”) = S 1:109,4*; S 1:3,3* = 62,32* = J 4:487,18* (*accenti kālā*, “time flies”), where *accayanti* = *acceti*.

⁹ J 4:127,14* (*opp jāyate*, “to be born”).

¹⁰ J 6:359,23*-363,8* (*paññaṃ nācceti sirī*, “greatness does not surpass wisdom”).

¹¹ Sn 183 f (*dukkhaṃ*, “suffering”); S 1:214,27*, qu at Miln 36,17* (do); Sn 781 (*sakaṃ diṭṭhiṃ*, “one’s own view”); J 5:153,18*; KhpA 1:195,8.

¹² D 1:137,29 (Comy), 140,24, 3:100,24, 135,4; M 1:112,3, 139,6, 234,33; S 2:252,18, 3:47,12, 187,30; A 1:284,25, 171,11; Vbh 1,9.

¹³ PvA 100,18; cf Sadd 54,1 f.

¹⁴ S 466* @ S 4.9/1:109,4*(SD 61.15d).

¹⁵ Line a recurs in (**Deva,putta**) **Nanda S** (S 359a*), SD 54.2d(4).

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|--|--|
| <p>1 <i>Accenti kālā tarayanti rattiyo</i>¹⁶
<i>vayo,guṇā anupubbaṃ jahanti</i>
<i>aham pi ekā carissāmi loke</i>
<i>hitvāna kāmāni mano,rāmāni</i> (J verse 317)</p> | <p>The times rush on, the nights pass by;
the stages of life desert us in turn.
But I will wander alone in the world,
abandoning pleasures delightful to the mind.</p> |
| <p>2 <i>Accenti kālā tarayanti rattiyo</i>
<i>vayo,guṇā anupubbaṃ jahanti</i>
<i>aham pi ekā carissāmi loke</i>
<i>hitvāna kāmāni yath'odakāni</i> (J verse 318)</p> | <p>The times rush on, the nights pass by;
the stages of life desert us in turn.
But I will wander alone in the world,
abandoning sensual pleasure like water.¹⁷</p> |
| <p>3 <i>Accenti kālā tarayanti rattiyo</i>
<i>vayo,guṇā anupubbaṃ jahanti</i>
<i>aham pi ekā carissāmi loke</i>
<i>sīti,bhūtā sabbam aticca saṅgan'ti</i> (J verse 319)</p> | <p>The times rush on, the nights pass by;
the stages of life desert us in turn.
But I will wander alone in the world,
become cool,¹⁸ having forsaken all bonds.</p> |
- (J 509/4:487,18-29*)

2.1.3 Text and context

2.1.3.1 We have noted the **polysemy** of the verb *acceti* (plural, *accenti*) [2.1.1.1]. Why is there such polysemy? It has to do with the language and languages used by the Buddha. He probably used various local dialects to teach his Dharma throughout the central Gangetic plain, dominated by the kingdoms of Magadha and Kosala. We have no record of these dialects, but we do have a comprehensive translation of these ancient teachings compiled by the early teachers, mostly monastics, in a language we today call **Pali**.

Pali arose as **koine** (Greek for “common, vernacular”), a mixture of vernacular dialects, including Magadhī and Kosalan. The versatility of such a potent mixture allows the expression and preservation of the early teachings in their nuances of language and subtleties of doctrine. The richness and profundity of the Pali suttas lie in its often **non-technical** use of language and terms.

2.1.3.2 In the early Buddhist texts, words do not define the context; rather, the context defines the words.¹⁹ In Mahāyāna works, however, there is a tendency to evoke power from words, making **statements** of impressive imaginative (but non-existent) meditative states.²⁰ Ironically, Zen Buddhism loses its Zenity without its statements, such as the koans—the authenticity of which have to be “licensed” by an authorized teacher.

The early Buddhist texts use words, ideas, stories, metaphor and myths like the points of colour in Neo-impressionist Pointillism art. The technique relies on the ability of the viewer’s eye and mind to blend the colour spots into a fuller range of tones.²¹ The early Buddhist texts are like points of white light whose colours can only be teased out with a calm and clear mind primed by mindfulness and meditation.

Early Buddhism, after all, is not a word-based religion of fiats and dogmas but an experiential journey that is the path of awakening. Without truly and fully experiencing life and understanding its patterns and potential, we will not see true reality. To know and see true reality, we need to understand how our mind

¹⁶ Lines ab recur in **Accenti S** (S 5ab* = 6ab*), SD 54.2d = (**Deva,putta**) **Nanda S** (S 359* = 360*), SD 54.2d(3).

¹⁷ There seems to be a humorous wordplay here on “passing water”!

¹⁸ “Become cool” on account of extinguishing the fires of greed, hate and delusion.

¹⁹ On Pali, see Norman, 1983:1-7. On the language of early Buddhism, see Levman 2016.

²⁰ On “the statement is not the state,” see SD 10.16 (1.3.2.3); SD 49.5b (4.6.4.2). For a scholarly insight, see Andrew Skilton, “State or statement? Samādhi in some early Mahāyāna Sūtras,” *Eastern Buddhist* 34,2 2002:51-90.

²¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pointillism>.

works and fine-tune its workings to inspire self-understanding and reflect true reality. Then, we will awaken from the sleep of ignorance and dreams of craving into the bright space of the unconditioned.

2.1.3.3 According to Bryan Levman, “... the Buddha’s statements must be contextualized. He did not hold any absolutist view of language (as in Brahmanism); language was strictly by conventional agreement That is also why he often uses three, four or five words to describe a particular situation; it is the linguistic analog to relativity.”²²

Hence, **polysemy** is a common and vital feature of the early Buddhist text and spirituality—where words and ideas often have multiple senses that may apply simultaneously.²³ Since the suttas record a wealth of the awakening experience and wisdom of the Buddha and the early saints, such a fluid use of language effectively records and preserves experiential teachings and living experience of awakening without being limited by the technicalities and temporality of language.

2.1.3.4 Merely reading the texts today may, of course, give us the impression that the sutta words and terms have fixed senses. But it is we who have fabricated and fixed the senses, and so stifled them. Such an approach will limit and skew our understanding of the teachings and stories, and they are related to one another.

A careful look at the list of **the 7 sets**, comprising the 37 limbs of awakening (*bodhi, pakkhiya, dhamma*), will show that many of the factors in most of the sets overlap: effort (*virīya*), for example, is found in 6 of the 7 sets.²⁴ While maintaining its essential meaning, the very same term is used with a nuance in each of these sets.

In fact, it is obvious that all the teachings of the Buddha Dharma are somehow interrelated. Hence, it is helpful, even essential, that we should ensure we understand the context of every teaching we hear or study. This helps to give us a taste of the living experience of the Buddha’s awakening, or at least inspire us with the truth and beauty of the Buddha Dharma. This is called **the rule of context**.²⁵

2.2 THE STAGES OF LIFE

2.2.1 The 3 stages of life

2.2.2.1 On the interesting phrase, “**the stages of life desert us in turn**” (*vayo, guṇā anupubbam jahanti*) [S 5b*=359b*], the Saṃyutta Commentary only explains it as referring to “the first, the middle and the last stages (of life) by multiplication (increase) in (each of) the categories” (*paṭhama, majjhima, pacchima, vāyānam guṇā rāsayo’ti*)²⁶ *attho*, SA 1:23,25).

2.2.2.2 “**The first, the middle and the last stages (of life)**” [2.2.2.1] are those of childhood, youth and old age. Childhood quickly deserts youth, and both desert old age. If we follow the Commentaries, they take the first stage as youth, the middle as middle age, and the last as old age. Similarly, in youth,

²² Personal communication, email 21 Oct 2018.

²³ On Pali polysemy, see SD 1.1 (4.4.5); SD 10.16 (1.3.1-1.3.2; 2.2). See also DEB: polysemy.

²⁴ Effort is not listed in (1) the 4 focuses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), but is found in (2) the 4 strivings (*padhāna*), (3) the 4 bases of spiritual success (*iddhi, pāda*), (4) the 5 spiritual faculties (*indriya*), (5) the 5 powers (*baḷa*), (6) the 7 awakening-factors (*bojjhaṅga*) and (7) the noble eightfold path (*maggā*): **Bodhi, pakkhiya, dhamma**, SD 10.1. See also **Pāriḷeyya S** (S 22.81,11), SD 6.1; SD 9 (10.3); **Sakuḷ’udāyī S** (M 77,15-21), SD 6.18.

²⁵ On the rule of context, see SD 53.5 (4.2.3).

²⁶ *Guṇārāsayo’ti* corrected to *guṇā rāsayo’ti* (with Be Ce Se; see DP: guṇa).

we run after pleasure, in middle age we walk life's pains, in old age we crawl alone forgetful of many things. But, at death, all the three desert us.

2.2.2.3 For **women** in traditional Chinese society, their 3 stages of life is not a very happy one, as she ages. According to the Confucian notion of the "3 obediences" (*sanjū*; Chinese *sancong* 三從), women have to lead a servile life, obeying the men in their lives. Before marriage (when young), a woman must obey her father; during marriage, she has to obey her husband; and after her husband's death, she must obey her son (禮記 *Li ji*, "Book of Rites").²⁷

2.2.2.4 In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, sad Jacques, in his monologue, reflects on "the seven ages of man." Although the passage is in Shakespeare's signature iambic pentameter, its lack of rhyme only accentuates a sense of sad hopelessness:

All the world's a stage,
 And all the men and women merely players:
 They have their exits and their entrances;
 And one man in his time plays many parts,
 (1) His acts being seven ages. At first **the infant**,
 Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
 (2) And then **the whining school-boy**, with his satchel
 And shining morning face, creeping like snail
 (3) Unwillingly to school. And then **the lover**,
 Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
 (4) Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then **a soldier**,
 Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
 Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
 Seeking the bubble reputation
 (5) Even in the cannon's mouth. And then **the justice**,
 In fair round belly with good capon lined,
 With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
 Full of wise saws and modern instances;
 (6) And so he plays his part. **The sixth age** shifts
 Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
 With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
 His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
 For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
 (7) And whistles in his sound. **Last scene** of all,
 That ends this strange eventful history,
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (Act 2, scene 7, lines 146-173)

2.2.2.5 **Buddhaghosa**, in his *Visuddhi, magga*, speaks of the 10 ages (decades) of a person, as a reflection on impermanence, thus:

Here, in these decades:

²⁷ See SD 66.13 (3.7.1.3). On the traditional lot of Indian women, see SD 54.2c (1.2.1.3).

The first 10 years of a person living a hundred years are called the tender decade; for, he is a tender unsteady child then.

The next 10 years are called the sport decade; for, he is very playful then.

The next 10 years are called the beauty decade; for, his beauty fully blossoms then.

The next 10 years are called the strength decade; for, his strength and power fully mature then.

The next 10 years are called the understanding decade; for, his understanding is well established then. Even in one naturally weak in understanding, some understanding, it seems, arises then.

The next 10 years are called the decline decade; for, his fondness for playfulness, beauty, strength and understanding decline then.

The next 10 years are called the stooping decade; for his person stoops forward then.

The next 10 years are called the bent decade; for, his person is bent like a ploughshare then.

The next 10 years are called the dotage decade; for, he dotes then and forgets what he has done.

The next 10 years are called the prone decade; for, a centenarian mostly lies prone. (Vism 20.51)²⁸

3 The (Deva,putta) Nanda Sutta (S 2.27)

SD 54.2d(3)

(Deva,putta) Nanda Sutta

The Discourse on (the young deva) Nanda *or* The (Deva,putta) Discourse on Nanda
S 2.27/1:62 f (S 359*-360*)

Traditional: S 1.2.3.7 = Saṃyutta 1, Sagāthāvagga 2, Devaputta Saṃyutta 3, Nānātitthiyā Vagga 7
Theme: Life is short; hit the path now

1 Standing at one side, the young deva Nanda uttered this verse in the Blessed One's presence.²⁹

<p>2 “<i>Accenti kālā tarayanti rattiyo vayo,guṇā anupubbarṃ jahanti etaṃ bhayaṃ maraṇe pekkhamāno</i>³⁰ <i>puññāni kayirātha sukhāvahānī.</i>³¹ (S 359)</p>	<p>The times rush on, the nights pass by, the stages of life desert us in turn. [63] Seeing this danger in death, let one make merits that bring happiness.”</p>
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[The Blessed One:]

<p>3 “<i>Accenti kālā tarayanti rattiyo vayo,guṇā anupubbarṃ jahanti etaṃ bhayaṃ maraṇe pekkhamāno lok’āmisam pajahe santi,pekkho’ti.</i> (S 360)</p>	<p>The times rush on, the nights pass by. the stages of life desert us in turn. Seeing this danger in death, a peace-seeker should forsake the world's lure.”</p>
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— evaṃ —

²⁸ See SD 48.1 (5.3.1.2).

²⁹ *Ekam antaṃ t̥hito kho nando deva,putto bhagavato santike imaṃ gātham abhāsi.*

³⁰ S 359cd recur as S 3cd respectively.

³¹ *Sukhāvahāni* (pl), from *sukha*, “happiness” + *āvaha*, “(ifc) bringing, producing, causing.” “Ifc” = “in fine composition,” used only as a suffix (“at the end” of a word).

Accenti Sutta

The Discourse on “They Rush On”

S 1.4

1 Originating in Sāvattthī.

Standing at one side, the deity uttered this verse in the Blessed One’s presence:

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| <p>2 “<i>Accenti kālā tarayanti rattiyo
vayo,guṇā anupubbaṃ jahanti
etaṃ bhayaṃ maraṇe pekkhamāno</i>³²
<i>puññāni kayirātha sukhāvahānī.</i>³³ (S 5)</p> | <p>The times rush on, the nights pass by,
the stages of life desert us in turn.
Seeing this danger in death,
let one make merits that bring happiness.”</p> |
|--|---|

[The Blessed One:]

- | | |
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| <p>3 “<i>Accenti kālā tarayanti rattiyo
vayo,guṇā anupubbaṃ jahanti
etaṃ bhayaṃ maraṇe pekkhamāno
lok’āmisam pajahe santi,pekkho’ti.</i> (S 6)</p> | <p>The times rush on, the nights pass by.
the stages of life desert us in turn.
Seeing this danger in death,
a peace-seeker should forsake the world’s lure.”³⁴</p> |
|---|--|

— evaṃ —

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³² S 359cd recur as S 3cd respectively.

³³ *Sukhāvahāni* (pl), see S 359d* n.

³⁴ For comy on the “world’s lure” (*lok’āmisā*), see SD 54.2c (2.2.3).