

2i

(Devatā) Arañña Sutta

The (Devatā) Discourse on the Forest | S 1.10 of the *Nala Vagga*,¹ The Reed Group
Theme: The benefits of forest meditation
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2018

1 Sutta significance

1.1 PARAPHRASE

1.1.1 The Arañña Sutta comprises 3 verses: the 1st is the deity’s question on the forest monk’s radiant countenance [S 17*]; the other 2 verses are the Buddha’s reply on the benefit of having presence of mind [S 18*], and the disadvantage of being lost in the past and the future [S 19*]. Note the phrase “**presence of mind**” rather than “the present” or even “the here and now.” Helpful as these latter phrases may be, like the past and future, the present, too, is mentally projected and mind-made.

1.1.2 The teaching of the Buddha’s 1st verse [S 18*] closely parallels that of **the Bhadd’eka,ratta Suttas**, such as M 131, where we are given a helpful vision of what **the “present”** really is:

(1) *Atītaṃ nānvāgameyya
n’appaṭikaṅkhe anāgataṃ
yad atītaṃ pahīnaṃ taṃ
appaṭtañ ca anāgataṃ.*

**Let one not pursue² [not dwell on] the past,³
nor hold fond hope for the future.**
For, the past is gone,⁴
and the future has not yet come.⁵

(2) *paccuppannañ ca yo dhammaṃ
tattha tattha vipassati*

Only this present state⁶
(as it arises) one sees that with insight⁷ ...

(M 131,3*/3:187), SD 8.9

The reality, then, is that there is *no* “present” since all moments are passing! The idea is to direct our mind to “where the action is,” which is really the “present” or, better, **the “event” moment**.⁸

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 **Naḷa Vagga**, see SD 54.2a (1).

² “Let one ... not pursue [not dwell on]” (*anvāgameyya*), pot 3 sg of *anvāgameti* (caus of *anvāgacchati* = *anu* + *ā-gacchati*), lit, “to let come back,” ie to wish something back (CPD), to run after, dwell on. [This tr was suggested by Kumara Bhikkhu of Malaysia, email 17 Aug 2013.]

³ Cf *patisarati* at SD 41.6 (2.3.6.1).

⁴ Alt tr: “For the past has passed away.”

⁵ Alt tr: “And the future is yet unreached”; poetically, “the future never comes.”

⁶ Comy: One should contemplate each state as it arises by way of the 7 contemplations of insight (ie by way of insight into impermanence, suffering, not-self, revulsion, dispassion, cessation, relinquishment) (MA 5:1 f).

⁷ The Sutta here teaches seeing *only* the arising of the 5 aggregates (or any of them) in the present moment. More simply, this means to see each moment of “rising and falling,” as being impermanent: this is a perception of impermanence (*anicca,saññā*): see **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

⁸ For further details, see SD 54.2e (2.3.4.2).

1.2 DRYADS AND FOREST MEDITATORS

1.3.1 According to the Commentary, the deity (*devatā*), unlike those of the preceding verses in this chapter, is just a female **dryad**, a forest-dwelling earth-bound fairy (*vana,saṇḍa,vāsikā bhumma,devatā*) (SA 1:28,4). Like the dryads of Greek mythology, these earth-bound deities are not as long-lived or powerful as their celestial counterparts. They would usually die when their natural habitat—the forests, trees and greenery—are destroyed.

1.3.2 Each day, the dryad would see the monks living in the forest sitting meditation after their meal. As they sit, their minds become unified and peaceful, and their mental peace show on their complexion (*vaṇṇa*). Puzzled that they are able to have such serene faces while living in these austere conditions, the deities visit the Buddha to ask about it.

1.3.3 A meditator's radiance

1.3.3.0 The meditator's bright or radiant countenance (*mukha,vaṇṇa*) or skin complexion (*chavi,vaṇṇa*) is said to indicate the visible benefits of the calming effects of meditation, as evident from these sutta passages:

1.3.3.1 The Ghaṭa Sutta (S 21.3)

(Sāriputta to Moggallāna:) “Radiantly clear, avuso Moggallāna, are your faculties! Pure and bright your countenance! Has the venerable Mahā Moggallāna spent the day in a peaceful dwelling?”⁹

“I spent the day in a gross dwelling, avuso, but I did have some Dharma talk, too.”

(S 21.3/2:275,20-21), SD 64.4 [1.3.3.X].

1.3.3.2 The Viveka,ja Sutta (S 28.1)

(Ānanda to Sāriputta:) “Radiantly clear, avuso Sāriputta, are your faculties! Pure and clear is your countenance! In which dwelling has the venerable Sāriputta dwelled today?”¹⁰

(Sāriputta replies that he has attained the 1st dhyana.)

(S 28.1/3:235,22), SD 33.3a

1.3.3.3 Sāriputta meets Assaji (V 1:40,14+41,1-3)

(Sāriputta to Assaji:) “Radiantly clear, avuso, are your faculties! Pure is your skin complexion! On whose account, avuso, have you gone forth? Or, who is your teacher? Or, whose Dharma do you profess?”¹¹

(Mv 1.23.3 @ V 1:40,14; Mv 1.23.5 @ V 1: 41,1-3), SD 42.8 (1.2); SD 51.5 (5.2.3.10)¹²

1.3.3.4 The Commentary on **the Ghaṭa Sutta** [1.3.3.1] informs us that such a meditative state or “dwelling” (*vihāra*) is said to be “gross” (*olārika*) on account of its object. Moggallāna, it is said, dwelled in the exercise of the divine eye and divine ear elements, which take on gross meditation-objects (*āram-*

⁹ *Vippasannāni kho te āvuso indriyāni, parisuddho mukha,vaṇṇo pariyodāto santena nun'āyasmā mahā moggallāno ajja vihārena vihāsīti.*

¹⁰ *Vippasannāni kho te āvuso sāriputta indriyāni, parisuddho mukha,vaṇṇo pariyodāto santena katamen'āyasmā mahā sāriputto ajja vihārena vihāsīti.*

¹¹ *Vippasannāni kho te āvuso indriyāni, parisuddho chavi,vaṇṇo pariyodāto, kam'si tvaṃ āvuso uddissa pabbajito, ko vā satthā kassa vā tvaṃ āvuso dhammaṃ rocesīti.*

¹² Mv 1.13.5+10 @ V 1:40,28*+41,35* (VA 5:975) = Ap 1.146/1:25 (ApA 231) = Peṭk 10 = ThaA 3:95. See also SD 49.20 (1.2.2.2).

maṇa), namely, the form-base and the sound-base. (SA 2:234,28-28). Technically, *oḷārika* refers to a sense-based experience as opposed to *sukhuma*, “subtle,” that is, suprasensual or purely mental.¹³

In simpler language, Buddhaghosa’s explanation means that Moggallāna is making use of his psychic abilities of clairvoyance (mental seeing into the distance) and clairaudience (mental listening into the distance). Such powers are rooted in the 4th dhyana (which Moggallāna is able to quickly enter, ThA 3:178).

During this process, Moggallāna is in a kind of extra-dhyana samadhi state directing his mind as he wishes, examining the conditions of certain beings in other realms (for which he is well known). We are told that his power is so well developed that he is able to see other invisible or disembodied beings, such as pretas, without having to enter into any special state.¹⁴

2 Sutta highlights

2.1 ARAÑÑA

2.1.1 Definition. *Arañña* (Skt *araṇya*) means “a forest, the jungle (synonym, *vana*; complement, *pavana*; opposite: *gāma*); the wild, the wilderness.” According to **the Vinaya**, “Other than the village and its precincts, all else is forest” (V 3:46). According to the Abhidhamma method, it is defined as follows: “Having gone out beyond the boundary post, all (the rest) is forest” (Vbh 251; Pm 1:176).

According to the sutta method, however, a “forest” is “outside of 500 bow-lengths (*dhanu*) (from an inhabited area).”¹⁵ Buddha,ghosa explains that this distance should be measured from a strung instructor’s bow from the gate-post of a walled village, or from the range of the first stone’s throw from an un-walled one, up to the monastery wall¹⁶ (Vism 2.49).¹⁷

2.1.2 Difficulties of forest-life

2.1.2.1 The Bhaya Bherava Sutta (M 4), “the discourse on fear and terror,” relates the difficulties of a monastic living the solitary forest life or, more generally, a life of spiritual solitude by any monastic or lay person.¹⁸ **Fear** (*bhaya*) arises from a mental object, a thought, on account of our unwholesome roots of greed, hate or delusion (the last is always there in the unawakened mind). **Terror** (*bherava*), as a deeper sense of fear, is arises fed by our emotional insecurity, especially our wrong views and personality.

For example, explains the Commentary, when we are covetous or strongly lustful, we are likely to experience such fears in the solitude of the forests as these:

There are uncertain mental objects. Of these uncertain mental objects for those dwelling in the forests, what appears in the day become the bases for fear and terror in the night. Their minds, on account of being heedless, tremble and quiver—seeing a rope or a creeper, they think it is a snake, seeing a tree-trunk (or stump), they think it is a yaksha; seeing high ground or a

¹³ See SD 33.1b (6.2.1.2): n on “subtle but real perception.”

¹⁴ DhA 2:64, 3:60, 410, 475.

¹⁵ V 4:183 = 3:263; VA 731. According to Monier-Williams, a *dhanu* is 4 *hasta* or cubits, or 1/2000 *gavyūti* (SED). A *hasta* (P *hattha*) is the length of the forearm (from the middle-finger-tip to the elbow).

¹⁶ *Taṃ aropitena ācariya, dhanunā parikkhattassa gāmassa inda, khīlato minivā vavatthapetabbarā* (V 2.49/72).

¹⁷ For details, see SD 44.3 (4).

¹⁸ M 4/1:16-24 (SD 44.3).

hillock, they think it is an elephant. It is as if they are facing some calamity or misfortune such as snakes and so on.¹⁹ (MA 1:115)

2.1.2.2 The (Dasaka) Upāli Sutta (A 10.90) represents the sentiment of a time when the early sangha had grown large and well established with numerous unawakened monastics who needed training.²⁰ **The Thera,gāthā Commentary** gives this account of Upāli, immediately following his ordination:

Having gone forth and ordained, he went before the Teacher and requested for a meditation subject and permission to be a forest dweller. The Teacher replied that dwelling in the forest, he could cultivate only one duty (that of meditation), but living in the Teacher’s presence, he could cultivate both the duties of meditation (*vipassanā,dhura*) and of study (*gantha,dhura*). The elder listened to the Teacher, and practising meditation, in no long time attained arhat-hood.²¹ (ThaA 2:100; cf ApA 278; AA 1:311)

The drift of the Sutta seems to suggest that Upāli is unable to attain dhyana. Moreover, he is adept in legalistic aspects of monastic list. His knowledge and understanding of the Vinaya makes him a valuable expert for a large monastic order that must be properly administered. Moreover, with proper training—especially living in the Buddha’s presence—Upāli will be able to work his own awakening in his own time, and at the same time be of service to the sangha as a whole.²²

2.2 A PLACE FOR CONSULTATION AND SOLITUDE. The Buddha and his monks often resort to the forest (*arañña*), especially the foot of a tree (*rukkha,mūla*) as a place for solitary meditation, for personal consultation,²³ even of life-changing spiritual encounter.²⁴ Here are a few examples:

- **Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2): “He resorts to a secluded dwelling: a forest, the foot of a tree, a mountain, a gully [gorge], a hillside cave, a cemetery, a remote forest [jungle grove], the open air, a heap of straw. Returning from his almsround, after his meal, he sits down, crosses his legs, keeps his body erect, and establishes mindfulness before him.”²⁵
- **Anāpāna,sati Sutta** (M 118): “Here, monks, a monk who has gone to the forest or to the foot of a tree or to an empty place, sits down, and having crossed his legs and keeping his body upright, establishes mindfulness before him.”²⁶

¹⁹ *Te avavatthit’ārammaṇā honti, tesam avavatthit,ārammaṇānam araññe viharantānam divā diṭṭham rattim bhaya,bheravam hutvā upaṭṭhāti. Te ākula,cittā appamattakena pi tasanti vittasanti, rajjum vā latam vā disvā sap-pa,saññino honti, khāṇum disvā yakkha,saññino, thalam vā pabbatam vā disvā hatthi,saññino sapp’ādīhi anaya,vyasanam āpādītā viya hontīti.* (MA 1:115)

²⁰ This was prob during the “2nd period” of the Buddha’s ministry. On the 2 periods of the Buddha’s ministry, see SD 1.1 (2.2); SD 40a.1 (1.3).

²¹ *So pabbajitvā upasampanno satthu santike kammaṭṭhānam gahetvā “mayham, bhante, arañña,vāsam anujā-nāthāti āha. Bhikkhu tava araññe vasantassa ekam eva dhuram vaḍḍhissati, amhākam pana santike vasantassa gantha,dhurañca vipassana,dhurañca paripūressatīti. Thero satthu vacanam sampatīcchitvā vipassanāya kammam karonto na cirass’eva arahattam pāpuṇi.* (ThaA 2:101,15-21)

²² A 10.99/5:202,4 + SD 30.9 (2).

²³ See eg **Bahu,dhītara S** (S 7.10), SD 50.24; **Nava,kammika S** (S 7.17), SD 50.34; **Katṭha,hāra S** (S 7.18), SD 50.38.

²⁴ On def of a forest-dweller’s practice, see Vism 2.47-59/71,26-75,6.

²⁵ D 2,67/1:71,16 (SD 8.10).

²⁶ M 118,17/3:82 (SD 7.13). For refs, see **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39,12.2) n, SD 10.13.

- **Dhaj’agga Sutta** (S 11.3): “In a forest, or at the foot of a tree, | or in an empty house, bhikshus, | should you recollect the self-awakened one, < the Dharma, | the sangha, > | there will be no fear in you.”²⁷
- **Pārâpariya Thera,gāthā**: *araññe rukkha,mūlesu | kandarāsu guhāsu ca || vivekam anubrūhantā | vihiṃsu tap,parāyanā ||* “In the forest, at the foot of trees, | in grottoes and in caves, || devoting themselves to solitude, | they dwelt—their goal: the crossing over.” (Tha 925)
- **Aṅgulimāla Thera,gāthā** (on his awakening):

<i>Araññe rukkha,mūle vā pabbatesu guhāsu tattha tatth’eva aṭṭhasiṃ ubbigga,manaso tadā</i>	(Tha 887)	In the forest, at the foot of a tree, or in the mountains, in a cave, right here and there I stood just like that with agitated mind.
<i>Sukhaṃ sayāmi ṭhāyami sukhaṃ kappemi jivitaṃ ahattha,pāso mārasa aho satthā’nukampino</i>	(Tha 888)	(Now) happily I lie down, happily I stand, happily I live my life, out of arm’s reach of Māra ²⁸ — O, how compassionate is the teacher!

— — —

(Devatā) Arañña Sutta

The (Devatā) Discourse on the Forest

S 1.10

1 Originating in Sāvattihī.

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

1 <i>Araññe viharantānaṃ santānaṃ brahma,cārinaṃ eka,bhattaṃ bhuñjamānānaṃ kena vaṇṇo pasīdatīti</i>	(S 17)	Those living in the forest, at peace, living the holy life, taking only one meal a day— why is their complexion so bright?
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

(The Blessed One:)

2 <i>Atītaṃ nānusocanti na-p,pajappanti nāgataṃ paccuppanna yāpenti tena vaṇṇo pasīdati</i>	(S 18)	They sorrow not over the past, they yearn not for what has not come. They keep themselves to what is present— hence, their complexion is so bright.
3 <i>Anāgata-p,pajappāya atītassānusocanā etena bālā sussanti naḷo va harito luto’ti</i>	(S 19)	Yearning for the future, sorrowing after the past, fools dry up in that way, cut down like green reeds.

— evaṃ — 181106 181108 190311

²⁷ S 1:220,22* (SD 15.5).

²⁸ On Māra, see SD 54.2 (3.2.2.2 (5)).