

The four dangers to new monks

Source: Cātumā Sutta, the 4 dangers that renunciants must overcome (M 67, SD 34.7) by Piya Tan ©2006, 2010¹.

5.3.2 (1) The danger of waves

In the water parables of the Cātumā Sutta, waves (*ūmi*) represent anger and despair (*kodh'upāyāsa*, or “the despair that is anger”), arising from one’s frustration on account of having to follow advice and instructions from fellow renunciants. The unhappy monk, recalling how he used to advise and instruct others, becomes angry and frustrated, and leaves the sangha. [§16]

The (Nīvaraṇā) Saṅgārava Sutta (S 46.55), too, has a water parable for *anger*, that is, that of water boiling over a hot blaze.² The common theme here is that of water disturbed by waves and ripples, so that we cannot see through it; hence, the frustration. Only when the boiling stops, can we see through the water; when it is cool, we can drink it and slake our thirst.

The Vammika Sutta (M 23), too, refers to “anger and despair,” but uses a toad (*uddhu,māyika*) as its figure.³ The toad here, according to the Critical Pali Dictionary (CPD), is a “bloating frog,” the size of a finger-nail swelling to the size of a wood-apple⁴ when irritated, and thus becoming the helpless prey of birds; as such, it is used as a symbol of gradually worsening wrath.⁵

5.3.3 (2) The danger of crocodiles

Kumbhīla, “crocodile,” is defined as “crocodile (of the Ganges)” both by the Pali-English Dictionary (PED) and the Sanskrit-English Dictionary (SED, sv *kumbhīra*). It is one of those obscure loanwords in Pali whose etymology is unknown. Its synonym, *suṃsumāra*—Sanskrit, *śiśumāra*, literally meaning “child-killer”—is more common.⁶ The place-name *suṃsumāra,gira*, “crocodile sound,” is well known.⁷ It is possible that while *kumbhīla* refers specifically to the Ganges crocodile, and *suṃsu.māra* to the freshwater crocodiles.

The word *kumbhīla* by itself is rare, appearing only a couple of times in the Commentaries.⁸ It is more common as the compound, *kumbhīla,bhaya*, “the danger (or fear) of crocodiles,” as it appears in the Cātumā Sutta (M 67), the Ūmi Bhaya Sutta (A 4:122), the Mahā Niddesa (in a list of fearful things), the Vibhaṅga and the Commentaries, all in connection with the water parables of the 4 dangers.⁹

The Cātumā Sutta, like the other texts and commentaries, explain “the danger of crocodiles” as gluttony [§17]. A monk who thinks too much about food is a bad monk who would surely fail in his training. Apparently, the parable of the 4 dangers are famous enough, or at least the parable of the danger of crocodiles is, as it is invoked in **the Sumedhā Therī,gāthā**: “Remember the dangers of crocodiles” (*sara*

¹ <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/34.7-Catuma-S-m67-piya.pdf>

² S 46.55/5:121-126 (SD 3.12).

³ M 23.38/1:144 (SD 28.13).

⁴ *Feronia acidissima* L. Its fruit is about 5-9 cm (1.9-3.5 in). Javanese *kawis* or *kawista*; Lao *mafit*; Malay *gelinggai*, *belinggai*; Myanmar *thibin*; Sinh *divul*; Tamil *vilam palam*; Thai *makhwit* (northern *mafit*); Vietnam *cân thang*.

⁵ M 1:142, 144; MA 2:128, 132; VvA 218.

⁶ S 4:198 (in the parable of the 6 animals); Thī 241, ThaA 204; J 2:158 f; Vism 446; SnA 207; DhA 3:194.

⁷ Eg, *Suṃsumāra,gira*, the capital of Bhagga country, where the Buddha spends his 8th rains retreat. The town is so called because it is said that when it was being built, a crocodile (*suṃsumāra*) made a noise in a nearby lake.⁷ The Buddha visits the Bhagga country several times (eg V 2:127, 4:115, 198; A 2:61, 4:65.).

⁸ DhA 1:201; CA 228, 229 (twice, once as voc); J 2:279 (twice, once as voc). *Kumbhīla* as cpds are more common in Comys.

⁹ M 67/1:459,31, 460,1+20; A 4.122/2:123,16+22, 124,11, 145,6+8; Nm 2:371; Vbh 376; NmA 2:396; VbhA 502.

kumbhīla, bhayāni ca, Thī 502). The **Kīṭāgiri Sutta** (M 70) is one of the few discourses that centre around gluttony.¹⁰

5.3.4 (3) The danger of whirlpools

In the Cātumā Sutta, whirlpools (*āvaṭṭa*) is one of the 4 dangers or fears to a newly ordained monk, and is said to represent “the 5 cords of sense-pleasure” (*pañca kāma, guna*), namely, form, sound, smell, taste, and touch that are taken as pleasurable¹¹ [§18]. The whirlpool is a water imagery, where there is the parable of the 4 floods (*ogha*), a name for the influxes (*āsava*), that is, the floods of sense-desire (*kām’ogha*), of (the desire for) existence (*bhav’ogha*), of views (*diṭṭh’ogha*), and of ignorance (*āviññ’ogha*).¹²

A whirlpool in a flood is more dangerous than the flood itself as it sucks and drowns those caught in the currents. But the power of the whirlpool comes from the flood itself, that is, the volume and power of the moving waters. A fuller imagery of the whirlpool is found in the parable of the log, as explained in **the Dāru-k, khandha Sutta** (S 35.241), where the Buddha declares:¹³

If, bhikshus, that log of wood,	[our body-mind]
does not land on this bank,	[the 6 internal sense-faculties]
does not land on the far shore,	[the 6 external sense-objects]
does not sink midstream,	[lust and desire]
does not get caught on a sandbank,	[the “I am” conceit]
is not seized [hauled up] by humans,	[socializing with lay people]
is not seized [hauled up] by non-humans,	[living the holy life for sake of heavenly life]
<u>is not seized by a whirlpool,</u>	[the 5 cords of sense-pleasure]
be not rotten [will not rot] internally,	[not immoral and deceitful]
then, bhikshus, that log of wood would tend towards the ocean, slant towards the ocean, slope towards the ocean.	

What is the reason for that?

Because, bhikshus, the Ganges river current tends towards the ocean, slants towards the ocean, slopes towards the ocean. (S 35.241,3/4:180 f), SD 28.5

The ocean here represents “nirvana.” Just as the whole terrain naturally tends towards the ocean, even so, “right view tends towards nirvana, slants towards nirvana, slopes towards nirvana.” (id)

While the fuller imagery of the parable of the log relates to the whole holy life, the 4 water parables (including that of the whirlpool) warn the newly ordained of the immediate dangers they should stay clear from. If a monastic steers clear of all these dangers, his holy life is plain sailing.

5.3.5 (4) The danger of river dolphins

5.3.5.1 The fourth of the water parables, warning the newly ordained against *susukā*, refers specifically to “women” [§18], but should be understood more broadly simply as “sexuality.” Translators, how-

¹⁰ M 70/1:473-481 (SD 11.1). On the crocodile, see SD 52.9 (2.2.2).

¹¹ See **Mahā Dukkha-k, khandha S** (M 13.7/1:85), SD 28.5 (a detailed treatment); **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,13-1:173), SD 1.11 (a study in connection with meditation).

¹² See **Sabb’āsava S** (M 2), SD 30.3 (1.3.2).

¹³ During first reading, omit the whole set of parentheses on the right, and read to the end. Then read with the parentheses right to the end[.]

ever, are not agreed on the meaning of **susukā**, variously translated as follows: “fierce fishes” (M:B 2:132, 134; Miln:H 283; following the Commentaries) [5.3.5.2], “sea-monsters” (A:W 2:127), and “sharks” (M:ÑB 563), usually without any explanation. Moreover, none of these translations are attested by any Pali dictionary, all of which (except perhaps for R C Childers’ Dictionary of Pali Language, DPL) seem to be uncertain of the word.

5.3.5.2 The DPL, PED & BHSD sv *śusukā*, all define it as “alligator.”¹⁴ But we already have *kumbhila*, “crocodile,” as the second danger.¹⁵ The Commentary on **the Baka Brahmā Sutta** (S 6.4) relates how an angry naga assumes the form of a fierce *susukāra* to frighten off some revellers on the river (SA 1:211). The Commentaries and Subcommentaries take it as a “fierce fish” (*caṇḍa, maccha*),¹⁶ which might have influenced the above definitions.

The DPL adds that it is the “Gangetic porpoise” (attested by SED: *śisukā*), and “a kind of aquatic animal.” We can take *susu + ka* as an onomatopoeia, “making a hissing sound,” which aptly describes dolphins blowing air. The *susukā*, as such, is probably the Gangetic dolphin (*Platanista gangetica gangetica*), that is, **a river dolphin**.¹⁷

5.3.5.3 Another important clue to the likely meaning of *susukā* is found in the Sutta itself, which says that the danger of the *susukā* refers to a monastic’s attraction to “women” (*mātu, gāma*) [§19]. Putting it all together, it surely refers to “river dolphin” (which is close to Childer’s definition, “Gangetic porpoise”).

5.3.5.4 The ancient Indian Buddhists clearly regarded these watery creatures as having an enticing beauty, the counterpart in western mythology would be the sirens.¹⁸ They are said to be seductive water-beings who lure nearby sailors with their enchanting music and voices so that they shipwreck on their island’s rocky coast. In 1917, Franz Kafka wrote in *The Silence of the Sirens*,

Now the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence. And though admittedly such a thing never happened, it is still conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never.¹⁹ (Kafka 1917)

5.3.5.5 Since a monastic has taken up the rules of celibacy, to be drawn to others, women or men, in a physical manner, is *a prelude to sexuality*, which, being a fully bodily action, distracts the mind from its goals of letting the body go for a total experience of disembodied bliss called dhyana. Furthermore, one who has tasted dhyanic bliss is no more enticed in the slightest by physical pleasure.²⁰

¹⁴ Cf Nc 470 ad Sn 37, gives the 4 dangers but has *suṃsumāra*, “crocodile” in place of *susukā*.

¹⁵ For differences btw crocodile and alligator, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crocodilia>.

¹⁶ MA 3:176; AA 3:123; Nma 396; VbhA 502; AAT 3:123; *susukādi, caṇḍa, macchari*, MAT: Be 2:80; cf *susū = caṇḍa, macchā*, J 5:256). In *Ardhamāgadhī*, *śusu = śīsu*, as in *śuśumāra = śīsumāra* (P *suṃsumāra*) (Pischel 1981 §117). Cf Se *suṃsukā* (vl Nm 2:371).

¹⁷ Srinivasulu & Srinivasulu, *South Asian Mammals*, NY, 102:24 (no 502), 92; identified in 1801.

¹⁸ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siren>.

¹⁹ Orig German: Nun haben aber die Sirenen eine noch schrecklichere Waffe als den Gesang, nämlich ihr Schweigen. Es ist zwar nicht geschehen, aber vielleicht denkbar, daß sich jemand vor ihrem Gesang gerettet hätte, vor ihrem Schweigen gewiß nicht.

²⁰ See **Cūḷa-k, khandha S** (M 14.4/1:91), SD 4.7; **Sexuality**, SD 31.7 (5.1).

5.3.5.6 In a number of discourses, such as **the Udakûpama Sutta** (A 7.15), the arhat (also called “brahmin”) is one who stands on high ground.²¹ The water parables of the Udakûpama Sutta are very insightful in their representation of spiritual development and liberation, thus:

Simile

- (1) One who once submerges, remains submerged
- (2) One, having emerged, then submerges
- (3) One, having emerged, then remains so
- (4) One, having emerged, observes, looks around
- (5) One, having emerged, swims across
- (6) One, having emerged, gains firm ground
- (7) One, having emerged, is one who has crossed over and stands on dry ground

Referents

the one of habitual wrong view.
the spiritually uncommitted.
the good worldling.
the mindful Buddhist (streamwinner).
the assertive Buddhist (once-returner).
the accomplished Buddhist (non-returner).

the consummate saint (arhat).
(A 7.15/4:11-13) = (Pug 7.1/71 f)

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²¹ See: **Dāmaḷi S** (S 2.5/1:48), **Āsīvisôpama S** (S 35.238,9/4:178), **Anusota S** (A 4.5/2:5), **Udakûpama S** (A 7.15.8-9/4:13f = Pug 7.1/71 f), SD 28.6. For more similar metaphors, see **Dāru-k,khandha S 1** (S 35.241/4:179-181) [5.3.4].