

Acarim Sutta

The “I went Forth” Discourse

[The Buddha’s reflection on the elements]
(Saṃyutta Nikāya 14.32/2:171 f)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2009

Introduction

The **Acarim Sutta** (S 14.32) is a simple statement on the four elements, in terms of the “gratification” triad, related in terms of the Bodhisattva’s quest for awakening. Due to its simplicity, this discourse should open any study on the four elements. The gratification triad—gratification (*assāda*), danger (*ādīnava*) and escape (*nissaraṇa*)—are defined in **the (Dhātu) Pubbe Sambodha Sutta** (S 14.31).¹

The Acarim Sutta somewhat parallels **the (Assāda) Pubbe Sambodha Sutta** (A 3.101) in structure. While the former deals with the four elements, the latter deals with “the world.” Comparing the two, we can say that here “four elements” (*catu dhātu*) and “world” (*loka*) are near-synonyms, overlapping in their reference to the material aspects of the universe.²

For related discourses, with the gratification triad in the context of the Buddha’s pre-awakening quest, see **the (Dhātu) Pubbe Sambodha Sutta** translation’s Introduction (SD 29.17).³

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The “I went Forth” Discourse

(S 14.32/2:171 f)

1 [The Blessed One was] residing at Sāvathī.

The earth element

2 “Bhikshus, I went forth seeking the *gratification* in the earth element.
Whatever gratification there is regarding the earth element—that I have discovered.
It has been well seen with wisdom by me how far the gratification goes.

3 Bhikshus, I went forth seeking the *danger* in the earth element.
Whatever danger there is regarding the earth element—that I have discovered.
It has been well seen with wisdom by me how far the danger goes.

4 Bhikshus, I went forth seeking the *escape* from the earth element.
Whatever escape there is from the earth element—that I have discovered.
It has been well seen with wisdom by me how far the escape goes.

The water element

5 Bhikshus, I went forth seeking the *gratification* in the water element.
Whatever gratification there is regarding the water element—that I have discovered.
It has been well seen with wisdom by me how far the gratification goes.

6 Bhikshus, I went forth seeking the *danger* in the water element.
Whatever danger there is regarding the water element—that I have discovered.

¹ S 14.31/2:170 f = SD 29.17.

² A 3.101/1:258 f = SD 14.6.

³ On the usage of the gratification triad as a template to generate suttas based on other themes, see S:B 38.

It has been well seen with wisdom by me how far the danger goes.

7 Bhikshus, I went forth seeking the *escape* from the water element.

Whatever escape there is from the water element—that I have discovered.

It has been well seen with wisdom by me how far the escape goes.

The fire element

8 Bhikshus, I went forth seeking the *gratification* in the fire element.

Whatever gratification there is regarding the fire element—that I have discovered.

It has been well seen with wisdom by me how far the gratification goes.

9 Bhikshus, I went forth seeking the *danger* in the fire element.

Whatever danger there is regarding the fire element—that I have discovered.

It has been well seen with wisdom by me how far the danger goes.

10 Bhikshus, I went forth seeking the *escape* from the fire element.

Whatever escape there is from the fire element—that I have discovered.

It has been well seen with wisdom by me how far the escape goes.

The wind element

11 Bhikshus, I went forth seeking the *gratification* in the wind element.

Whatever gratification there is regarding the wind element—that I have discovered.

It has been well seen with wisdom by me how far the gratification goes.

1 Bhikshus, I went forth seeking the *danger* in the wind element.

Whatever danger there is regarding the wind element—that I have discovered.

It has been well seen with wisdom by me how far the danger goes.

13 Bhikshus, I went forth seeking the *escape* from the wind element.

Whatever escape there is from the wind element—that I have discovered.

It has been well seen with wisdom by me how far the escape goes.

The awakening

14 Bhikshus, so long as I did not directly know these four elements as they really are, regarding the gratification as gratification, and the danger as danger, and the escape as escape, [172]

for that long I did not claim that I had awakened to the supreme full self-awakening in this world with its devas, Māra and Brahmā, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, its devas and humans.

15 But, bhikshus, when I directly knew, as they really are, thus—the world’s gratification as gratification, and the danger as danger, and the escape as escape—

then I claimed that I had awakened to the supreme full self-awakening in this world with its devas, Māra and Brahmā, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, its devas and humans.

16 The knowledge and vision arose in me:

‘Unshakable is my liberation⁴—this is my last birth. There is now no more rebirth!’”

— evaṃ —

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⁴ Comy (to (Dhātu) Pubbe Sambodha S, S 14.31) ad loc: The knowledge arose, “This liberation of mine by the fruit of arhathood is unshakable.” Its unshakability can be understood through cause and through object. It is unshakable “through cause” (*karaṇato*) because there the defilements eradicated by the four paths cannot return. It is unshakable “through object” (*ārammaṇato*) because it occurs with nirvana, the unshakable state, as object. (SA 2:154)