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Ūmi Bhaya Sutta

The Discourse on the Danger of Waves | A 4.122¹

Theme: How renunciation can fail

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2014

1 Sutta summary and highlights

Note: Detailed notes can be found in the translation and introduction, especially (5.3), of **the Cātuma Sutta** (M 67), SD 34.7. We can either go through the Ūmi Bhaya Sutta (A 4.122) here first, and then study the relevant parts of the Cātumā Sutta. Or, we can begin with the Cātumā Sutta, especially M 67, 14-20 and their notes. Then go on to study the Ūmi Bhaya Sutta.

Here, the notes are brief and preliminary, but sufficient to give us a good idea of the teaching and spirit of the Ūmi Bhaya Sutta.

1.1 SIGNIFICANCE

1.1.1 The Ūmi Bhaya Sutta (A 4.122), the Discourse on the Danger of Waves, is a reprise of a quartet of famous parables from sections 14-20 (the climax or closing section) of **the Cātumā Sutta** (M 67). The context in both Suttas is the same: the Buddha is admonishing new monks on the fundamentals of safeguarding the holy life of renunciation.²

1.1.2 The Ūmi Bhaya Sutta features only the parables for the benefit of laity, where the spirit of such teachings can also apply for our effective practice for the sake of awakening in this life itself. In the case of lay training, the parables remind us how we should restrain ourselves, especially on precept days or during meditation retreats or whenever we are inclined to observe the rule of celibacy for mental cultivation.

Although the laity, including lay streamwinners, may indulge in sensual pleasures, these are truly enjoyable experiences that satisfies and harmonizes our lives, especially with our loved ones, families, work, creative pursuits, and recreation. Such pleasures are wholesome experiences within the limits and spirit of the 5 precepts, or the additional precepts that we choose to observe.³

1.2 HIGHLIGHTS. The 4 “river” parables point to the dangers (or fears) of waves (anger and despair), of crocodiles (gluttony), of whirlpools (sensual pleasures), and of river dolphins (sexual lust). For monastics, these are warnings that impatience and unmindfulness are likely to make us vulnerable to our weaknesses and fall back on old worldly habits, which then lead to our giving up our training. The Buddha dramatically and clearly illustrates this through the 4 parables, summarized here:

(1) **“The danger of waves”** (*ūmi, bhaya*). Newly ordained monks, instructed regarding proper postures and other rules of decorum, find it annoying, and as a result return to lay life out of anger and despair (*kodh’upāyāsa*). The “danger of waves” is a monk’s *anger and despair*, arising from his dislike for the training in full awareness, that is, in sense-restraint and mindfulness, so that he returns to the lay life. [§§3-11]

(2) **“The danger of crocodiles”** (*kumbhīla, bhaya*). Newly ordained monks are instructed in the restraint regarding food, feel as if they have been given “a muzzle over our mouths,” and as a result return to lay life out of gluttony (*odarika*). The “danger of crocodiles” is a monk’s *desire for food* or gluttony (becoming a monk for the sake of food), so that he dislikes the monastic rules and restrictions regarding food and meals, and as a result returns to the lay life. [§§12-26]

(3) **“The danger of whirlpools”** (*āvatta, bhaya*). Newly ordained monks go out for alms with body, speech and mind unguarded, and seeing lay people enjoying sense-pleasures, they recall their own previous lay lives of pleasure. As a result, they return to lay life because of attraction to the 5 objects of sense-pleasures (*pañca kāma, guṇa*) (that is, pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch). The “dan-

¹ This Sutta recurs almost verbatim but with a few differences in **Cātumā S** (M 67, 14-20), SD 34.7.

² M 67, 14-20/1:459-462 @ SD 34.7.

³ On laity who indulge in sensual pleasures (*kāma, bhogī*), see **Mahā Vaccha, gotta S** (M 73, 10/1:491), SD 27.4. See SD 47.1 (1.1.2.4).

ger of whirlpools” refers to a monk’s being unmindful in body and speech (such as socializing with the laity), so that he is aroused by worldly pleasures. [§§27-38]

(4) **“The danger of river dolphins”** (*susukā, bhaya*). Newly ordained monks go out for alms with body, speech and mind unguarded, with sense-faculties unrestrained, and seeing a woman lightly dressed, lust infects them. As a result, they return to lay life because of women (*mātu, gāma*) (here, a euphemism for sexuality). The “danger of river dolphins” refers to the monk’s being unmindful especially in public places, and seeing *attractive women*, is overcome with lust. Here, “women” is a euphemism for sexuality. Hence, unmindfully seeing *attractive men*, too, may arouse lust in those who tend to be attracted to the same sex (which, to some extent, is hinted at in the third parable, of the whirlpools). [§§39-48]

The 4 parables warn of dangers of those who are new to renunciation and spiritually weak, recalling past worldly pleasures. In each case, the monk, being unmindful, fondly recalls his erstwhile lay laxity and pleasures, misses them, and so fails in his monastic training by returning to the pleasures of lay life. These 4 dangers (or fears) are also mentioned in **the Vibhaṅga** and **the Milinda, pañha**.⁴

2 Related suttas

2.1 We have noted that the 4 parables of the Ūmi Bhaya Sutta comes from the closing section of **the Cātumā Sutta** (M 67) [1.1.1].

2.2 We have already mentioned that the elder nun **Sumedhā** alluded to the “parable on danger of crocodiles” (*kumbhila, bhaya*) [§12 n].

2.3 On a positive note, we do have a water parable that presents the various stages of sainthood, as found in **the Udakūpama Sutta** (A 7.15). The Sutta is about levels of spiritual commitment and attainment, illustrated by a water parable. In the parable of the 7 kinds of shipwrecked persons, 3 kinds of worldlings (the one of habitual wrong view, the spiritually uncommitted, and the good worldling) and 4 kinds of saints (the streamwinner, the once-returner, the non-returner, and the arhat).⁵

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The Discourse on the Danger of Waves

A 4.122⁶

The 4 dangers

1 Bhikshus, there are these 4 dangers [fears] to be expected when one goes down into the water.⁷ What are the four?

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|---|------------------------|
| 2 (1) the danger [fear] of waves, | <i>ūmi, bhaya</i> |
| (2) the danger [fear] of crocodiles, ⁸ | <i>kumbhīla, bhaya</i> |
| (3) the danger [fear] of whirlpools, and | <i>āvaṭṭa, bhaya</i> |
| (4) the danger [fear] of river dolphins. | <i>susukā, bhaya</i> |

These, bhikshus, are the 4 dangers to be expected by those who go down into the waters.

2 Even so, bhikshus, there are these 4 dangers to be expected by a certain son of family⁹ who have left the household life for homelessness¹⁰ out of faith¹¹ in this Dharma-Vinaya [teaching and discipline]. [M 1:460]

⁴ Vbh 376; Miln 196 (in a long list of *bhayāni*).

⁵ A 7.15/4:11-13 = Pug 7.1/71 f @ SD 28.6. For details, see **Level of learning**, SD 40a.4 (2.1.1).

⁶ This Sutta recurs almost verbatim but with a few differences in **Cātumā S** (M 67, 14-20), SD 34.7.

⁷ *Cattār’imāni bhikkhave bhayāni udak’orohantassa* [M 67, 14 *orohante*] *pāṭikaṅkhitabbāni*.

⁸ Invoked in **Sumedhā Thī**: *sara kumbhīla, bhayāni ca*, “remember the dangers of crocodiles” (Thī 502).

⁹ Be Ce Se *ekaccassa kula, puttassa* (sg); Ee *idh’ekacce kula, putte* (pl)..

What are the four?

They are the danger of waves, the danger of crocodiles, the danger of whirlpools, and the danger of river dolphins.

(1) The danger of waves (*ūmi bhaya*)

3 (1) And what, bhikshus, is **the danger [fear] of waves**?

4 Here, bhikshus, a certain son of family goes forth out of faith from the household life into homelessness, thinking,

5 ‘I am beset by birth, decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, bodily pains, mental pains and despair; beset by suffering; overcome by suffering.

Perhaps an ending of this whole mass of suffering could be known.’¹²

6 Then, fellow renunciants, colleagues in the holy life,¹³ advise and instruct him, thus:¹⁴

‘You should move forward this way.

You should walk back [step back] this way.

You should look forward this way. [124]

You should look around this way.

You should bend down this way.

You should stretch up this way.

You should carry your upper robe, outer robe and bowl this way.’

7 It occurs to him, thus:

‘Formerly, while in our household state, we advised and instructed others. But (now) these who seem like but sons, like but grandsons to us, think that they would advise and instruct us!’

8 Angry and offended, he gives up the training and returns to the low life.¹⁵

9 This, bhikshus, is called one who, out of the danger of *waves*, has given up the training and returned to the low life.

10 ‘The danger of waves,’ indeed, bhikshus, this is a name for anger and despair.¹⁶

11 This, bhikshus, is called the danger of waves.¹⁷

(2) The danger of crocodiles (*kumbhīla bhaya*)

12 (2) And what, bhikshus, is **the danger [fear] of crocodiles**?¹⁸

¹⁰ Be *pabbajitassa*; Ee *pabbajite*; Ce Se *pabbajito*.

¹¹ “Left the household life...out of faith,” Ce Ke Se *saddhā agārasmā*; Be Ee pny *agārasmā*.

¹² *Otiṇṇo ’mhi jātiyā jarāya maraṇena sokehi paridevehi dukkhehi somanassehi upāyāsehi dukkh’otiṇṇo dukkha,-pareto, app’eva nāma imassa kevalassa dukkha-k,khandhassa anta,kiriya paññāyethāti.*

¹³ “Fellow renunciants, colleagues in the holy life,” *pabbajitaṃ samānaṃ sa,brahma.cārī*, ie, those who have renounced at the same time (*samāna*) as him, residing in the same community.

¹⁴ *Tam enaṃ tathā pabbajitaṃ samānaṃ sa,brahma.cārī ovadanti anusāsanti.* Here it refers to the training in full awareness (*sampajañña*): see **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10,8/1:57), SD 13.3.

¹⁵ *So sikkhaṃ paccakkhāya hīnāy’āvattati.* Cf S 2:50, 4:103; Nm 147. **Cātuma S** (M 67) omits *so kupito anattamano*, “angry and offended...” “Returns...to the low life,” *hīnāy’āvattati*, lit “turns to the low,” ie gives up orders, returns to secular life (D 3:49-51; M 1:460-462, 2:258; S 2:231, 271; A 1:147, 2:124-126, 3:4, 90 f, 96 f, 393-398, 5:318; Miln 247 f; Pug 66 f); also *hīnāya āvattati* (V 1:17; S 2:231, 4:191; U 21; A 3:393 f; M 1:460; Sn p92); Pug 66; *hīnāya vattati* id, J 1:276; *hīnāy’āvatta*, “one who returns to the world” (M 1:460, 462; S 2:50, 4:103; Ndm 147).

¹⁶ *Ūmi,bhayan ti kho, bhikkhave, kodh’upāyāsass’etaṃ adhvāvacanam.* **Vammika S** (M 23) uses a toad (*uddhu,māyika*) as its figure for “anger and despair” (*kodh’upāyāsa*) (M 23,38/1:144), SD 28.13. See SD 34.7 (5.3.2). Cf “anger and upset” (*kopa appaccaya*) which are called a monastic’ “blemishes” (*aṅgaṇa*): see **Anaṅgaṇa S** (M 5,9/-1:26), SD 37.7.

¹⁷ Omitted in **Cātuma S** (M 67).

¹⁸ This parable is alluded to by the elder nun **Sumedhā**: “Remember the dangers of crocodiles...” (*sara kumbhila,-bhayāni ca*, Thī 502).

13 Here, bhikshus, a certain son of family goes forth out of faith from the household life into homelessness, thinking,

14 I am immersed in birth, decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, bodily pains, mental pains and despair; immersed in suffering; overcome by suffering.

Perhaps an ending of this whole mass of suffering could be known.’

15 Then, fellow renunciants, colleagues in the holy life advise and instruct him, thus:

‘This can be eaten by you;	this should not be eaten ¹⁹ by you.
This can be consumed by you;	this should not be consumed by you.
This can be tasted by you;	this cannot be tasted by you.
This can be drunk by you;	this cannot be drunk by you.

16 You should eat what is allowable;	you should not eat what is not allowable.
You should consume what is allowable;	you should not consume what is not allowable.
You should taste what is allowable;	you should not taste what is not allowable.
You should drink what is allowable;	you should not drink what is not allowable.

17 You should eat at the right time;	you should not eat at the wrong time. ²⁰
You should consume at the right time;	you should not consume at the wrong time.
You should taste at the right time;	you should not taste at the wrong time.

You should drink at the right time; [125]	you should not drink at the wrong time. [M 1:461]
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18 It occurs to him, thus:

‘Formerly, while in our household state,

19 we ate what we wished,	we did not eat what we did not wish, too;
we consumed what we wished,	we did not consume what we did not wish, too;
we tasted what we wished,	we did not taste what we did not wish, too;
we drank what we wished,	we did not drink what we did not wish, too;

20 we ate what was allowable,	we ate what was not allowable, too;
we consumed what was allowable,	we consumed what was not allowable, too;
we tasted what was allowable,	we tasted what was not allowable, too;
we drank what was allowable,	we drank what was not allowable, too;

21 we ate at the right time,	we ate at the wrong time, too;
we consumed at the right time,	we consumed at the wrong time, too;
we tasted at the right time,	we tasted at the wrong time, too;
we drank at the right time,	we drank at the wrong time.

22 Now,²¹ when faithful housemasters²² give me exquisite food, hard and soft, during the day at the wrong time [outside the right time], it seems as if they have put a gag over my mouth!²³

¹⁹ “Should not be eaten,” *na khāditabbam* refers to eating solid or “hard” food, which needs some grinding or chewing (like rice, fish, vegetables, etc) taken as a main meal; *bhūñjitabba*, “that which should be consumed” (next line) refers to “soft food (no chewing needed) are made of any of the 5 kinds of food: boiled rice, porridge, barley-meal, fish, or meat (V 4:83), the last two being well cooked; *sāyitabba*, “that which should be tasted,” incl ghee, fresh butter, oil, etc (DA 3:927). When they appear together as a set, usu tr as “food, hard and soft” (*khādanīyam bhojanīyam*, D 2:127; Sn p110; Miln 9, 11; J 1:90, 235, 3:127). SED defs *bhojanīya* as “food (esp what is not masticated, as opp to *khādanīya*).

²⁰ “At the right [proper] time,” *kālena*; “at the wrong time,” *vikālena*, from *vikāla* (“outside the time”). The proper time for meals for monastics is from dawn to noon (natural time), outside of which only liquids may be taken. Where available, during such times, milk products (like cheese), too, may be taken when necessary (basically, to ward off tiredness or prevent illness).

²¹ “Now...me,” Be Ee *tatra pi me*; Ce *tatrāpi me*; Se *tatrāpīme*; M 1:451,13 *tattha pi me*.

²² *Gaha,patikā* is a synecdoche ref to a class of people, viz the housemasters, owners of their own house, who are individually ref to as *gaha,pati*, “houselord.” We could tr *gaha,patika* (sg) as “one of the houselord class.” See SD 38.6 (2.1).

²³ *Tatra’pi’me* [see head of para] *mukh’āvaraṇam maññe karontīti*, so *kupito anattamano sikkham paccakkhāya hīnāyāvattati Mukh’āvaraṇam karonti*, lit “they make a covering over the mouth,” or, alt, “muzzled up our mouths.”

23 He gives up the training and returns to the low life.

24 This, bhikshus, is called one who, out of the danger [fear] of *crocodiles*, has given up the training and returned to the low life.

25 ‘The danger of crocodiles,’ indeed, bhikshus, this is a name for belly-filling [gluttony].²⁴

26 This, bhikshus, is called the danger of crocodiles.

(3) The danger of whirlpools (*āvatta bhaya*)

27 (3) And what, bhikshus, is **the danger [fear] of whirlpools**?

28 *Here, bhikshus, a certain son of family goes forth out of faith from the household life into homelessness, thinking,*

29 *‘I am immersed in birth, decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, bodily pains, mental pains and despair; immersed in suffering; overcome by suffering. Perhaps an ending of this whole mass of suffering could be known.’*

30 Then, as one gone forth, having dressed himself in the morning, taking bowl and robe, he enters a village or market-town for alms.

31 With body unguarded, with speech unguarded,²⁵ with mindfulness unestablished, with faculties unrestrained,

there he sees a householder or a householder’s son endowed and replete with the 5 cords of sense-pleasures, revelling in them.²⁶

32 It occurs to him, thus:

‘Formerly, while in our household state,

33 we were endowed and replete with the 5 cords of sense-pleasures, revelling in them.

34 Now, my family has wealth. I can enjoy my wealth as well as make merit.’

35 He gives up the training and returns to the low life.

36 This, bhikshus, is called one who, out of the danger [fear] of *whirlpools*, has given up the training and returned to the low life.

37 ‘The danger of whirlpools,’ indeed, bhikshus, this is a name for the 5 cords of sense-pleasure.

38 This, bhikshus, is called the danger of whirlpools.

(4) The danger of river dolphins (*susukā bhaya*)

39 (4) And what, bhikshus, is **the danger [fear] of river dolphins**?²⁷

40 *Here, bhikshus, a certain son of family goes forth out of faith from the household life into homelessness, thinking,*

41 *‘I am immersed in birth, decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, bodily pains, mental pains and despair; immersed in suffering; overcome by suffering.*

Perhaps an ending of this whole mass of suffering could be known.’

42 Then, as one gone forth, having dressed himself in the morning, taking bowl and robe, he enters a village or market-town for alms. [126]

43 With body unguarded, with speech unguarded, with mindfulness unestablished, with faculties unrestrained, there he sees a woman, scantily clothed, scantily dressed.

²⁴ *Kumbhīla, bhayan’ti kho, bhikkhave, odarikattass’etaṃ adhivacanāṃ.* Cf “danger of gluttony” (*odarikatta, bhaya*), ie, “through doing what should not be done so as to fill one’s belly” (ThĀ 291). See Intro (5.3.3). On this 4th danger, see eg **Kīṭṭā, giri S** (M 70/1:473-481), SD 11.1.

²⁵ The whole sentence: *Arakkhiten’eva kāyena arakkhitāya vācāya anupaṭṭhitāya satiyā asaṃvutehi indriyehi so tattha passati gaha, patim vā gaha, pati, puttam vā pañcahi kāma, guṇehi samappitam samaṅgī, bhūtam paricārayamānam.* **Ūmi Bhaya S** (A 4.122) here adds *arakkhiteṇa cittaṇa*, “unguarded in mind” (A 4.122, 5/2.125).

²⁶ “Replete with...revelling in them,” *pañcahi kāmaguṇehi samappitam samaṅgī, bhūtam paricārayamānam.* See VbhA 2494/506. *Pañca kāma, guna*, “the 5 cords of sense-pleasure,” viz, form, sound, smell, taste, touch that are taken as pleasurable (M 1:85, 173).

²⁷ On “river dolphins,” see (1.2(4)) above.

44 Having seen that woman scantily clothed, scantily dressed, lust corrupts his mind.²⁸

45 On account of his mind being corrupted by lust, he gives up the training and returns to the low life.

46 This, bhikshus, is called one who, out of the danger [fear] of *river dolphins*, has given up the training and returned to the low life.

47 ‘The danger of river dolphins,’ indeed, bhikshus, this is a name for women.²⁹

48 This, bhikshus, is called the danger of river dolphins.

Conclusion

49 These, bhikshus are the 4 dangers to be expected by certain sons of family who have left the household life for homelessness in this Dharma-Vinaya [teaching and discipline].”

50 The Blessed One said this. The monks joyfully approved of the Blessed One’s word.

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²⁸ As at **Verambā S** (S 17.9,5/2:231), **Bilāra S** (S 20.10,9/2:271); **Yodh’ājīva S 2** (A 5.76,8/3:95).

²⁹ For further details, see SD 34.7 (5.3.5).