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(Agga) Tathāgata Suttā 1-4“The Tathagata is Foremost” Discourses 1-4¹ | S 45.139

Theme: The Buddha is the most evolved of beings

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2016

1 The 4 cycles and the 4 truths

1.1 The (Agga) Tathāgata Sutta 1-4 (S 45.139) has been specially arranged by the council fathers as a play on the 4 noble truths in terms of awakening. It is really a single sutta, but the internal numbering helps us to examine each of the sections separately for an in-depth reflection. The lateness of this canonical Sutta is evinced by the fact that it follows the popular “teaching” sequence of the 4 noble truths. The older “practice” sequence—that is, as 1-2-4-3—is found in, for example, **the Mahā Saḷ-āyatanika Sutta** (M 149) and **the Abhiññā Sutta** (A 4.251).²

1.2 The 4 sections of the Sutta respectively reflect each of the 4 noble truths in the teaching sequence as follows:

(1) The path to solitude (<i>viveka</i>)	the 1 st truth	suffering	1
(2) The path to abandoning the 3 roots (* <i>mūla</i> , <i>vinaya</i>)	the 2 nd truth	craving	2
(3) The path whose goal is the death-free state (<i>amata</i>)	the 3 rd truth	nirvana	4
(4) The path that “tends towards nirvana” (<i>nibbāna</i> , <i>ninna</i>)	the 4 th truth	the path	3

While the last three pairs correspond well, the first pair needs a bit of imaginative stretch. How do we relate suffering, or the truth that is suffering (the first truth), to the path to wholesome solitude? One possible answer is by way of antithesis: our sufferings prevent us from enjoying any kind of meaningful or beneficial solitude. Or, that if we really want to understand and experience true solitude, we need to understand the nature of suffering.³

1.3 In the older natural or “practice” sequence of the 4 truths presented in the suttas, we can see them in terms of the “3 true teachings” (*saddhamma*), that is, as theory [a], practice [b+d], and realization [c]:⁴

(1) The path to solitude (<i>viveka</i>)	the 1 st truth	suffering
(2) The path to abandoning the 3 roots (* <i>mūla</i> , <i>vinaya</i>)	the 2 nd truth	craving
(4) The path that “tends towards nirvana” (<i>nibbāna</i> , <i>ninna</i>)	the 4 th truth	the path
(3) The path whose goal is the death-free state (<i>amata</i>)	the 3 rd truth	nirvana

1.4 The (Agga) Tathāgata Sutta (S 45.139) closely parallels **the Sāra,gandha Sutta** (S 45.143). The Sāra,gandha Sutta is just a little more elaborate, with four heartwood parables, highlighting red sandalwood, which refers to diligence.

On account of their close parallels, the notes of the Sāra,gandha Sutta apply to this Sutta, too. Please refer to SD 42.24 for the relevant notes.

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¹ This is actually a single sutta with 4 parts, numbered for convenience of reference.

² M 149,11: see esp SD 41.9 (2.4) (for refs). Cf **Gavam,pati S** (S 56.30/5:436 f), SD 53.1: see also SD 1.1 (6.2.-2.4).

³ On solitude, see **Paviveka S** (A 3.92), SD 44.2.

⁴ These are the “3 good truths” (*saddhamma*), ie, SD 1.1 (5.1.5).

“The Tathagata is Foremost” Discourses 1-4

S 45.139

1 At Sāvattihī.

Paṭhama (Agga) Tathāgata Sutta

The First “The Tathagata is Foremost” Discourse

(1) SOLITUDE (*VIVEKA*)⁵

1.2 Bhikshus, as far as there are **beings**—

whether legless, two-legged, four-legged, many-legged,

whether with form or formless,

whether conscious, [42] unconscious, or neither-conscious-nor-non-conscious,⁶that is to say, the Tathagata, the worthy one, fully self-awakened, is declared to be the foremost amongst them.⁷2 Even so, bhikshus, whatever **wholesome states** there are,⁸all of them are rooted in diligence, converge on diligence,diligence is declared the foremost amongst them.⁹2 Bhikshus, when a monk is *diligent*, it is to be expected that he will cultivate the noble eightfold path.¹⁰4 And how, bhikshus, does a monk who is *diligent* cultivate **the noble eightfold path**?

5 Here, bhikshus, a monk

(1) cultivates right view,¹¹dependent¹² on **solitude**,¹³ dependent on fading away (of lust) [on dispassion],¹⁴ dependent on cessation (of suffering),¹⁵ ripening in letting go (of defilements);¹⁶

⁵ *Viveka, nissita*, “dependent on solitude”: see **Sāra, gandha S** (S 45.143,5(1) n), SD 42.24. For essay, see *Viveka*, SD 20.4.

⁶ This phrase recurs at (**Catukka**) **Agga, pasāda S** (A 4.34/2:34) = (It 87), SD 45.13; (**Dasaka**) **Appamāda S** (A 10.15/5:21), SD 42.23; Miln 217.

⁷ The whole section: *Yāvataṃ bhikkhave sattā apadā vā dvi, padā vā catu-p, padā vā bahu-p, padā vā rūpino vā arūpino vā saññino vā asaññino vā n’eva, saññi, nāsaññino vā, tathāgato tesam aggam akkhāyati* [It adds *yad idam* here] *arahaṃ sammāsam, buddho*. Qu in opening of (**Dasaka**) **Appamāda S** (A 10.15,1), SD 42.23 [2.1.2]. Qu in Vism 293 where *yāvataṃ* (adv) is mistaken for pronoun (as *yo ayaṃ*), as in Comys. Text omits *yad idam* (“that is to say”), which is found in **It 90**, SD 45.17. This passage is alluded to in comy on “the 3 refuges” (*saraṇa-t, taya* as “the foremost of all beings” (*sabba, sattānaṃ aggo*, KhpA 20,22) and quoted in comy on Ratana S (KhpA 179,26).

⁸ *Evam evaṃ kho bhikkhave ye keci kusalā dhammā, sabbe te appamāda, mūlakā appamāda, samosaraṇā, appamādo tesam dhammānaṃ aggam akkhāyati*.

⁹ These two sections [§§1-2] recur in (**Dasaka**) **Appamāda S** (A 10.15,1-2), SD 42.23. Comy: How is it (diligence, *appamāda*) is the foremost of them (wholesome states)? On account of benefitting the recipient. For, on account of diligence, they (the wholesome states) are obtained; hence, it is the foremost amongst them. (*Katham esa tesam aggo-ti? Paṭilābhak’atthena. Appamādena hi te paṭilabbhanti, tasmā so tesam aggo*, SA 3:133).

¹⁰ This line recurs in **Pāda S** (S 5:43); **Candima Pabhā S** (S 5:45).

¹¹ This & foll 2 ll: *sammā, diṭṭhiṃ bhāveti viveka, nissitaṃ virāga, nissitaṃ nirodha, nissitaṃ vossagga, pariṇāmiṃ*.

¹² “Dependent on solitude ... ripening in letting go,” *viveka, nissitaṃ virāga, nissitaṃ nirodha, nissitaṃ vossagga, pariṇāmiṃ*. On the terms here, see Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 2001:165-168. MA says that there are 2 kinds of letting go (of suffering) (*vossagga*): “giving up” (*pariccāga*), i.e. the abandonment of defilements, and “entering into” (*pakkhandana*), ie culminating in nirvana. Gethin notes that this phrase is not unique to the 7 *bojjh-*

- (2) cultivates right intention,
dependent on solitude, dependent on fading away (of lust) [on dispassion], dependent on cessation (of suffering), ripening in letting go (of defilements);
- (3) cultivates right speech,
dependent on solitude, dependent on fading away (of lust) [on dispassion], dependent on cessation (of suffering), ripening in letting go (of defilements);
- (4) cultivates right action,
dependent on solitude, dependent on fading away (of lust) [on dispassion], dependent on cessation (of suffering), ripening in letting go (of defilements);
- (5) cultivates right livelihood,
dependent on solitude, dependent on fading away (of lust) [on dispassion], dependent on cessation (of suffering), ripening in letting go (of defilements);
- (6) cultivates right effort,
dependent on solitude, dependent on fading away (of lust) [on dispassion], dependent on cessation (of suffering), ripening in letting go (of defilements);
- (7) cultivates right mindfulness,
dependent on solitude, dependent on fading away (of lust) [on dispassion], dependent on cessation (of suffering), ripening in letting go (of defilements);
- (8) cultivates right concentration,
dependent on solitude, dependent on fading away (of lust) [on dispassion], dependent on cessation (of suffering), ripening in letting go (of defilements).

6 This, bhikshus, is how a monk who is diligent cultivates the noble eightfold path.

Dutiya (Agga) Tathāgata Sutta

The Second “The Tathagata is Foremost” Discourse

(2) ENDING THE ROOTS (*MŪLA PARIYOSANĀ*)

7 Bhikshus, as far as there are **beings**—
whether legless, two-legged, four-legged, many-legged,
whether with form or formless,
whether conscious, unconscious, or neither-conscious-nor-non-conscious,
that is to say, the Tathagata, the worthy one, fully self-awakened, is declared to be the foremost
amongst them.

8 Even so, bhikshus, whatever **wholesome states** there are,
all of them are rooted in diligence, converge on diligence,
diligence is declared the foremost amongst them.

aṅgā, but is also found in connection with the factors of the noble eightfold path, the *indriyā* and *balā* (2001: 162 f). This formula shows that each *bojjhaṅga* is to be developed successively “as dependent on solitude, dispassion [fading away] and cessation” (Gethin 2001:166). See *Viveka*, SD 20.4.

¹³ Solitude (*viveka*) or seclusion ref to the overcoming of the 5 mental hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇā*): “dependent on solitude ... “ is called the *viveka,nissita* formula: see *Viveka,nissita*, SD 20.4.

¹⁴ “Fading away,” *virāga* also “dispassion”.

¹⁵ “Cessation,” *nirodha*, ie, “cessation of suffering”.

¹⁶ “Letting go (of defilements),” *vossagga*, effectively synonymous with *paṭinissagga*, “relinquishment,” eg in *Ānāpāna,sati S* (M 118,21/3:83), SD 7.13; also *Eka,dhamma S* (S 54.1/5:313). See *Viveka,nissita*, SD 20.4 (7.3). On these 4 aspects of the *viveka,nissita* formula following the 4-truth model—ie *viveka,nissita* = 1st truth, *virāga,nissita* = 2nd truth, *nirodha,nissita* = 3rd truth, and *vossagga,nissita* = 4th truth—see *Viveka,nissita*, SD 20.4 (7.9).

9 Bhikshus, when a monk is *diligent*, it is to be expected that he will cultivate *the noble eightfold path*.

10 And how, bhikshus, does a monk who is *diligent* cultivate **the noble eightfold path**?

11 THE *MŪLA, PARIYOSANĀ* FORMULA¹⁷

Here, bhikshus, a monk

- (1) cultivates right view,
which ends in **the removal** of lust, the removal of hate, the removal of delusion;¹⁸
- (2) cultivates right intention,
which ends in the removal of lust, the removal of hate, the removal of delusion;
- (3) cultivates right speech,
which ends in the removal of lust, the removal of hate, the removal of delusion;
- (4) cultivates right action,
which ends in the removal of lust, the removal of hate, the removal of delusion;
- (5) cultivates right livelihood,
which ends in the removal of lust, the removal of hate, the removal of delusion;
- (6) cultivates right effort,
which ends in the removal of lust, the removal of hate, the removal of delusion;
- (7) cultivates right mindfulness,
which ends in the removal of lust, the removal of hate, the removal of delusion;
- (8) cultivates right concentration,
which ends in the removal of lust, the removal of hate, the removal of delusion.

12 This, bhikshus, is how a monk who is diligent cultivates the noble eightfold path.

Tatiya (Agga) Tathāgata Sutta

The Third “The Tathagata is Foremost” Discourse

(3) “PLUNGING INTO THE DEATH-FREE” (*AMAT’OGADHA*)

13 Bhikshus, as far as there are **beings**—
whether legless, two-legged, four-legged, many-legged,
whether with form or formless,
whether conscious, unconscious, or neither-conscious-nor-non-conscious,
that is to say, the Tathagata, the worthy one, fully self-awakened, is declared to be the foremost
amongst them.

14 Even so, bhikshus, whatever **wholesome states** there are,
all of them are rooted in diligence, converge on diligence,
diligence is declared the foremost amongst them.

15 Bhikshus, when a monk is *diligent*, it is to be expected that he will cultivate *the noble eightfold path*.

16 And how, bhikshus, does a monk who is diligent cultivate **the noble eightfold path**?

17 Here, bhikshus, a monk

- (1) cultivates right view,
that plunges into **the death-free**, crosses over to the death-free, ends in the death-free;¹⁹

¹⁷ As in *Oram, bhāgiya S* (S 45.179), SD 50.11.

¹⁸ *Raga, vinaya, pariyosānaṃ dosa, vinaya, pariyosānaṃ moha, vinaya, pariyosānaṃ*, lit, “which ends in the removal of lust, which ends in the removal of hate, which ends in the removal of delusion.”

¹⁹ *Amat’ogadham amata, parāyaṇam amata, pariyosānaṃ*. On this formula, see Gethin 2001:255 n109.

- (2) cultivates right intention,
that plunges into the death-free, crosses over to the death-free, ends in the death-free;
- (3) cultivates right speech,
that plunges into the death-free, crosses over to the death-free, ends in the death-free;
- (4) cultivates right action,
that plunges into the death-free, crosses over to the death-free, ends in the death-free;
- (5) cultivates right livelihood,
that plunges into the death-free, crosses over to the death-free, ends in the death-free;
- (6) cultivates right effort,
that plunges into the death-free, crosses over to the death-free, ends in the death-free;
- (7) cultivates right mindfulness,
that plunges into the death-free, crosses over to the death-free, ends in the death-free;
- (8) cultivates right concentration,
that plunges into the death-free, crosses over to the death-free, ends in the death-free.

18 This, bhikshus, is how a monk who is diligent cultivates the noble eightfold path.

Catuttha (Agga) Tathāgata Sutta

The Fourth “The Tathagata is Foremost” Discourse

(4) “TENDING TOWARDS NIRVANA” (*NIBBĀNA, NINNA*)

19 Bhikshus, as far as there are **beings**—
whether legless, two-legged, four-legged, many-legged,
whether with form or formless,
whether conscious, unconscious, or neither-conscious-nor-non-conscious,
that is to say, the Tathagata, the worthy one, fully self-awakened, is declared to be the foremost
amongst them.

20 Even so, bhikshus, whatever wholesome states there are,
all of them are rooted in diligence, converge on diligence,
diligence is declared the foremost amongst them.

21 Bhikshus, when a monk is diligent, it is to be expected that he will cultivate the noble eightfold path.

22 And how, bhikshus, does a monk who is diligent cultivate **the noble eightfold path**?

23 Here, bhikshus, a monk

- (1) cultivates right view
that **tends**²⁰ **towards nirvana**, slopes towards nirvana, bends towards nirvana;²¹
- (2) cultivates right intention
that tends towards nirvana, slopes towards nirvana, bends towards nirvana;
- (3) cultivates right speech
that tends towards nirvana, slopes towards nirvana, bends towards nirvana;
- (4) cultivates right action
that tends towards nirvana, slopes towards nirvana, bends towards nirvana;
- (5) cultivates right livelihood
that tends towards nirvana, slopes towards nirvana, bends towards nirvana;

²⁰ “That tends,” *ninna*, which lit means “lowland, low ground.” The idea here is that just as water naturally tends to flow from a higher to a lower level, so, too, under the right conditions, the mind *tends* towards nirvana.

²¹ *Nibbāna, ninnam nibbāna, poṇam nibbāna, pabbhāram.*

- (6) cultivates right effort
that tends towards nirvana, slopes towards nirvana, bends towards nirvana;
- (7) cultivates right mindfulness
that tends towards nirvana, slopes towards nirvana, bends towards nirvana;
- (8) cultivates right concentration
that tends towards nirvana, slopes towards nirvana, bends towards nirvana.
- 24** This, bhikshus, is how a monk who is diligent cultivates the noble eightfold path.

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[For **Bibliography**, see the end of SD 49c]

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