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## (Navaka) Nibbāna Sutta

The (Nines) Discourse on Nirvana | A 9.48

Theme: The progress to nirvana

Translated by Piya Tan ©2017

### 1 Sutta summary and significance

#### 1.1 Sutta summary

**The (Navaka) Nibbāna Sutta** (A 9.48) is a sutta in the Pañcāla Vagga (A 9) of the Aṅguttara dealing with nirvana.<sup>1</sup> It lists the 9 progressive stages of cessation (*anupubba nirodha*), that is, the 4 form dhyanas (*rūpa jhāna*), the 4 formless attainments (*arūpa samāpatti*) and the attainment of cessation (*nirodha samāpatti*). They are also similarly listed in **the Anupubba Nirodha Sutta** (A 9.31).<sup>2</sup>

#### 1.2 Sutta theme

**1.2.1** In each of the first 8 stages [§§3-10], the dhyana experience is said to be a description of “nirvana in a provisional manner (*pariyāyena*),” that is, in a relative way of speaking. This means that at each level, we experience a kind of temporary “nirvana,” that is, as the extinction or disappearance of certain dhyana-factors,<sup>3</sup> and the cooling of suspension of certain defilements, that is, the 5 mental hindrances<sup>4</sup> and the 4 influxes.<sup>5</sup> None of these stages is nirvana itself, but gives us a progressively better idea of what nirvana is like, relatively speaking.

**1.2.2** Only the 9<sup>th</sup> and last stage—that of **the cessation of perception and feeling** [§11]—refers to the non-returner’s and the arhat’s experience of nirvana here and now. Hence, it is said to be described “in a non-provisional way” (*nippariyāyena*), that is, in the ultimate or Dharma way of speaking. In simple terms, “provisional” refers to the stages of progress leading to nirvana, our concept of which is “non-provisional.”<sup>6</sup>

### 2 The 2 kinds of nirvana

#### 2.0 DEFINITIONS

**The Dīgha Commentary** mentions 2 kinds of nirvana:

(1) the nirvana of the defilements (*kilesa, nibbāna*), and

(2) the nirvana of the aggregates (*khandha, nibbāna*). (DA 899 f)

<sup>1</sup> For the full list, see SD 50.25 (2.1).

<sup>2</sup> A 9.31/4:409 (SD 33.6(3.2.3)): see SD 33.6 (3.2.2).

<sup>3</sup> On dhyana-factors (*jhān’āṅga*), see **Jhāna Pañha S** (S 40.1), SD 24.11 (4.3); SD 8.4 (6).

<sup>4</sup> The 5 mental hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇa*)—sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt—prevent us from attaining dhyana. See **Nīvaraṇā**, SD 32.1

<sup>5</sup> The 4 influxes (*āsava*) are those of sensual desire, of existence, of views and of ignorance: see **Ogha Pañha S** (S 38.11) SD 30.3 (1). An older set has only 3 influxes, ie, omitting the influx of views, which underlies all three: see SD 30.1 (1.3.2).

<sup>6</sup> Further on *pariyāyena* and *nippariyāyena*, see SD 50.25 (1.4).

According to the Commentary, *nibbāna* here refers to the “nirvana of the defilements” (*kilesa,nibbāna*), that is, the cessation of greed, hate and delusion (AA 4:207). In the suttas, these 2 kinds of nirvana are respectively called “the nirvana with remains” (*sa,upādi,sesa nibbāna*) and “the nirvana without remains” (*anupādi,sesa nibbāna*).<sup>7</sup>

## 2.1 THE NIRVANA OF THE DEFILEMENTS

In brief, “**the nirvana of the defilements**” entails the cessation of arising of new karma and refers to the arhat’s state while he still lives. This refers to the utter destruction of the roots (*mūla*) of greed, hate and delusion, the bases for ignorance, craving, rebirth and suffering. This is the nirvana of the arhat who continues to live as long as his karmic aggregates last.

## 2.2 THE NIRVANA OF THE AGGREGATES

At the moment of death and thereafter, the arhat is said to have attained “**the nirvana of the aggregates**.” This means that all his *form, feeling, perception, formation and consciousness*<sup>8</sup> cease to arise any more. Like a fire that has gone out, there is nothing more to speak about it, except that it is “extinguished, quenched or cooled” (*nibbuta*).<sup>9</sup>

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# The (Nines) Discourse on Nirvana

A 9.48

1 (Originating in Kosambī.)<sup>10</sup>

2 “Nirvana. Nirvana,’ avuso,<sup>11</sup> it is said.

How, avuso, has the Blessed One spoken of **nirvana** (*nibbāna*)?”

THE OPENING: THE 9 PROGRESSIVE ABODES<sup>12</sup>

## The 4 dhyanas

(1) THE 1<sup>ST</sup> DHYANA

3 Here, avuso, a monk,<sup>13</sup>

quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome mental states,

attains and dwells in the **1<sup>st</sup> dhyana**,

accompanied by initial application and sustained application,

and with zest and happiness born of solitude.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup> SD 50.13 (1.3.2). Further on the conception of nirvana, see (Navaka) **Sandiṭṭhika S 2** (A 9.47) + SD 50.25 (4).

<sup>8</sup> On the 5 aggregates (*pañca-k,khandha*), see SD 17, eg (**Dve**) **Khandhā S** (S 22.48), SD 17.1a.

<sup>9</sup> On the nature of nirvana as a concept, see **Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta S 1** (U 8.1) + SD 50.1 (2).

<sup>10</sup> Ce. See A 94.6 (SD 50.25a) n ad loc.

<sup>11</sup> On this mode of address, see A 94.6 (SD 50.25a) n ad loc above.

<sup>12</sup> *Anupubba,vihāra*, see SD 50.25 (1.3.2.2).

<sup>13</sup> “A monk” (*bhikkhu*) in such contexts always refers to a meditator (**Satipaṭṭhāna S**, M 10,3A n, SD 13.3), or to the practitioner (SD 4.9 (5.3); SD 13.1 (3.1.1)).

3.2 He dwells, having touched that base<sup>15</sup> with the body as it is attained, and he understands it with wisdom.<sup>16</sup>

3.3 To that extent, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **nirvana** in a provisional [relative] manner.<sup>17</sup>

(2) THE 2<sup>ND</sup> DHYANA

**4** And, furthermore, avuso, a monk,  
with the stilling of initial application and sustained application,

by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind,  
attains and dwells in **the 2<sup>nd</sup> dhyana**,  
free from initial application and sustained application,<sup>18</sup>  
with zest and happiness born of concentration.<sup>19</sup>

4.2 He dwells, having touched that base with the body as it is attained, and he understands it with wisdom.

To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **nirvana** in a provisional [relative] manner.

(3) THE 3<sup>RD</sup> DHYANA

**5** And furthermore, avuso, a monk,  
with the fading away of zest,

dwells equanimous, mindful and clearly knowing, and experiences happiness with the body.  
He attains and dwells in **the 3<sup>rd</sup> dhyana**,  
of which the noble ones declare, ‘Happily he dwells in equanimity and mindfulness.’  
He permeates and pervades, floods and fills this very body with the happiness  
free from zest.

5.2 He dwells, having touched that base with the body as it is attained, and he understands it with wisdom.

To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **nirvana** in a provisional [relative] manner.

(4) THE 4<sup>TH</sup> DHYANA

**6** And furthermore, avuso, a monk,  
with the abandoning of joy and pain—  
and with the earlier disappearance of pleasure and displeasure—

attains and dwells in **the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana**,  
that is neither painful nor pleasant, and with mindfulness fully purified by equanimity.

6.2 He dwells, having touched that base with the body as it is attained, and he understands it with wisdom.

To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **nirvana** in a provisional [relative] manner.

<sup>14</sup> See A 94.6 (SD 50.25a) n ad loc above.

<sup>15</sup> “That base” (*tad-āyatanam*), ie, the meditation state.

<sup>16</sup> *Yathā yathā ca tad-āyatanam tathā tathā nam kāyena phassitvā viharati, paññāya ca nam pajānāti.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ettāvatā’pi kho āvuso sandiṭṭhiko dhammo vutto bhagavatā pariyāyena.* “In a provisional manner,” *pariyāyena* (in a restricted sense, “in a sense”): SD 50.25 (1.4.2-1.4.4); cf *nippariyāyena*: SD 50.25 (1.4.5).

<sup>18</sup> On “initial application and sustained application,” see A 94.6 (SD 50.25a) n ad loc.

<sup>19</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> dhyana is known as “the noble silence” (*ariya,tuṇhī,bhāva*): see A 94.6 (SD 50.25a) n ad loc.

## The 4 attainments

### (5) THE SPHERE OF INFINITE SPACE

**7** And furthermore, avuso, a monk,  
having completely transcended perceptions of form,  
 with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance,  
 through non-attention to perceptions of diversity,  
 contemplating, “Infinite space,” attains and dwells in **the sphere of infinite space.**<sup>20</sup>

*7.2 He dwells, having touched that base with the body as it is attained, and he understands it with wisdom.*

*To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **nirvana** in a provisional [relative] manner.*

### (6) THE SPHERE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

**8** And furthermore, avuso, a monk,  
having completely transcended the sphere of infinite space,  
 contemplating, “Infinite consciousness,”  
 attains and dwells in the sphere of infinite consciousness.<sup>21</sup>

*8.2 He dwells, having touched that base with the body as it is attained, and he understands it with wisdom.*

*To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **nirvana** in a provisional [relative] manner.*

### (7) THE SPHERE OF NOTHINGNESS

**9** And furthermore, avuso, a monk,  
having completely transcended the sphere of infinite consciousness,  
 contemplating, “There is nothing,”  
 attains and **[451]** dwells in **the sphere of nothingness.**<sup>22</sup>

*9.2 He dwells, having touched that base with the body as it is attained, and he understands it with wisdom.*

*To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **nirvana** in a provisional [relative] manner.*

### (8) THE SPHERE OF NEITHER-PERCEPTION-NOR-NON-PERCEPTION

**10** And furthermore, avuso, a monk,  
having completely transcended the sphere of nothingness,  
 contemplating, “This is peaceful; this is sublime,”  
 attains to **the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.**<sup>23</sup>

*10.2 He dwells, having touched that base with the body as it is attained, and he understands it with wisdom.*

*To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **nirvana** in a provisional [relative] manner.*

<sup>20</sup> *Sabbaso rūpa,saññānaṃ samatikkamā paṭigha,saññānaṃ atthaṅgamā nānatta,saññānaṃ amanasikārā ananto ākāso ti ākāsaṇaṅcāyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

<sup>21</sup> *Sabbaso ākāsaṇaṅcāyatanaṃ samatikkama anantaṃ viññāṇaṃ ti viññāṇaṅcāyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

<sup>22</sup> *Sabbaso viññāṇaṅcāyatanaṃ samatikkamma n’atthi kiñcī ti ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

<sup>23</sup> *Sabbaso ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ samatikkama santam etaṃ paṇītam etan ti n’eva,saññā,nāsaññāyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

## The cessation of perception and feeling

**11** (9) Furthermore, avuso, a monk,  
having completely transcended the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception,  
 attains and dwells in **the cessation of perception and feeling**.

11.2 And having seen it with wisdom, his mental influxes are fully destroyed.

To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **nirvana** in a non-provisional manner.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> “In a non-provisional manner,” *nippariyāyena*, ie, in the ultimate sense: SD 50.25 (1.4.5).