

## 27

**(Navaka) Parinibbāna Sutta**

The (Nines) Discourse on Parinirvana | A 9.49

Theme: The progress to nirvana

Translated by Piya Tan ©2017

**1 Sutta summary and significance****1.1 Sutta summary**

**1.1.1 The (Navaka) Parinibbāna Sutta** (A 9.49) is a sutta in the Pañcāla Vagga (A 9) of the Aṅguttara dealing with nirvana.<sup>1</sup> It is identical with **the (Navaka) Nibbāna Sutta** (A 9.47), SD 50.26, except for their keywords: in the former, it is *parinibbāna*, while in the latter, it is simply *nibbāna*. Their meaning, however, is identical (AA 4:207), that is, “extinction, quenching, cooling,” where *nibbāna* = *parinibbāna*, at least in these contexts. [2.1]

**1.1.2** The Sutta lists the 9 progressive stages of cessation (*anu, pubba nirodha*), that is, the 4 form dhyanas (*rūpa jhāna*), the 4 formless attainments (*arūpa samāpatti*) and the attainment of cessation (*nirodha samāpatti*).<sup>2</sup> They are also listed as such in **the Anupubba Nirodha Sutta** (A 9.31).<sup>3</sup> [1.2]

**1.2 Sutta theme**

**1.2.1** In each of the first 8 stages [§§3-10], the dhyana experience is said to be “parinirvana in a **provisional** (*pariyāyena*) manner,” 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>4</sup> and the cooling of certain defilements, that is, the 5 mental hindrances<sup>5</sup> and the 4 influxes.<sup>6</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 described “in a non-provisional way” (*nippariyāyena*), that is, in the ultimate or Dharma way of speaking. In simple terms, “provisional” means the stages of progress leading to nirvana, only our concept of the last stage, cessa-tion, is “non-provisional.”<sup>7</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> SD 50.25 (1.3.2.2).

<sup>3</sup> A 9.31/4:409 (SD 33.6(3.2.3)): see SD 33.6 (3.2.2) & SD 50.25 (1.3.2.2).

<sup>4</sup> On dhyana-factors (*jhān’āṅga*), see **Jhāna Pañha S** (S 40.1), SD 24.11 (4.3); SD 8.4 (6).

<sup>5</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>6</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>7</sup> Further on *pariyāyena* and *nippariyāyena*, see SD 50.25 (1.4).

## 2 Parinirvana

### 2.1 EARLY USAGE

**2.1.1** In the early Buddhist texts, the terms *nibbāna* and *parinibbāna*, as a rule, refer to the same thing, that is, the full awakening of an arhat, including that of the Buddha. However, there is an important grammatical difference between the two words. *Parinibbuta* (literally, “who has nirvana-ed”; “who has attained nirvana”) is the past participle of *parinibbāna*, which also means “full nirvana,” that is, the awakening of the Buddha or an arhat.<sup>8</sup>

**2.1.2** The prefix *pari-* (meaning “all around, complete”) before the noun *nibbāna* (“nirvana”) and past participle *nibbuta* (“extinguished, cool or cooled”) give the compounds the sense of action nouns. Hence, *parinibbāna* means “full or final nirvana,” and *parinibbuta*, “having attained full or final nirvana.”

**2.1.3** The verb, *nibbāyati*, means “to be in nirvana, to attain nirvana,” while *parinibbāyati* means “to attain full or final nirvana.”<sup>9</sup> In short, they are all words referring to awakening without distinguishing between activity and state, between *bodhi* and *nibbāna* [2.4]. These words are more fixed technically when they are used to refer specifically to an event, such as the Buddha’s passing away.<sup>10</sup> [2.3.1]

### 2.2 THE 2 KINDS OF NIRVANA

#### 2.2.1 Commentarial 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)

According to the Commentary, the first *nibbāna*—such as the Buddha’s awakening under the Bodhi tree—refers to the “**nirvana of the defilements**” (*kilesa, nibbāna*), that is, the cessation of the 3 unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion (AA 4:205). When an arhat passes away, his 5 aggregates cease to exist; hence, it is called the “**nirvana of the aggregates**” (*khandha, nibbāna*).

#### 2.2.2 The nirvana of the defilements

**2.2.2.1** 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>11</sup> The Buddha, for example, attains the “**nirvana with remains**” under the Bodhi tree and continues to live and teach. His mind is fully awakened and freed from all defilements, but his physical body continues, more or less, as it is.

**2.2.2.2** 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.

<sup>8</sup> On the early synonymy of *nibbāna* and *parinibbāna*, see SD 50.27 (1).

<sup>9</sup> For a historical n, see Thomas 1933:121 f n4. See also Tha:N 119 n5 & Collins 1998:191-198.

<sup>10</sup> See SD 50.13 (1.3.1.2 + 2.2.1.5).

<sup>11</sup> SD 50.13 (1.3.2). For more on the conception of nirvana, see (**Navaka**) **Sandiṭṭhika S 2** (A 9.47) + SD 50.25 (4).

### 2.2.3 The nirvana of the aggregates

**2.2.3.1** Finally, when the physical body is unable to sustain itself, it ceases to be a foothold for consciousness. The Buddha’s consciousness goes out—like the wick of a candle when the wax has run out. Only in this case, flame, wick and wax—the whole candle—has gone out. The candle here represents the 5 aggregates. This is called the “**nirvana without remains.**” [2.3.1]

**2.2.3.2** The “nirvana without remains,” then, refers to the moment of death and thereafter. Here, the arhat is also said to have attained “**the nirvana of the aggregates,**” which means that all his *form, feeling, perception, formation and consciousness*<sup>12</sup> cease to arise any more. Like a fire that has gone, there is nothing more to speak about it, except that it is “extinguished or cooled” (*nibbuta*).<sup>13</sup>

## 2.3 LATER MEANING OF PARINIBBĀNA

### 2.3.1 Parinibbāna as “final passing away”

Towards the end of the Buddha’s ministry, or soon after his passing away, *parinibbāna* is used in the title, **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) [SD 9]. Here, it clearly and specifically refers to the Buddha’s passing away into “final nirvana” (that is, without any more rebirth). In the same Sutta—in a passage recurring in **the Saṃvejaniya Sutta** (A 4.118)—there is a reference to the 4 holy places, worthy of pilgrimage, the *last* of which is Kusinārā, of which it is declared: “Here the Tathāgata has passed into the nirvana-element without remains (*anupādi,sesa*).”<sup>14</sup> This is, of course, a late, post-Buddha usage.<sup>15</sup> *Anupādi,sesa nibbāna*, “the nirvana without remains,” is another term for the arhat’s state when passes away.<sup>16</sup> [2.2.3.2]

— — —

## The Discourse on Parinirvana

A 9.48

- 1 (Originating in Kosambī.)<sup>17</sup>
- 2 “Parinirvana. Parinirvana,’ avuso,<sup>18</sup> it is said.  
How, avuso, has the Blessed One spoken of **parinirvana** (*parinibbāna*)?”

<sup>12</sup> On the 5 aggregates (*pañca-k,khandha*), see SD 17, eg **(Dve) Khandhā S** (S 22.48), SD 17.1a.

<sup>13</sup> On the nature of nirvana as a concept, see **Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta S 1** (U 8.1) + SD 50.1 (2).

<sup>14</sup> D 16,5.8(4) (SD 9); **Saṃvejaniya S** (A 4.118/2:120). Cf usages of merely “final nirvana” (*parinibbuta*) for the Buddha’s passing away at **(Chakka) Kimbila S** (A 6.40/3:340), SD 106.13, & **(Sattaka) Kimbila Sutta or Kimbila Sutta 3** (A 7.56/4:84), SD 106.14

<sup>15</sup> SD 50.13 (2.2.1.5).

<sup>16</sup> On *upādi,sesa nibbāna,dhātu* and *anupādi,sesa nibbāna,dhātu*, see SD 45.18 (2.5). See also SD 41.1 (2.2.1).

<sup>17</sup> Ce. See A 94.6 (SD 50.25a) n ad loc.

<sup>18</sup> On this mode of address, see A 94.6 (SD 50.25a) n ad loc above.

THE OPENING: THE 9 PROGRESSIVE ABODES<sup>19</sup>The 4 dhyanas(1) THE 1<sup>ST</sup> DHYANA

3 Here, avuso, a monk,<sup>20</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>21</sup>

3.2 He dwells, having touched that base<sup>22</sup> with the body as it is attained, and he understands it with wisdom.<sup>23</sup>

3.3 To that extent, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **parinirvana** in a provisional [relative] manner.<sup>24</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>25</sup>

with zest and happiness born of concentration.<sup>26</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 **parinirvana** 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.

<sup>19</sup> *Anupubba, vihāra*, see SD 50.25 (1.3.2.2).

<sup>20</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)).

<sup>21</sup> See A 94.6 (SD 50.25a) n ad loc above.

<sup>22</sup> “That base” (*tad-āyatanam*), ie, the meditation state.

<sup>23</sup> *Yathā yathā ca tad-āyatanam tathā tathā nam kāyena phassitvā viharati, paññāya ca nam pajānāti.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ettāvatā’pi kho āvuso sandiṭṭhiko dhammo vutto bhagavatā pariyāyena.* “In a provisional manner,” *pariyāyena* (ie, 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>25</sup> On “initial application and sustained application,” see A 94.6 (SD 50.25a) n ad loc.

<sup>26</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> dhyana is known as “the noble silence” (*ariya, tuṅhī, bhāva*): see A 94.6 (SD 50.25a) n ad loc.

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

## 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>27</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 **parinirvana** 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>28</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 **parinirvana** 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>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Sabbaso rūpa,saññānaṃ samatikkamā paṭigha,saññānaṃ atthaṅgamā nānatta,saññānaṃ amanasikārā ananto ākāso ti ākāśānañcāyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

<sup>28</sup> *Sabbaso ākāśānañcāyatanaṃ samatikkama anantaṃ viññāṇaṃ ti viññāṇañcāyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

<sup>29</sup> *Sabbaso viññāṇañcāyatanaṃ samatikkamma n’atthi kiñcī ti ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

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 **parinirvana** 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>30</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 **parinirvana** in a provisional [relative] manner.

### 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 **parinirvana** in a non-provisional manner.<sup>31</sup>

— evaṃ —

170418 170418 170610

<sup>30</sup> *Sabbaso ākiñcaññāyatanāni samatikkama santam etaṃ paṇītam etaṃ ti n’eva, saññā, nāsaññ’āyatanam upasampajja viharati.*

<sup>31</sup> “In a non-provisional manner,” *nippariyāyena*, ie, in the ultimate sense: see SD 50.25 (1.4.5).