

28

(Navaka) Tad-aṅga Nibbāna Sutta

The (Nines) Discourse on Nirvana “To That Extent” | A 9.50

Theme: The progress to nirvana

Translated by Piya Tan ©2017

1 Sutta significance

1.1 SUMMARY AND SIGNIFICANCE

1.1.1 The (Navaka) Tad-aṅga Nibbāna Sutta (A 9.50) is a sutta in the Pañcāla Vagga (A 9) of the Aṅguttara dealing with nirvana.¹ It uses the term *tad-aṅga*, meaning “that factor,” “that means,” “in that respect,” or “(to) that extent.” Hence, we can translate the phrase *tad-aṅga nibbāna* as “(attained) nirvana to that extent.”² Further, it should be noted that such a usage is only “provisional” (*pariyāyena*) [1.1.2].

1.1.2 In each of the first 8 stages [§§3-10], the dhyana experience is described as “nirvana in a **provisional** manner” (*pariyāyena*), that is, 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,³ and the cooling or suspension of certain defilements, that is, the 5 mental hindrances⁴ and the 4 influxes.⁵ None of these stages are nirvana itself, but gives us a progressively better idea of what nirvana is like, relatively speaking.

1.1.3 This Sutta (A 9.50) is, in fact, a kind of abridgement of the longer **(Anupubba) Vihāra Sutta 2** (A 9.33), which applies the longer phrase “hunger-free, quenched, crossed over, gone beyond in that respect” (*nicchātā nibbutā tiṇṇā pāragatā tad-aṅgena*). This longer phrase has the same sense as the phrase *tad-aṅga nibbāna* here in the (Navaka) Tad-aṅga Nibbāna Sutta (A 9.50). [1.3.2]

1.1.4 We see the same “contextual” usage of *tad-aṅga* in the **Atta,dīpa Sutta** (S 22.43) [1.2.1.2]. Both the (Anupubba) Vihāra Sutta 2 (A 9.33) and the Atta,dīpa Sutta (S 22.43) should be studied in connection with the (Navaka) Tad-aṅga Nibbāna Sutta (A 9.50).

1.2 MEANING and practice

1.2.1 Meanings

1.2.1.1 “That-factored nirvana” or “nirvana by that means” (*tad-aṅga nibbāna*) means that we have worked to attain nirvana by way of a dhyana as its factor or condition for arising, that is, the 1st dhyana and so on (*tad-aṅga,nibbānan’ti paṭhama-j,jhān’adinā tena tena aṅgena nibbānaṃ*, AA 4:207). Here, we

¹ For the full list, see SD 50.25 (2.1).

² On the term *nibbāna*, see SD 50.25 (4.1) and look up the refs there.

³ On dhyana-factors (*jhān’aṅga*), see **Jhāna Pañha S** (S 40.1), SD 24.11 (4.3); SD 8.4 (6).

⁴ 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

⁵ 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).

attain nirvana by means of dhyana meditation. However, this is a limited or “provisional” (*pariyāyena*) of nirvana [1.2.1.3].

1.2.1.2 The Atta,dīpa Sutta (S 22.43), in its closing section, helps us with a clear understanding of the meaning of *tad-aṅga nibbāna*. The participial phrase ***tad-aṅga,nibbuto***, “one quenched or cooled in that respect” or “one has attained nirvana in that sense,” occurs 5 times in the Sutta. These occurrences refer, in turn, to each of the 5 aggregates, that is, *form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness*.

Having understood their impermanence, fading away and cessation, we see them as being impermanent, subject to change, and seeing with right wisdom that they are thus impermanent, suffering, subject to change in the past and also now—then, sorrow, lamentation, bodily pain, mental displeasure and despair are abandoned. With their abandonment, we are no more agitated, and so dwells happily. Such a monk (meditator) who dwells happily is said to be “quenched or cooled in that respect” (*sukha,vihārī bhikkhu ‘tad-aṅga,nibbuto’ti vuccati*).⁶

1.2.1.3 In the phrase ***tad-aṅga,nibbuta***, although the word *nibbuta* (past participle) is grammatically translated as “one who has attained nirvana,” the qualifier *tad-aṅga* means that he has not actually attained nirvana in the full or “non-provisional” (*nippariyāyena*) sense, but only “quenched,” *as it were* or *in a sense*, in connection with those aggregates.

However, this is not merely a poetic way of talking. The Commentary explains that one is “cooled” in that respect” on account of the quenching of the defilements by the insight-factor (*vipassan’aṅgena*). In the Sutta only insight (*vipassanā*) is discussed. (SA 2:268)

1.2.2 Practice

In other words, through deep meditation, we attain dhyana, and having mastered it, in due course, emerge and review our experiences as being mind-made and impermanent, and so on.⁷ Doing so habitually—says **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1)—we will attain streamwinning in this life itself.⁸ And within 7 lives, we will attain nirvana.⁹

1.3 OCCURRENCES OF TAD-AṅGA

1.3.1 Tad-aṅgena (1)

The form ***tad-aṅgena*** (instrumental) occurs twice in **the (Anuruddha) Upakkilesa Sutta** (M 127), in both cases the phrase translates as “on account of that factor,” meaning, as a result of a certain kind of meditation that in the first case, gives rise to a certain group of devas with “limited radiance” and another with “boundless radiance,” while, in the second case, it gives rise to a certain group of devas with “defiled radiance” and another with “pure radiance.”¹⁰

⁶ S 22.43/3:43,4-32 (SD 93.8).

⁷ It is easiest to reflect on impermanence. If we are inclined, we can also reflect on suffering, even non-self. See **Atam,mayatā**, SD 19.13 (1).

⁸ This is the first of 10 similar suttas in **the Okkanta Samyutta** (S 25): we can reflect on any of these sutta.

⁹ On the 7 lives at most, see SD 17.1a(2.3).

¹⁰ M 127,13+15 = 3:148,27 + 151,1 @ SD 5.18 (MA 4:202,16).

1.3.2 Tad-aṅgena (2)

We have already noted in the sutta summary [1.1] that the (Navaka) Tad-aṅga Nibbāna Sutta (A 9.50) is, in fact, a kind of summary or abridgement of the longer (**Anupubba**) **Vihāra Sutta 2** (A 9.33). In place of the shorter *tad-aṅga nibbāna* of A 9.50, **A 9.33** applies the longer phrase “hunger-free, quenched, crossed over, gone beyond in that respect” (*nicchātā nibbutā tiṇṇā pāragatā tad-aṅgena*). Both these phrases have the same sense of a “contextual” or limited sense of attaining nirvana [1.2.1.3].

To whatever dhyana or attainment that the meditator has achieved, to that same level, he is said to have become “hunger-free, quenched, crossed over, gone beyond in that respect.” The meaning here is that one has attained nirvana—or the quenching of the defilements by insight or wisdom [1.2.1.2]—to the extent of that dhyana as the factor (*tena jhān’āṅgena*, AA 4:193).¹¹ This is the same as saying or describing such a nirvana experience in a “provisional” (*pariyāyena*) manner—such as in the following suttas:

(Navaka) Paññā,vimutta Sutta	(A 9.44)	see SD 50.31 (1.2)
(Navaka) Ubhato.bhāga,vimutta Sutta	(A 9.45)	see SD 50.32 (1.2)

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The (Nines) Discourse on Nirvana “To That Extent”

A 9.50

1 (Originating in Kosambī.)¹²

2 “Nirvana to that extent. Nirvana to that extent,’ avuso,¹³ it is said.

How, avuso, has the Blessed One spoken of ‘nirvana to that extent (*tad-aṅga nibbāna*)?’”

THE OPENING: THE 9 PROGRESSIVE ABODES¹⁴

The 4 dhyanas

(1) THE 1ST DHYANA

3 Here, avuso, a monk,¹⁵

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

attains and dwells in the 1st **dhyana**,

accompanied by initial application and sustained application,

and with zest and happiness born of solitude.¹⁶

¹¹ A 9.33/4:411,1 @ SD 95.2 (AA 4:193,24).

¹² Ce. See A 94.6 (SD 50.25a) n ad loc.

¹³ On this mode of address, see A 94.6 (SD 50.25a) n ad loc.

¹⁴ *Anupubba,vihāra*, see SD 50.25 (1.3.2.2).

¹⁵ “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)).

¹⁶ See A 94.6 (SD 50.25a) n ad loc above.

3.2 He dwells, having touched that base¹⁷ with the body as it is attained, and he understands it with wisdom.¹⁸

3.3 To that extent, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **nirvana to that extent** in a provisional [relative] manner.¹⁹

(2) THE 2ND 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 2nd dhyana**,
free from initial application and sustained application,²⁰
with zest and happiness born of concentration.²¹

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 to that extent** in a provisional [relative] manner.

(3) THE 3RD 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 3rd 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 to that extent** in a provisional [relative] manner.

(4) THE 4TH 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 4th 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 to that extent** in a provisional [relative] manner.

¹⁷ “That base” (*tad-āyatanam*), ie, the meditation state.

¹⁸ *Yathā yathā ca tad-āyatanam tathā tathā nam kāyena phassitvā viharati, paññāya ca nam pajānāti.*

¹⁹ *Ettāvatā’pi kho āvuso sandiṭṭhiko dhammo vutto bhagavatā pariyāyena.* “In a provisional manner,” *pariyāyena*: SD 50.25 (1.4.4), ie, in a restricted sense, “in a sense”; cf *nippariyāyena*: SD 5025 (1.4.5).

²⁰ On “initial application and sustained application,” see A 94.6 (SD 50.25a) n ad loc.

²¹ The 2nd dhyana is known as “the noble silence” (*ariya, tuṅhī, 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.**²²

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 to that extent** 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.²³

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 to that extent** 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.**²⁴

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 to that extent** 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.**²⁵

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

²² *Sabbaso rūpa,saññānaṃ samatikkamā paṭigha,saññānaṃ atthaṅgamā nānatta,saññānaṃ amanasikārā ananto ākāso ti ākāsaṇaṅcāyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

²³ *Sabbaso ākāsaṇaṅcāyatanaṃ samatikkama anantaṃ viññāṇaṃ ti viññāṇaṅcāyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

²⁴ *Sabbaso viññāṇaṅcāyatanaṃ samatikkamma n’atthi kiñcī ti ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

²⁵ *Sabbaso ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ samatikkama santam etaṃ paṇītam etan ti n’eva,saññā,nāsaññāyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **nirvana to that extent** 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 **nirvana to that extent** in a non-provisional manner.²⁶

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²⁶ "In a non-provisional manner," *nippariyāyena*, ie, in the ultimate sense: SD 50.25 (1.4.4).