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(Navaka) Diṭṭha,dhamma Nibbāna Sutta

The (Nines) Discourse on Nirvana Here and Now | A 9.51

Theme: Nirvana can be experienced in this very life itself

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1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 Sutta summary

The (Navaka) Diṭṭha,dhamma Nibbāna Sutta (A 9.51) is a sutta in the Pañcāla Vagga (A 9) of the Aṅguttara dealing with nirvana.¹ 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).²

1.2 Sutta theme

1.2.1 In each of the first 8 stages [**§§3-10**], the dhyana experience is said to be “nirvana here and now 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,³ and the cooling or suspension of certain defilements, that is, the 5 mental hindrances⁴ and the 4 influxes.⁵

None of these stages is nirvana itself, but it gives us a progressively better idea of what nirvana is like, relatively speaking. This is the closest experience of nirvana we can have *here and now*, in this life itself, before we actually attain arhathood.

1.2.2 Only the 9th 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 sense or Dharma way of speaking. In simple terms, “**provisional**” (*pariyāyena*) means the stages of progress leading to nirvana *here and now*, our conception of nirvana as an experience here and now.⁶

2 The 2 kinds of nirvana

2.0 DEFINITIONS

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

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

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

³ On dhyana-factors (*jhān’āṅga*), 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).

⁶ On nirvana as an experience, one of the 4 dimensions of the nirvana as a concept. see SD 50.1 (4). Further on *pariyāyena* and *nippariyāyena*, see SD 50.25 (1.4).

- (1) the nirvana of the defilements (*kilesa, nibbāna*), and
- (2) the nirvana of the aggregates (*khandha, nibbāna*). (DA 899 f)

According to the Commentary, **nibbāna** here refers to the “nirvana of the defilements” (*kilesa, nibbāna*), that is, the cessation of the 3 unwholesome roots, 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*).⁷

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.

In the (Navaka) Diṭṭha, dhamma Nibbāna Sutta (A 9.51), this is the “nirvana here and now,” the destruction of all our defilements. The Commentary states that this is “the nirvana for oneself right here” (*ismim̐ yeva attabhāve nibbānam̐*, AA 4:205).

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**” (*khandha, nibbāna*) [2.0]. This means that all his 5 aggregates—*form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness*⁸—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*).⁹

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The Discourse on Nirvana Here and Now

A 9.51

- 1 (Originating in Kosambī.)¹⁰
- 2 “Nirvana here and now. Nirvana here and now,’ avuso,¹¹ it is said. How, avuso, has the Blessed One spoken of **nirvana here and now** (*diṭṭha, dhamma nibbāna*)?”

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

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

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

¹⁰ Ce. On Kosambī, see SD 6.1 (1-2).

¹¹ Presumably, Ānanda is addressing the monk Udāyī—Kāl’udāyī, says Comy (AA 4:205)—in Ghosit’ārāma, outside Kosambī, far west of the “middle country” (*majjhima, desa*), ie, the central Gangetic plain. Since they address one another as *āvuso* (“Friend, brother”), this sutta—and the others of this **Pañcāla Vagga** [2.1]—record events while the Buddha is still living. The Buddha’s absence may be explained by the fact that he is away on solitary retreat for the rains of the 10th year of the ministry (BA 3): see SD 6.1 (2+6). **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16) records the Buddha, in his last days, as instructing that senior monks should address juniors by name or as *āvuso*, while junior monks should address seniors as *bhante* (“sir”) or *āyasmā* (“venerable”) (D 16, 6.2), SD 9.

THE OPENING: THE 9 PROGRESSIVE ABODES¹²The 4 dhyanas(1) THE 1ST DHYANA

3 Here, avuso, a monk,¹³

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.¹⁴

3.2 He dwells, having touched that base¹⁵ with the body as it is attained, and he understands it with wisdom.¹⁶

3.3 To that extent, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **nirvana here and now** in a *provisional [relative] manner*.¹⁷

(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,¹⁸

with zest and happiness born of concentration.¹⁹

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 here and now** in a *provisional [relative] manner*.

(3) THE 3RD DHYANA

5 And furthermore, avuso, a monk,

with the fading away of zest, he dwells equanimous, mindful and clearly knowing,

and experiences happiness with the body.

¹² See SD 50.25 (1.3.2.2).

¹³ "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)).

¹⁴ "Born of solitude," *viveka,ja*; ie it is the result of abandoning the hindrances: on the 3 kinds of solitude, see **The body in Buddhism**, SD 29.6a (1.5). On the omission of "one-pointedness of mind" (*cittassa ek'aggatā*) and "concentration" (*samādhi*) here, see **The layman and dhyana**, SD 8.5.

¹⁵ "That base" (*tad-āyatanam*), ie, the meditation state.

¹⁶ *Yathā yathā ca tad-āyatanam tathā tathā nam kāyena phassivā viharati, paññāya ca nam pajānāti.*

¹⁷ *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 (1.4.5).

¹⁸ On "initial application and sustained application" (*vitakka, vicāra*), see **Vitakka, vicāra**, SD 33.4; SD 8.4 (5.1.2).

¹⁹ The 2nd dhyana is known as "the noble silence" (*ariya, tuṇhī, bhāva*) because within it initial application and sustained application (thinking and discursion, *vitakka, vicāra*) cease, and with their cessation, speech cannot occur. (S 2:273); cf S 4:293 where *vitakka* and *vicāra* are called verbal formation (*vacī, saṅkhāra*), the mental factors responsible for speech. In **Ariya, pariyesanā S** (M 1:161), the Buddha exhorts the monks when assembled to "either speak on the Dharma or observe the noble silence" (ie either talk Dharma or meditate). See **Dutiya Jhāna Pañha S** (S 40.2/4:263 f), SD 24.12.

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 here and now** 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 here and now** 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**.²⁰

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 here and now** 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**.²¹

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 here and now** in a provisional [relative] manner.*

²⁰ *Sabbaso rūpa,saññānaṃ samatikkamā paṭigha,saññānaṃ atthaṅgamā nānatta,saññānaṃ amanasikārā ananto ākāso ti ākāśānañcāyatanam upasampajja viharati.*

²¹ *Sabbaso ākāśānañc’āyatanam samatikkama anantaṃ viññāṇan ti viññāṇañcāyatanam upasampajja viharati.*

(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.**²²

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 here and now** 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.**²³

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 here and now** 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 here and now** in a non-provisional manner.²⁴

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²² *Sabbaso viññāṇaṅc’āyatanaṃ samatikkamma n’atthi kiñcī ti ākiñcaññ’āyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

²³ *Sabbaso ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ samatikkama santam etaṃ paṇītam etaṃ ti n’eva, saññā, nāsaññ’āyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

²⁴ “In a non-provisional manner,” *nippariyāyena*, ie, in the ultimate sense: see D 50.25 (1.4.5).