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Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 3

Tatiya Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta The Third Discourse Related to Nirvana | U 8.3

Theme: The “birth-free” (*ajāta*) nirvana formula

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1 Significance of the 4 Suttas

1.0 THE 4 NIBBĀNA PAṬISAṂYUTTA SUTTAS

There are four discourses with the same title: Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta, “Discourses Related to Nirvana.” They describe nirvana with different themes as shown here:

		<u>Keywords</u>	
Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 1	U 8.1/71/p80	the full nirvana pericope (full formula)	SD 50.1
Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 2	U 8.2/72/p80 f	the “bent-free” (<i>anata</i>) nirvana formula	SD 50.2
Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 3	U 8.3/73/p80 f	the “birth-free” (<i>ajāta</i>) nirvana formula	SD 50.3
Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 4	U 8.4/74/p81	the “non-dependent” (<i>anissita</i>) nirvana formula	SD 50.4

1.1 THE “BIRTH-FREE” (*AJĀTA*) NIRVANA FORMULA (U 8.3)

1.1.1 The formula

1.1.1.1 Of the four Suttas, **the Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 3** (U 8.3) has the shortest statement on nirvana—also called **the brief nirvana formula**—thus:

Bhikshus, there is
the birth-free, non-become, non-created, non-conditioned¹ *ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ*

1.1.1.2 It should be noted that the key words here—***ajāta abhūta akata asaṅkhata***—are all past participles²—they function as adjectives (mfn = masculine, feminine, neuter) which can stand as nouns. Or, we read them with an implied noun, the most probable of which is *padam*, “place,” but is periphrastic (self-referent), that is, it does not need to be translated or can be rendered as “state.” This is a common context: *nibbāna, padam* (“nirvana”), *accutaṃ padam* (“the unmoving state”), *asaṅkhataṃ padam* (“the unconditioned state”), etc.

1.1.2 Apophasis

1.1.2.1 The terms describing nirvana—***ajāta abhūta akata asaṅkhata***—are best translated respectively as “the non-born, non-become, non-created, non-conditioned,” or “not-born, not-become, not-created, not-conditioned.” *Asaṅkhata*, however, is exceptional as it can be translated either as “unconditioned” (which is common), or better (in keeping with the way the other terms are translated) as “non-conditioned,” that is, “nothing to do with conditions.”

1.1.2.2 The language used here is **apophatic**, that is, negating the states of being born, become, created and conditioned. The meaning is not so much that birth, becoming, creation and conditioning stop here, but rather that they are totally absent from nirvana: nirvana is totally free of birth, becoming, creation and conditioning.

¹ Lit, “... there is the unborn, unbecome, uncreated, unconditioned”

² See A K Warder, *Introduction to Pali*, 2nd ed 1974, 3rd ed 2001:41

This distinction, although subtle, is a significant one. Nirvana is not the opposite or the antithesis of these states: if so, then, it is conditioned by these states. Nirvana neither *is* nor *has* any of these states or activities. Nirvana, in other words, exists, as it were, in itself, *sub specie aeternitatis*.³

1.1.3 The first discourse

In the **Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), the Buddha is recorded as giving his **first discourse** to the group of 5 monks. Amongst these first teachings was a mention of the 6 aspects of nirvana, that is, unlike samsara, nirvana is *not subject to birth, to decay, to disease, to death, to sorrow and to defilement*.⁴ The first few qualities are the same as those listed here in the Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 3, that is, of nirvana being not subject to birth (*ajātaṃ*), not subject to decay (*ajaram*) and not subject to death (*amataṃ*).

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The Third Discourse Related to Nirvana

U 8.3

Thus have I heard.

The Buddha teaches on nirvana

1 At one time, the Blessed One was residing in Anātha,piṇḍika’s park monastery in Jeta’s grove outside Sāvattihī.

2 Now, at that time, the Blessed One had been instructing, inspiring, rousing, and gladdening the monks with a Dharma talk connected with nirvana.⁵

The monks listened to the Dharma, receptive, attentive, concentrating their whole mind, giving their ear.

The unborn (*ajāta*) nirvana formula

3 Then, the Blessed One, knowing the significance of the occasion, uttered this udana:

4 Bhikshus, there is the non-born, non-become, non-created, non-conditioned.⁶ *ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ*

5 If, bhikshus, there were no non-born, non-become, non-created, non-conditioned,

³ SD 50.1 (3.5.1.2).

⁴ M 26,30/1:173 (SD 1.11).

⁵ *Tena kho pana samayena Bhagavā bhikkhū nibbānapaṭisaṃyuttāya dhammiyā kathāya sandasseti samādapeti samuttejete sampahaṃseti*. On sandasseti ... sampahaṃseti—the 4 “stages of teaching” (*desanā, vidhī*) or the Buddha’s grace (*buddha, līlā*)—see **Cand’upama S** (S 16.3) SD 38.2 (4.2.3). For a detailed application, see **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65,17) + SD 35.4a (§17).

⁶ Lit, “... there is the non-born, non-become, non-created, non-conditioned ... ,” or “not-born ... ” etc.

then, no escape would be discerned here from the born, the become, the created, the conditioned.

6 But, bhikshus, since there is the non-born, non-become, non-created, non-conditioned,⁷ then, **escape** is discerned from the born, the become, the created, the conditioned.⁸

— evaṃ —

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⁷ Note that there is only the definite article “the,” particularizing the first term but not the rest—signifying that all these terms refer to the same thing—nirvana. Cf foll.

⁸ Note that there is the definite article “the” before every term in this phrase—signifying that each can refer to a particular aspect of existence or state “outside” of or other than nirvana.