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Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 4

Catuttha Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta The Fourth Discourse Related to Nirvana | U 8.4

Theme: The “non-dependent” (*anissita*) 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, “Discourse Related to Nirvana.” They describe nirvana with different themes as shown here:

		<u>Keyword</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 “NON-DEPENDENT” (*ANISSITA*) NIRVANA FORMULA (U 8.4)

1.1.1 The formula

1.1.1.1 The verse of the Sutta—constituting the “non-dependent” (*anissita*) nirvana formula—reads as follows:

4	For the dependent, there is wavering [instability] for the non-dependent, there is no wavering.	<i>nissitassa calitaṃ anissitassa calitaṃ n’atthi</i>
5	In the unstable, there is no tranquility; in the tranquil, there is no bending.	<i>calite asati passaddhi passaddhiyā sati nati na hoti</i>
6	When there is no bending, there is neither coming nor going; with neither coming nor going, there is neither birth nor death.	<i>natiyā asati āgati, gati na hoti āgati, gatiyā asati cutūpapāto na hoti</i>
7	When there is neither birth nor death, there is neither here nor there, nor in between the two.	<i>cutūpapāte asati n’ev’idha na hurāṃ na ubhayam antarena</i>
8	This is indeed the ending of suffering.	<i>es’ev’anto dukkhassāti</i>

1.1.2 Anissita

1.1.2.1 The key-word in this formula is “non-dependent” (*anissita*), highlighting the fact that nirvana does not depend on anything else for its existence or value (or meaningfulness) [§4]. Nirvana, so to speak, exists in itself. It refers to a situation when or where all the 3 unwholesome roots of karmic motivation—greed, hate and delusion—have been uprooted, that is, when we fully awaken to true reality and are liberated in the spiritual sense of the word.

1.1.2.2 More specifically, “non-dependent” means that nirvana is not *conditioned* by any cause or effect within or without itself. Nirvana is unconditioned or non-conditioned. In linguistic terms, we use words like “state,” “place,” “situation,” or even “condition,” to expedite our understanding of such a reality.

However, none of these words define nirvana. These are simply conceptual aids to our better understanding of a reality that is otherwise ineffable—simply because it is a personal experience of the awakened beings, that is, the arhats and the bud.

1.1.2.3 The phrase “**for the dependent, there is wavering**” (*nissitassa calitaṃ*) [§4a] means that anything that is dependent—that is, *causally* dependent—is unstable [§4a]. Its arising and existence depend on some external causes and conditions. Hence, it is “wavering, unsteady” (*calita*). It also means that when any of its causes or conditions are removed or missing, it ceases to exist, or some other state takes its place under normal worldly circumstances.

1.2 CONDITIONS AND CONDITIONALITY

1.2.1 Specific conditionality

1.2.1.1 Technically, the discussion on dependence [1.1.2.3] refers to the principle of **specific conditionality** (*idap,paccayatā*),¹ which, simply put, runs thus:

When there is A,	there is B;	A arising,	B arises;
When there is no A,	there is no B;	A ceasing,	B ceases.

The first line means (two parts), for example, that when there is greed present (or hate—some delusion is always present), we are *likely* to break the precepts, that is, do something bad. Any of the unwholesome 3 karmic roots is sufficient to motivate us to create bad karma.

The second line (two parts) means that we can still choose not to “bend”² to the power of the unwholesome motivational root. We can, for example, stop doing something bad we have been habitually doing, or we can nip a negative thought as it buds. If this were not possible, then there is no way we can awaken to nirvana. Since this is possible, we are able to work to attain nirvana.

1.2.1.2 The 3 unwholesome karmic roots are the basis for the “**craving cycle**” of suffering. Craving comprises two aspects—greed and hate. It is very true that “opposites attract.” When there is greed (such as when we desire for something), there is also hate, which is our reaction to whatever that prevents us from getting what we desire, or whatever that lessens or ends our enjoyment of that object of desire—or whatever *seems* to us to be doing so. Both these unwholesome roots are initiated and fed by delusion, which includes the notion that sense-pleasure is always (permanently) pleasurable.

1.2.1.3 This is what happens in the moment: as we think, so we act; as we act, so we become; as we become, so we suffer (taste the fruit). The first cycle is where our thought motivates an act: we can also call this a “synchronic cycle” of karma. Once we act, we like to “re-act,” meaning, we will do it again, and we will hit back on other acts, depending on whether we like it or dislike it.

Sow a thought, reap an act; sow act act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a personality; sow a personality, reap a destiny. This is a “diachronic cycle” of karma over time, even lives. Our habits shadow us, and what shadows us, haunts with fear of the past or the future, even the present, which we like and do not want to lose, or which we dislike and try to reject. We are caught in a karmic rut.

1.2.2 Dependent arising

1.2.2.1 On a broader scale, we are the result of our own **dependent arising** (*paṭicca,samuppāda*): we arise and exist dependent on various internal conditions.³ Basically, this cycle starts with ignorance (that is, not fully understanding the 4 noble truths). On account of ignorance (*avijjā*), we act through 3 doors of karma: body, speech and mind: these are the karma-formations (*saṅkhārā*). This karma condi-

¹ On specific conditionality, see SD 5.16 (2).

² On nirvana said to be “unbent” (*anata*), see **Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta S** (U 8.2) + SD 50.2 (1.1.1+1.1.3).

³ Dependent arising deals with our internal conditionings. The 5-aggregate model (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) deals with both our internal conditions (mind) and external conditions (matter): see SD 17.

tions our cognitive consciousness (*viññāṇa*), which in turn, conditions us to “name” and “form”⁴ our experiences (*nāma,rūpa*).

1.2.2.2 Through these experiential activities, our senses evolve and specialize to process sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts, that is, the 6 sense-bases (*saḷ-āyatana*). These sense-bases come into “contact” (*phassa*) with the world, and we have “feelings” (*vedanā*) for them, seeing them as pleasurable (so, liking them) or not pleasurable (so, disliking them) or neither (so, feeling bored or ignoring them). This habit is the basis for craving (*taṇhā*), which leads to clinging (*upādāna*).

1.2.2.3 What we crave for becomes us, our existence (*bhava*). This continues with our birth (*jāti*) into new lives. Where there is life, there is decay-and-death (*jarā,maraṇa*), and a host of suffering states. This, essentially, is the dependent arising of our being.⁵

1.2.3 Dependent ending

1.2.3.1 When the cycle of dependent arising breaks down, our suffering ends. Theoretically, this is when we have removed our primordial ignorance—that is, we fully understand the 4 noble truths, Then, we attain nirvana.

Since dependent arising is a chain of dependent causes and effects, there is the occasional weak point in the links. This is not easy to detect, and when detected is not easy to break. But, with some mindfulness, wisdom and diligence, we are able to weaken the chain, and gain better control of these causes and effects, so that we are less fettered to them.

1.2.3.2 In our daily lives, we can take greater charge of our lives when we learn to deal with our feelings as they arise. We need to remind ourselves of the *impermanence* of all feelings, pleasurable, not pleasurable or neutral. This is our reality check which prevents us from turning them into craving and so on. The wholesome habit of the perception of impermanence, diligently and properly practised—says **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1)—will bring us streamwinning in this life itself. In due course, with the breakdown of dependent arising, the cycle of **dependent ending** (the reverse cycle) sets in, freeing us from craving and ignorance. We are free from all dependence; hence, we are stable in all good senses of the word [§4b]. We attain nirvana.⁶

1.2.4 Training

However, it is not always so easy to attain nirvana in this life itself—unless we are living in direct contact with the Buddha and the arhats who can skillfully instruct us in such matters. Since we are basically on our own today—and often at the mercy of the madding market of religion—we need to cultivate a better theoretical understanding and practical vision of our spiritual progress. This is possible by living a moral life, mastering the sutta teachings and cultivating the mind for insight wisdom—that is, undergoing the 3 trainings.⁷

1.3 SECTION 5

1.3.1 Passaddhi

1.3.1.1 The “non-dependent” nirvana formula continues with the lines, “**in the wavering, there is no tranquillity; in the tranquil, there is no bending [bias]**” [§5]. “**Tranquillity**” (*passaddhi*) basically refers to the mind that is free of feedback from the sense-bases. When such a mind is fully free from distractions

⁴ Here, used as verbs.

⁵ For details, see SD 5.16 (1.4).

⁶ On dependent ending, see SD 5.16 (19.3.2).

⁷ On the 3 trainings, see *Sīla samādhi paññā*, SD 21.6.

from the sense-bases, it is free from the 5 mental hindrances: lust for sensual pleasures, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and guilt, and doubt.⁸ Thus free, it attains dhyana.⁹

1.3.1.2 A mind that is shaking or trembling (*calita*) is one that is troubled by greed, hate and delusion. It needs to be tranquillized, that is, we need to apply mindfulness (*sati*), investigating of the mental states (*dhamma, vicaya*) and assertion of effort (*virīya*) in our practice to clear the mind of the hindrances.

1.3.1.3 When the hindrances clear away, zest (*pīti*) arises, leading to tranquillity (*passaddhi*)—this is when the mind is fully free from the subtler aspects of the hindrances. Then, arises concentration (*samādhi*), and finally, equanimity (*upekkhā*), that is, dhyana, especially the 4th dhyana. Briefly, this is the working of **the 7 awakening-factors** (*satta bojjhaṅga*).¹⁰

1.3.2 The 5 grounds for liberation

1.3.2.1 If there is any difficulty, we should then take a step back, and work on the 5 grounds for liberation (*pañca vimutt'āyatana*), that is,

- (1) listening to the Dharma,
- (2) teaching the Dharma,
- (3) reciting the Dharma (learning the suttas),
- (4) reflecting on the Dharma, or
- (5) meditating (and practising mindfulness).

They should be done with wise faith (inquiring mind and diligence) for the purpose of inspiring joy.¹¹

1.3.2.2 Any of these 5 practices, properly done, inspires joy or gladness (*pāmojja*) in us. When this joy gets stronger, it generates zest (*pīti*), which brings tranquillity (*passaddhi*) to our mind—our physical senses are all at peace, so that we can fully focus our mind, making it happy (*sukha*), which settles into mental concentration (*samādhi*).¹²

1.4 SECTION 6

1.4.1 Section 6a

1.4.1.1 When our mind is habitually joyful on account of proper meditation, we are unlikely to *bend* to greed, hate and delusion. “**When there is no bending, there is neither coming nor going**” [§6a]. The Commentary explains “coming and going” as being reborn here and there (UA 398). Untouched by the 3 unwholesome roots, we are free from the “coming and going” or karma. This is indeed well and true in the long run, when we taste the fruit of our practice.

1.4.1.2 However, in terms of our daily efforts, we are still training to strengthen our mind against the “*coming and going*” of greed, hate and delusion in all our actions. We are practising to guard our senses and keep the precepts; to tame our mind not to get caught up in the “*coming and going*” of our thoughts, and keep the mind calm and clear.

1.4.1.3 Only a calm and clear mind can have some idea of the peace and joy of nirvana, and of the possibility to approaching and attaining it in due course. There is always the danger that we will fall into a “philosophy” of nirvana, of merely *thinking* about it, instead of directly experiencing its truth and beauty. Philosophical notions often face argumentation and disagreement, but a direct experience of peace and joy needs no more evidence and experience for the presence of nirvana.

⁸ On the 5 hindrances, see *Nīvaraṇa*, SD 32.1.

⁹ See *Dhyana*, SD 8.4.

¹⁰ On the 7 awakening-factors, see (*Bojjhaṅga*) *Bhikkhu S* (S 46.5), SD 10.15(2).

¹¹ A 5.26 (SD 21.5); SD 10.15 (4.4.2).

¹² On these 5 grounds of liberation (*vimutt'āyatana*), see SD 10.15 (4.4).

1.4.2 Section 6b

1.4.2.1 “With neither coming nor going, there is neither birth nor death” [§6b]. This refers to nirvana in ontological terms¹³—our being in nirvana is characterized as beyond birth and death. This is naturally true, too, because nirvana is beyond the “coming and going” of time. What comes, must go, nothing can hold it back; what goes, does not return, never found again—that’s the nature of time.

1.4.2.2 Nirvana is without death, but we should not say that nirvana is “deathless.” Then, it is dependent on the idea of death—nirvana is independent of any idea, state or thing. Nirvana is death-free. It is non-conditioned and one of a kind: *sub specie aeternitatis*.¹⁴

1.4.2.3 Just as nirvana *is* or *has* neither coming nor going, it is also beyond birth and death. Where there is no birth, there is no death; where there is no death, there is no rebirth. So, the wheel of suffering is broken and stops. Not only that, nirvana is also beyond any concepts or conceptualization. We cannot even say that nirvana *is*. For, then, we are contrasting it with what is *not*: its existence is then dependent on the notion of what is “not,” non-existence.

1.4.2.4 In a manner of speaking, nirvana “has” nothing, no attributes; to have something means that it is *other* than that thing to *have*. There is no attribute for nirvana (except perhaps in a metaphorical or poetic sense). We can speak of nirvana as an “island” or “cave” that shelters us away from dangers. But this is just a way of talking—just like would-be travelers speaking about their destination, which they have not yet been to. They are travellers’ tales.

1.5 THE (OVADA) CHANNA SUTTA (S 35.87)

1.5.1 The verse of the Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 4 is nearly identical to the verse in **the (Ovāda) Channa Sutta** (S 35.87), where Mahā Cunda recounts the “Blessed One’s teaching” to counsel the suicidal Channa, thus:

There is wavering in one who is dependent;	there is no wavering in one who is independent.
When there is no wavering,	there is tranquility.
When there is tranquillity,	there is no <u>bias</u> (<i>nati</i>).
When there is no <i>bias</i> ,	there is neither coming nor going.
When there is neither coming nor going,	there is neither dying nor arising.
When there is neither dying nor arising,	there is no here nor beyond nor in between.
This is the end of suffering.	(S 35.87/4:59 = M 144,11), SD 11.12 ¹⁵

1.5.2 The only difference so far is the word “**bending**¹⁶ [**bias**]” (*nati*) [§§5b+6a], which, from the context, is clearly a synonym for “wavering” (*calita*), something unstable and vacillating. There is always uncertainty in the “*coming and going*” of things [1.4.2.1]. When things happen, we don’t really have any control over them, even when we think otherwise. Only when we let go of all identifying or “owning” them, are we free and do we feel free from their effects and influence.

1.6 BĀHIYA’S TEACHING

1.6.1 The last line of the pericope says: “**there is neither here nor there, nor in between the two**” [§7b]. Regarding this line, the Commentary (UA 398 f) refers us to **the (Arahatta) Bāhiya Sutta** (U 1.10), that is, the “Bāhiya teaching,” which goes like this:

¹³ See SD 50.1 (3.1).

¹⁴ Nirvana is *sub specie aeternitatis*: see SD 50.1 (5.3.1.2).

¹⁵ Also at U 81; UA 398; Nett 65; cf S 12.40/2:67.

¹⁶ I have used “without a bent, unbent” (*n*) for *anata*, and use “bending” for *nati*: see SD 50.2 (1.1.1).

<i>a</i>	When, for you, Bāhiya,	<i>Yato kho te, bāhiya,</i>
<i>b</i>	in the seen there will only be the seen	<i>diṭṭhe diṭṭha, mattaṃ bhavissati;</i>
<i>c</i>	in the heard there will only be the heard	<i>sute suta, mattaṃ bhavissati;</i>
<i>d</i>	in the sensed there will only be the sensed	<i>mute muta, mattaṃ bhavissati;</i>
<i>e</i>	in the known there will only be the known,	<i>viññāte viññāta, mattaṃ bhavissati</i>
<i>f</i>	then you, Bāhiya, are ‘ <u>not by that.</u> ’	<i>tato tvaṃ, bāhiya, na tena</i>
<i>g</i>	When you, Bāhiya, are ‘not by that,’	<i>yato tvaṃ, bāhiya, na tena</i>
<i>h</i>	then, you, Bāhiya, are ‘ <u>not therein.</u> ’	<i>tato tvaṃ, bāhiya, na tattha</i>
<i>i</i>	When you, Bāhiya, are ‘not therein,’	<i>yato tvaṃ, bāhiya, na tattha,</i>
<i>j</i>	then you, Bāhiya, are ‘ neither here nor beyond	<i>tato tvaṃ, bāhiya, n’ev’idha na huram</i>
<i>k</i>	nor in between the two.’	<i>na ubhayam-antarena</i>
	—This is itself the ending of suffering.”	<i>es’ev’anto dukkhassā ti.</i>

(Arahatta) Bāhiya Sutta (U 1.10,16), SD 33.7¹⁷

1.6.2 Lines bcde instructs us to respond to all our sense-experiences just as they are—as sense-objects—to be “objective,” not subjective, about them. In other words, they are conditioned by various factors, no single one of which is the only or “real” cause—hence, there are only deeds, no doer; only events, no mover or creator. Since they are all conditioned, they are also impermanent; hence, we cannot hold on to them. Even as they arise, they pass away. To try to hold on to them is to miss them. To miss them is to desire them, but they are already gone, dead into the past, and the future never comes.

“**Not by that**” [§§fg] means that one is free from greed, hate, delusion and fear.¹⁸

“**Not therein**” [§§hi] means that one is not caught up with the sense-objects (as just mentioned).

Finally, “**neither here nor beyond, nor in between the two**” [§§jk] refers to not being born or reborn in any realm or an intermediate state.¹⁹ This line is also found in the Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 4.

1.7 HOW TO SEE NIRVANA

1.7.1 It is impossible to accept the idea of nirvana, much less understand it, if we neither understand nor accept the truth of **non-self** (*anattā*). Without such an understanding, we tend to think in fixed or “essential” terms—that is, in terms of “essence” or eternalist categories. Those who understand the basic nature of quantum physics, for example, may find it easier to understand the theoretical nature of nirvana. Of course, we still need to experience the real thing.

In short, we only begin to appreciate the **idea** of nirvana by letting go of all our views, or at least suspending them for the duration that we are studying these texts (SD 50.1, 50.2, 50.3 and 50.4)—which contain excellent suttas—the **Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Suttas 1-4** (U 8.1-4)—to begin our study of nirvana. However, without proper Dharma practice, any theoretical understanding is just that. Our understanding of the idea of nirvana begins with appreciating the very nature of existence and reality around us—that there is neither abiding entity nor eternal essence, except in our wishful imaginations.

1.7.2 Ultimately, the **experience** of nirvana is beyond both belief and knowledge—beyond our ideas and our sense experiences. We need to realize and experience this utter freedom beyond self or other for ourself. **A simple reflection** may help (one of my favourite reflections): Sit by some still water in a beautiful place and watch for a leaf to drop into the water (or throw a small stone into the water). Not-

¹⁷ A similar teaching is found in (Arahatta) Māluṅkya,putta S (S 35.95,12/4:73) + SD 5.9 (3).

¹⁸ These are the 4 biases (*agati*): see **Sigal’ovāda S** (D 31,4+5) SD 4.1; **Agati S 1** (A 4.17) SD 89.7; **Saṅgaha Bala S** (A 9.5,6.4) n, SD 2.21; SD 31.12 (6/4/1/3).

¹⁹ For details on these brief explanations, see SD 33.7 (1).

ice how concentric rings of small ripples forming, growing and moving outwards towards you, and “disappearing” into the shore at your feet.

Reflect: Are the ripples really moving, or did we imagine it as the ripple-rings get pushed up and then down, appearing to move towards us. Do this as often as possible, and just let your heart tell you what you really learn from this. Take as long as you like (weeks, months, years)—then, read this passage or the above texts again.²⁰

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The Fourth Discourse Related to Nirvana

U 8.4

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 Sāvattḥī.

2 Now, at that time, the Blessed One had been instructing, inspiring, rousing, and gladdening the monks with a Dharma talk connected with nirvana.²¹

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

The non-dependent (*anissita*) nirvana formula

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

- | | |
|---|--|
| 4 For the dependent, there is wavering [instability];
for the non-dependent, there is no wavering. | <i>nissitassa calitaṃ
anissitassa calitaṃ n’atthi</i> |
| 5 In the wavering, there is no tranquility;
in the tranquil, there is no bending [bias]. | <i>calite asati passaddhi
passaddhiyā sati nati na hoti</i> |
| 6 When there is no bending, there is neither coming nor going;
with neither coming nor going, there is neither birth nor death. | <i>natiyā asati āgati, gati na hoti
āgati, gatiyā asati cutūpapāto na hoti</i> |
| 7 When there is neither birth nor death,
there is neither here nor there, nor in between the two. | <i>cutūpapāte asati
n’ev’idha na huram na ubhayam
antarena</i> |
| 8 This is indeed the ending of suffering. | <i>es’ev’anto dukkhassāti</i> |

— evaṃ —

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²⁰ This reflection is found in **R122**, “Don’t own the pain,” 2010: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/100203-Dont-own-the-pain.pdf>.

²¹ *Tena kho pana samayena Bhagavā bhikkhū nibbānapaṭisaṃyuttāya dhammiyā kathāya sandasseti samādape-ti samuttejete sampaharṃseti. On sandasseti ... sampaharṃseti*—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,put-tiya S** (A 3.65,17) + SD 35.4a (§17).