

9

Samudda Sutta 1

The First Discourse on the Ocean | S 35.187 [S:B 35.228]

Theme: Our 6 senses are like an ocean

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2018

1 Sutta highlights

1.1 SUTTA PARAPHRASE

The **Samudda Sutta 1** (S 35.187) is a short instructive reflection on our 12 sense-bases (*dvādas'āyatana*)—the 6 internal sense-faculties (*ajjhatt'āyatana*) and the 6 external sense-objects (*bāhir'āyatana*)—and clinging to them. The sense-objects are like currents in the ocean that are the sense-faculties. When we cling to any of the sense-objects, its current drags us with it and drown us in the ocean of our senses.¹

1.2 SUTTAS WITH THE SA, ŪMI STOCK

The **Samudda Sutta 1** (S 35.228) applies these similes to the 5 senses in a single parable, that is, each of the senses is “this ocean ... with its waves, whirlpools,² predators and monsters” (*imaṃ samuddaṃ sa, gāhaṃ sa, rakkhasaṃ | sa, ūmiṃ s'āvaṭṭaṃ sa, bhayaṃ*).³ This stock passage or its variations are found in a number of other suttas, attesting to its significance. For convenience, we can call this **the sa, ūmi stock**.

1.2.1 The Cātumā Sutta (M 67) depicts the Buddha as a strict teacher who demands the monks' respectful diligence for the training. He is also compassionate in rehabilitating erring students who are willing and ready to learn. The last section of the Sutta contains a variation of the *sa, ūmi* parable and an explanation of it:⁴

(1) the danger [the fear] of waves,	<i>ūmi, bhaya</i>	anger and annoyance
(2) the danger [the fear] of crocodiles, ⁵	<i>kumbhīla, bhaya</i>	belly-filling (gluttony)
(3) the danger [the fear] of whirlpools, and	<i>āvaṭṭa, bhaya</i>	the 5 cords of sense-pleasure
(4) the danger [the fear] of river dolphins.	<i>susukā, bhaya</i>	dangers to celibacy
		(M 67,14-20), SD 34.7

More broadly, all these explanations refer to living the holy life with respectful diligence, that is, keeping the highest standards of discipleship.

(1) **The danger of waves** (*ūmi, bhaya*) arises when a renunciant still clings to the ways and habits of a lay-person and fails to see himself as a renunciant and live accordingly. So, he is washed back into the crowdedness of lay-life.⁶

(2) **The danger of crocodiles** (*kumbhīla, bhaya*) refers to the renunciant's attachment to food. The monastic still thinks of the eating pleasures he enjoyed as a lay-person, and fails to practice simplicity and moderation in food. It is as if he lives to eat rather than merely eat to live the holy life.⁷

¹ On how suffering arises from these 6 senses, see **Āditta Pariyāya S** (S 35.28), SD 1.3.

² *Āvaṭṭa* (sg), like *ūmi, bhaya* (sg), is tr as uncountable (pl) to fit the context.

³ This is the Burmese (Be) version which gives the fullest reading [§22ab].

⁴ M 67,14-20 (SD 34.7)

⁵ Invoked in **Sumedhā Thī**: *sara kumbhīla, bhayāni ca*, “remember the dangers of crocodiles” (Thī 502).

⁶ See **Arahatta Susīma S** (S 12.70,58), SD 16.8; SD 45.18 (2.3.3.2) almsfood; SD 49.2 (1.1.3) recluses.

(3) **The danger of whirlpools** (*āvaṭṭa, bhaya*) refers to the 5 cords of sense-pleasure, that is, indulgences in the pleasures of the 5 physical senses. The renunciant is here still attached to his body so that he is intoxicated with youth, health and life—like a worldly lay-person.⁸

(4) **The danger of river dolphins** (*susukā, bhaya*) refers to being wary of any danger to the celibate holy life. Specifically, this is a warning to monastics not to socialize with another (not just women) in any intimate manner that will create emotional bonds with them, whether they are family, lay people, colleagues or teachers.⁹

1.2.2 The Nadī, sota Sutta (It 109) gives three very similar parables, related to a river (*nadī*), “with its waves, its whirlpools, its crocodiles, its monsters” (*sa, ūmi s’āvaṭṭa gaha, rakkhasa*). Besides other helpful imageries, it explains “waves” (*ūmi*) as *anger and annoyance*; “whirlpools” (*āvaṭṭa*), *the 5 cords of sense-pleasure*; “predators and monsters” (*gāha, rakkhasa*, as a dvandva) refers to women (as distractions and dangers to celibate monks).¹⁰

1.2.3 Similarly, **the Rāga Sutta 2** (It 3.2.10) gives water-related parables: “the ocean with its surging waves, whirlpools, predators and monsters,”¹¹ which parallel the 4 figures of **the Cātumā Sutta** (M 67) [1.2.1]. **The Nadī, sota Sutta** (It 4.10) explains them as “disturbed water,” which refers to *anger*; the whirlpools (*āvaṭṭa*), *the 5 cords of sense-pleasures*; the predators and monsters, *women* (as distractions and dangers to celibate monks).¹²

The Nadī, sota Sutta commentary—echoing the meanings of the parables (as those found in **the Cātumā Sutta** (M 67) and **the Nadī, sota Sutta** (It 4.10)—taking *ūmi* and *vīci* (“waves”)¹³ as synonyms or as a noun and a qualifier, explains the figures of the parable in accordance with the Sutta teachings¹⁴ [1.2.3]. Similar figures are found in **the Dāru-k, khandha Sutta 1** (S 35.241).¹⁵

2 Sutta key words

2.1 THE SA, ŪMI STOCK PHRASE

The Samudda Sutta 1 (S 35.187) has the sa, ūmi stock phrase: **saūmiṃ s’āvaṭṭam sa, gāham sa, rakkhasam**, translated as “with its waves, whirlpools, predators and monsters.”

2.2 CROCODILE OR ALLIGATOR?

2.2.1 Firstly, it should be noted that alligators are not found in India. The alligator is a crocodylian in the genus Alligator of the family Alligatoridae. There are today only two extant species of alligators: the American alligator (*A mississippiensis*) and the Chinese alligator (*A sinensis*).¹⁶

⁷ On moderate eating, see **Kakacūpama S** (M 21,7.2), SD 38.1; **Bhaddāli S** (M 65,2), SD 56.2; **Mahā Assa, pura S** (M 39,9), SD 10.13; **Kīṭa, giri S** (M 70,4), SD 11.1; **Āma, gandha S** (Sn 2.2), SD 4.24 (3.4.1); SD 32.2 (5.1); SD 37.13 (1.2).

⁸ On overcoming the 3 intoxications, see **Mada S** (A 3.39), SD 42.13; **Sukhumāla S** (A 3.38), SD 1.11 (3.2).

⁹ See **Saññoga S** (A 7.48), SD 8.7; **(Devatā) Samiddhi S** (S 1.20,5.2), SD 21.4.

¹⁰ It 4.1.10/109/113-115 (SD 52.11).

¹¹ *Samuddam sa, ūmiṃ sa, vīciṃ s’āvaṭṭam sa, gāham sa, rakkhasam* (It 69/2.3.10/57), SD 52.10.

¹² For details, see SD 34.7 (5.3.1).

¹³ ItA 37,23.

¹⁴ ItA 37,23-38,2, 171,20.

¹⁵ S 35.241/4:179-181 (SD 28.5).

¹⁶ For details, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alligator>.

2.2.2 Crocodiles and water-monsters in India

2.2.2.1 Crocodiles are often mentioned in the suttas as a species (*kumbhila*; *suṃsumāra*) or as place-names (eg, *suṃsumāra, giri*). According to the *Concise Encyclopedia of India* (2006:94),¹⁷ three species of crocodiles are found in India, that is,

- the mugger (or marsh) crocodile, *Crocodylus palustris*
- the saltwater crocodile, and *Crocodylus porosus*
- the gharial. *Gavialis gangeticus*

The mugger (or marsh) crocodile, India's most common species of crocodiles, is found in lakes and rivers throughout the country, especially in rivers and national parks. Their average size is about 4-4.2 metres (13-14 feet). They are generally shorter than the saltwater crocodile.

The saltwater crocodile is found along the eastern coast of India (Odisha, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu), and the Nicobar and Andaman islands. They are found, for example, in the mangroves of Bhattarkanika and Sunderbans, Mahanadi Delta, and in the swamplands in Odisha and West Bengal (including rivers).

The gharial (of the family Gavialidae), the rarest of the crocodilian species, is found in river areas, but is now greatly reduced from its previous range. Today, it is found in only some rivers of India, such as the Ganges, the Yamuna, the Chambal, the Girwa, the Kale, the Kosi and the Gandak.

2.2.2.2 There seems to be only 2 Pali words for “crocodile,” that is, *kumbhila* (or *kumbhīla*)—meaning “like a pot, *kumbha*”—and *suṃsumāra* (Burmese, *susumāra*)—meaning “child,” *susu*, killer, *māra*). Although these 2 words do occur in the suttas, they are more common in the Commentaries (especially the Jātakas). Here is a list of some references for their occurrences in the suttas:

kumbhila ~*bhaya*: **M 67/1:459,31** (SD 34.7) = **A 4.122/2:124,22** (SD 4.122), **Thī 502**, Miln 196,27, J 6:407,11; **Ap 15.11**; J 1:216,24, 278,27, 5:255,21, 6:537,19; MA 3:381,19; SA 2:23,29

suṃsumāra **S 35.247/4:198,27** (SD 19.15); **Thī 241**; ThaA 204; J 2:158 f; SnA 207; DhA 3:194,21.

2.2.2.3 Both *kumbhila* and *suṃsumāra* (Be *susumāra*) are often translated as “crocodile.”¹⁸ It is difficult to ascertain exactly how these 2 words translate into English. Both words are usually translated as “crocodile,” especially when only one word appears to the exclusion of the other. The 2 words, however, appear together in **the Apadāna** (Ap 402.23a = 407.17),¹⁹ thus: *kumbhīlā suṃsumārā ca, gahakā tattha jāyare*, which Jonathan Walters translates as “crocodiles and alligators [and other] fierce beasts are born there.”²⁰

¹⁷ <https://books.google.com/books?id=o84vxeFleYUC&pg=PA46>.

¹⁸ *Kumbhila* as “crocodile”: **M 67/1:460,1**; M:B 563, M:H 2:132; **A 4.122/2:123,16**; A:B 502, A:W 2:127; **Thī 502**: Thī:N 49; **Miln 186,27**: Miln:H 283. *Suṃsumāra* as “crocodile”: **S 35.247/4:198,27**: S:B 1255, S:W 4:131; **Thī 241**: Thī:N 26; **DhA 3:194,21**: DhA:B 3:34. Bodhi, Horner and Woodward all tr *both* words as “crocodile.”

¹⁹ *Cūla Niddesa* has *kumjbhila, bhayaṃ ... suṃsumāra, bhayaṃ* (Nc:Be 241 ad Sn 37; 261 ad Sn 135)

²⁰ Walters, *Legends of the Buddhist Saints*, 2017, verse 4011. He tr *Kumbhīlā suṃsumārā ... gahā/gahakā* as “crocodiles and alligators ... fierce beasts” throughout: 4011 (**Upasīva Ap 402.23**) = 4235a (**Udena Ap 407.17**). *Kumbhīlā suṃsumārā* as “crocodiles and alligators”: 156 (**Sāriputta Ap 1.19**), 158 (**Sāriputta Ap 3.19**). *Kumbhīlā* as “crocodiles” 143 (**Sāriputta Ap 3.4**). *Suṃsumārā* as “crocodiles”: 984 (**Uttiya Ap 29.1**), 4300 (**Eka, chattiya Ap 409.2d**), 5160 (**Puḷ- in’uppādaka Ap 484.21**); as “alligators” 143 (**Sāriputta Ap 3.4**). On *gahaka*, see (2.2.2.4).

Walters also translates both *kumbhila* and *sumsumāra* interchangeably as either “crocodile” or “alligator.”²¹ So, we have two issues: the first is an inconsistency in the translation, and secondly, a factual error: there are (and were) no alligators in India! Walters is, however, perhaps not wrong in translating both *kumbhila* and *sumsumāra* as “crocodile,” since they may be local words or dialectical forms for the same thing.

On the other hand, if we are more certain of the sutta context, we may be able to distinguish between the two in English translation. For example, while *kumbhila*, “crocodile,” is very common throughout the Ganges plain, or even the whole of India, the *sumsumāra*, “gharial” [2.2.2.1], is likely to be localized to the Ganges river itself. Where the two words appear sympatrically (in the same list or passage)—for example, as *kumbhilā sumsumārā ca* [see note above]—then, we can perhaps render it as “**crocodiles and gharials.**” This is probably as far as our current knowledge goes of these two words as they are used in the suttas.²²

2.2.2.4 Another difficult Pali word [§§4, 7, 10, etc] is *gaha* or *gahaka*, also *gāha(ka)* (Skt *graha*, *grāha*). The verb from this stem-form is *gaṇhati* or *gaṇhāti*, “(he, it) seizes, catches, holds.” The word (in all its forms) literally means “that which seizes or lays hold of, a seizer.”²³ It is a broad term which, in our Sutta context, may be explained as a “rapacious water-creature,” that is a predator.

2.2.2.5 A word related to *gaha*, “predator,” in the *sa,umi* stock, is *rakkhasa*, “monster”²⁴ (Skt *rakṣa*; adj *rākṣasa*: see SED). In Indian folklore, the rakshasas are terrestrial demons, but at least in this context, they clearly refer generically to what we would today call “monsters,” or “sea-monsters.” Such sea-monsters or their stories are common in folklore amongst the sea-going Indians who sailed as far down as off Cape Agulhas (the southernmost tip of south Africa) and to SE Asia.

Sea monsters could take many forms, including sea-dragons, sea-serpents or multi-armed beasts (eg, the 8-armed squid). The conception of a “monster” might have been based on sightings of actual sea-creatures such as sea-lions, dugongs, whales and giant squids. Such descriptions are used to highlight the perils and uncertainties of sea-voyages, and to illustrate the dangers that challenge the holy life or spiritual quest.²⁵

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²¹ K R Norman, in his **Therī,gāthā** tr, renders *nāgā ca sumsumārā ca* as “alligators and crocodiles” (Thī 241).

²² Further, on crocodiles, see SD 34.7 (5.3.3).

²³ See DP: *gaha*² (ii) & *gāha*² (3). PED tr *sagaha* (*sa*. “with,” + *gaha*²) as “full of crocodiles,” It 57, 114; as *sagāha*, S 4:157.

²⁴ Derived from √RAKṢ, to injure, or more likely from √ RAKṢ, to protect (PED). They are known in Malay (Malaysia and Indonesia) as “raksasa.” See A A Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, 162-164.

²⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_monster.

Samudda Sutta 1

The First Discourse on the Ocean

S 35.187

1 “**The ocean!** The ocean!” so, bhikshus, the untutored worldling says.²⁶

Bhikshu, this is not the ocean in the noble discipline. This, bhikshus, is (only) a great mass of water, the great flow of water.²⁷

(1) THE EYE

3 **The eye**, bhikshus, is a person’s ocean. Its current is made up of form.²⁸

4 One who overcomes²⁹ that current of *form* is said to have crossed the ocean that is the eye with its waves, whirlpools, predators and monsters.³⁰

5 Crossed over, gone beyond, the brahmin stands on dry land.³¹

(2) THE EAR

6 **The ear**, bhikshus, is a person’s ocean. Its current is made up of sound.

7 One who overcomes that current of *sound* is said to have crossed the ocean that is the ear with its waves, whirlpools, predators and monsters.

8 *Crossed over, gone beyond, the brahmin stands on dry land.*

(3) THE NOSE

9 **The nose**, bhikshus, is a person’s ocean. Its current is made up of smell.

10 One who overcomes that current of *smell* is said to have crossed the ocean that is the nose with its waves, whirlpools, predators and monsters.

11 *Crossed over, gone beyond, the brahmin stands on dry land.*

(4) THE TONGUE

12 **The tongue**, bhikshus, is a person’s ocean. Its current is made up of taste.

13 One who overcomes that current of *taste* is said to have crossed the ocean that is the tongue with its waves, whirlpools, predators and monsters.

14 *Crossed over, gone beyond, the brahmin stands on dry land.*

(5) THE BODY

15 **The body**, bhikshus, is a person’s ocean. Its current is made up of touch.

²⁶ *Samuddo samuddo’ti bhikkhave assutavā puthujjano bhāsati.*

²⁷ *Mahā eso bhikkhave udaka,rāsi mahā udak’añṇavo.*

²⁸ *Cakkhu* [Se *cakkhuṃ*] *bhikkhave purisassa samuddo, tassa rūpa,mayo vego.* See (1.1).

²⁹ “Overcomes,” *sahati* (from *ṡSAH*, to prevail), “to conquer, defeat, overcome” (M 1:33; S 4:157; Sn 942; Dh 335; It 84; J 1:74, 2:388, 3:423); also “to bear, endure” (Sn 20; Pug 68); “to be able” (D 2:342). Pot *sahe* (Sn 942); *sahey-ya* (M 1:33); imper *saha*, “excuse, forgive, beg your pardon!” (J 3:109; gerundive *sayha*, “that which can be endured, able to be done” (Sn 253); opp *asayha* (Miln 1:148,18).

³⁰ *Yo taṃ rūpa,mayaṃ vegarṃ sahati ayarṃ vuccati bhikkhave atari. Cakkhu,samuddarṃ sa,ūmirṃ* [Se *sa,umamirṃ* throughout] *s’āvaṭṭarṃ sa,gāharṃ sa,rakkhasarṃ.* See (1.2).

³¹ *Tiṇṇo pārāgato* [Be *pārāṅgato* throughout] *thale tiṭṭhati brāhmaṇo.* Recurs ub **Rāga S 2** (It 69,5), SD 52.10b: cf tr.

16 One who overcomes that current of *touch* is said to have crossed the ocean that is the body with its waves, whirlpools, predators and monsters.

17 *Crossed over, gone beyond, the brahmin stands on dry land.*

(6) THE MIND

18 **The mind**, bhikshus, is a person's ocean. Its current is made up of thought.

19 One who overcomes that current of *thought* is said to have crossed the ocean that is the mind with its waves, whirlpools, predators and monsters.

20 *Crossed over, gone beyond, the brahmin stands on dry land.*

21 The Blessed One said this. Having said this, the Sugata [well-farer], the Teacher, further said:³²

22 *Yo imarṃ samuddarṃ sa, gāharṃ sa, rakkhasarṃ
sa, ūmirṃ³³ s'āvaṭṭarṃ sa, bhayarṃ³⁴ duttararṃ
accatarī³⁵
sa veda, gū vusita, brahma. cariyo³⁷
lok'anta, gū pāragato'ti vuccatīti*

One who has crossed this ocean, so hard to cross, with its dangers of waves, whirlpools, predators and monsters³⁶— the knowledge-master whose holy life is lived has reached the world's end—he is called the one who has crossed over.

— evaṃ —

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³² Ce omits this line. *Idam avoca bhagavā. Idam vatvāna sugato athâparam etad avoca satthā.* (S 3.1/1:69,10), SD 42.11.

³³ Se -*ummi*. It is spelt *ūmi*, *ūmī*, *ummi* and *ummī*.

³⁴ Only in Be; Ce Ee Se read *sa, ūmi, bhayarṃ s'āvaṭṭarṃ sa, bhayarṃ ...*

³⁵ Cf §22abc with **Rāga S 2** (It 69,7bc), SD 52.10b.

³⁶ On this verse, cf the 1st "ocean-crossing verse" (It 69,7), SD 52.10b.

³⁷ Recurs as the 2 closing lines at It 4.109,9/115,10 f.