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Santatara Sutta

The Discourse on the More Peaceful | It 73

Theme: Cessation of feeling and perception is more peaceful than the formless states

Translated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2011

1 Introduction

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

1.1.1 The form and the formless. The **Santatara Sutta** (It 73) is a short teaching of 3 verses highlighting the true peace of **cessation** (*nirodha*), that is nirvana, excels even that of the formless, which is finer than that of the form states. The “form states” (*rūpa*) are the 4 form dhyanas.¹ The formless states (*arūpa*) are the 4 formless attainments.²

1.1.2 The sense-world (*kāma,loka*)³ is not mentioned because it is body-based and dependent on the 5 physical senses. Hence, it lacks the concentration (*samādhi*), even of the form states. As such, it is easily moved and gripped by sensuality (*kāma*) and related defilements.⁴

1.1.3 Cessation (*nirodha*) here, as in the 3rd noble truth (of the teaching sequence),⁵ has not technical sense, but simply refers to **nirvana**. This is confirmed by the Commentary, which simply says it refers to “nirvana” (ItA 2:42,8).

In the later suttas, we find mention of “cessation” as the “cessation for perception and feeling” (*saññā,vedayita,nirodha*).⁶ It is sometimes simply called “cessation” (*nirodha*) or “attainment of cessation” (*nirodha samāpatti*). It refers to the blissful meditative state of nirvana experienced by an arhat or a non-returner which still alive, that is, not in final nirvana.⁷

1.2 SUTTA COMMENTARY

1.2.1 Verse 4

1.2.1.1 “Those beings who read the form states” (*rūpūpaga sattā*) refer meditators who attain the form dhyanas and the deities or gods (brahmas and devas) who inhabit the form-dhyana heavens. These heavens are as follows, along with their lifespans (the number is that of the sequence of realms in the 31 planes of existence):⁸

¹ On the form dhyanas, see **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (5); the form devas, see SD 54.3a (3.7-3.10).

² On the formless attainments, see SD 24.11 (5); SD 53.23 (2.1.3); the formless brahmas, see SD 54.3a (3.11).

³ On the sense-world, see SD 54.3a (3.1-3.6).

⁴ On sensuality (*kāma*), see SD 32.2 (1.2). On the sensual conditions of the sense-world devas, see SD 54.3a (3.3).

⁵ On the sequences of the 4 noble truths, see SD 1.1 (6.2.2.2).

⁶ On the cessation of perception and feeling, see **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43,25/1:296), SD 30.2 (4) & **Cūḷa Vedalla S** (M 44.16-21/1:301 f), SD 40a.9 (2.5); also **Animitta Ceto,samādhi Pañha S** (S 40.8/4:268 f), SD 24.19.

⁷ On *nirodha* as nirvana, SD 1.1 (4.3).

⁸ On the 31 planes, see SD 7.1 (App).

			<u>lifespan</u>
The 1st dhyana ⁹			
19	great Brahmā;	<i>mahā brahmā</i>	1 aeon
20	Brahmā's ministers;	<i>brahma, purohita</i>	½ aeon
21	Brahmā's assembly or retinue.	<i>brahma, kāyikā, brahma, pārisajja</i>	¼ aeon
The 2nd dhyana ¹⁰			
15	Streaming radiance;	<i>ābhassara</i>	8 aeons
16	Boundless radiance;	<i>appamāṇ'ābha</i>	4 aeons
17	Limited radiance.	<i>paritt'ābha</i>	2 aeons
The 3rd dhyana ¹¹			
12	Radiant glory;	<i>subha, kiṇha</i> [Comy <i>subha, kiṇṇa</i>]	64 aeons
13	Boundless glory;	<i>appamāṇa, subha</i>	32 aeons
14	Limited glory.	<i>paritta, subha</i>	16 aeons
The 4th dhyana ¹²			
5	The peerless	<i>akaniṭṭhā</i>	16,000 aeons
6	The clear-visioned	<i>sudassī</i>	8,000 aeons
7	The clear-beauty	<i>sudasā</i>	4,000 aeons
8	The serene	<i>ātappā</i>	2,000 aeons
9	The durable	<i>avihā</i>	1,000 aeons
10	The non-percipient beings	<i>asañña, satta</i>	500 aeons
11	Abundant-fruit	<i>veha-p, phala</i>	500 aeons

} **The pure abodes**
(*suddh'āvāsa*)
non-returners only

1.2.1.2 “Those who remain in the formless states” (*arūpa-ṭ, ṭhāyino*) are the meditators who attain and remain in the formless attainments and the deities who inhabit the formless heavens. The 4 heavens of the formless attainments are as follows:

1	The base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception	<i>n'eva, saññā, nāsaññ'āyatana</i>	84,000 aeons
2	The base of nothingness	<i>ākāsaññ'āyatana</i>	60,000 aeons
3	The base of infinite consciousness	<i>viññāṇañc'āyatana</i>	40,000 aeons
4	The base of infinite space	<i>ākāśānanc'āyatana</i>	20,000 aeons

1.2.1.3 Despite the astronomically long lifespans of the divine beings in the form-heavens and the formless heavens, they must all eventually “fall” (*cavati*) from their states. To exist means to progress in time, that is, they are all *impermanent*. Even the highest gods must fall from their heaven.¹³

They are said to “fall” rather than “die” (like humans) because, in the case of the deities of the sense-world heavens for sure, they mostly die with an unwholesome mind so that they “fall” into the subhuman planes, even to the hells.¹⁴

⁹ On the brahmas of the 1st dhyana, see SD 54.3a (3.7).

¹⁰ On the brahmas of the 2nd dhyana, see SD 54.3a (3.8).

¹¹ On the brahmas of the 3rd dhyana, see SD 54.3a (3.9).

¹² On the brahmas of the 4th dhyana, see SD 54.3a (3.10).

¹³ See SD 54.3a (2.4.1.4).

¹⁴ See SD 54.3a (2.4.1).

1.2.2 Verse 5

1.2.2.1 When we attain and remain in **the form dhyanas**, we are fully freed from the limits and limitations of our body-based senses. We experience our pure mental states as being profoundly blissful and clear. This kind of mental calm and clarity remains with us even outside of dhyana with the help of mindfulness. With the help of such calm and clarity, we are able to see directly into true reality, and, seeing them as being impermanent, we will reach the path of awakening, even attain nirvana itself.

1.2.2.2 As long as we remain in the formless states, we remain under Māra’s power, that is, we are still part of samsara, that is, the ceaseless cycle of rebirths and redeaths. However, when we understand the formless states in the same way—as being mind-made and impermanent—we can use this profound calm and clarity to attain the path of awakening. Then, we will attain nirvana, the unconditioned state beyond life and death. In this sense, **“these people leave death behind.”** [§5d]

1.2.3 Verse 6

1.2.3.1 Meditatively, since all physical experiences have shut down in the dhyanas, **“with the body”** (*kāyena*) [§6a], should be understood as the “mental body” (*nāma,kāya*). This is the group of mental factors associated with consciousness; or, simply, we can take this to mean “in meditation” or “mental cultivation.”

The Commentary, however, glosses **“with the body”** (*kāyena*) [line 6a] with “with the name-body” (*nāma,kāyena*), that is, the mind comprising “the path and fruition” (*magga,phalehi vā*) (SA 2:4,16). The path, then, is our mind, or rather, properly directing our mind at the proper time, letting the mind go at the proper time.¹⁵ **“Having touched | the death-free element”** [§6b] means having realized nirvana, the unconditioned that is beyond birth and death, existence and non-existence.

1.2.3.2 The phrase, **“free from acquisition”** [§6b] refers not to “the death-free element,” but to the arhat who is **“influx-free”** (*anāsava*) [line 6d]. The influxes (*āsava*) are also known as “the floods” (*ogha*) of sense-desires, views, existence and ignorance. The influxes are the roots and fruits of samsara, bringing on continued sufferings and rebirths.

The terms *nirupadhiṃ* and *anāsavo* are practically synonymous since they both refer to sensual desire, existence, views and ignorance (the 4 influxes)¹⁶ abandoned by the arhat. *Upadhi* differs from *āsava* in that *upadhi* also refers to objective aspects of these influxes, that is, the material things and people we desire.¹⁷

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¹⁵ On “directed meditation” and “undirected meditation,” see **Bhikkhuṇi Vāsaka S** (S 47.10) + SD 24.2 (1).

¹⁶ SD 30.3 (1.4.2).

¹⁷ SD 54.3b (2.1.1).

Santatara Sutta

The Discourse on the More Peaceful
It 73

1 This was indeed spoken by the Blessed One, spoken by the Arhat [worthy one], [62] thus have I heard.¹⁸

2 “Bhikshus, the formless states are more peaceful than *the form states*; **cessation**¹⁹ is more peaceful than *the formless states*.

3 This is the meaning of what the Blessed One said. The meaning here is spoken thus:²⁰

4 *Ye ca rūpūpagā sattā*²¹
ye ca arūpa-ṭ, ṭhāyino
nirodhaṃ appajānantā
āgantāro punabbhavaṃ

Those beings who reach the form states,²²
and those who remain in the formless states,²³
not knowing cessation²⁴ well,
they return to be reborn.

5 *Ye ca rūpe pariññāya*²⁵
arūpesu asaṅghitā
nirodhe ye vimuccanti
te janā maccu, hāyino

Those who fully understand forms,
those who do not remain in the formless states,
they are freed into cessation—
these people leave death behind.

6²⁶ *Kāyena amataṃ dhātuṃ*
phassayitvā nirūpadhiṃ
upadhi-p, paṭinissaggaṃ
sacchikatvā anāsavo
deseti sammā, sambuddho
asokaṃ virajaṃ padan'ti

Who, with the body,²⁷ having touched
the death-free element,²⁸ free from acquisition,
having realized the abandoning of
acquisition, influx-free,²⁹
the fully self-awakened one teaches
a state that is sorrow-free, stainless.

7 This matter [meaning] too was spoken by the Blessed One. Thus I have heard.³⁰

— evaṃ —

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¹⁸ *Vuttaṃ h'etaṃ bhagavatā. Vuttam arahatā' ti me sutam.* This is said to be spoken by the laywoman **Khujji'-uttarā**: see SD 16.14 (1).

¹⁹ See Brahmavamso, *Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond*, 2006:217 f.

²⁰ *Etam atthaṃ bhagavā avoca, tatth'etaṃ iti vuccati.*

²¹ These 2 lines also at **Vijaya S** (S 531ab/5.4/1:131), but cf the sentiment there. The first 2 stanzas here are also in **Dvayatānupassanā S** (Sn 754 f/147).

²² Form states (*rūpa*), ie, the form dhyanas: see **Paṭhama Jhāna Pañha S** (S 40.1/4:262 f), SD 24.11 (4).

²³ Formless states (*arūpa*), ie, the formless attainments: see **Jhāna Pañha S 1** (S 40.1/4:262 f), SD 24.11 (5).

²⁴ On “cessation” (*nirodha*), see (1.1.3).

²⁵ These two lines are found almost verbatim as **Ti, dhātu S** (It 3.1.2).

²⁶ On this verse, see SD 54.3b (2.3.3.1).

²⁷ “With the body” (*kāyena*): see (1.2.3.1).

²⁸ “The death-free element” (*amata dhātu*), ie nirvana, where there is neither birth nor death.

²⁹ “Influx-free” (*anāsava*), see (1.2.3.2).

³⁰ *Ayam pi attho vutto bhagavatā. Iti me sutan ti.*