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(Navaka) Nibbāna Sutta

The (Nines) Discourse on Nirvana | **A 9.34**
 or, **Nibbāna Sukha Sutta** “Nirvana is happiness” Discourse
 or, **(Sāriputta) Nibbāna Sutta** The (Sāriputta) Discourse on Nirvana
 Theme: Nirvana is happiness beyond feeling
 Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2019

1 Summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY AND SIGNIFICANCE

1.1.1 Summary. The **(Navaka) Nibbāna Sutta** (A 9.34) opens with 2 important statements by Sāriputta on nirvana:

- (1) “This nirvana is happiness!” (*sukham idaṃ nibbānaṃ*) [§1.2];
- (2) It is happiness by the very fact that “here ... there is no feeling!” (*ettha n’atthi vedayitaṃ*) [§2.2].

Sāriputta spontaneously makes the 1st statement. The 2nd statement is given in response to Lāl’udāyī’s objection that he cannot imagine how **nirvana**, wherein there is no feeling, can be *happiness* [1.2]. In the rest of the Sutta, Sāriputta explains how **nirvana is true happiness by the very fact that there is no feeling therein**. This is the Sutta theme.

1.2 LĀĪ’UDĀYI’S REACTION

1.2.1 The (Navaka) Nibbāna Sutta (A 9.34) records Sāriputta’s teaching on nirvana to the monks. He simply but dramatically defines nirvana as “happiness” [§1.2]. When a foolish monk, Lāl’udāyī protests how nirvana can be “happiness,” when it has “no feelings” [§2.1], but that’s just it, retorts Sāriputta: it is the total absence of feelings that makes nirvana *true happiness!* [§2.2].

1.2.2 Lāl’udāyī’s reaction [§2.1] to Sāriputta’s statement on nirvana shows that he (Lāl’udāyī) either knows that nirvana is *without feelings* but only on a theoretical level, without any deeper understanding of it; or, he rejects the idea that nirvana is a state *without feelings*. Both of which are, of course, wrong views. Instead of investigating further by asking Sāriputta, renowned as the monk foremost in wisdom, he rudely interjects with a foolish remark.

2 Happiness and feeling

2.1 “HAPPINESS IS ... WHERE THERE IS NO FEELING!” (*sukhaṃ ... yad ettha n’atthi vedayitaṃ*) [§2.2]

2.1.1 Sukha and dukkha

2.1.1.1 Basically, **sukha**, (adj) “happy” and *sukhaṃ* (neutral noun) are resolved as *su-* (good, well, easy) + *√KHAM* (Skt *kṣam*), “to endure”; hence, meaning literally: “that which is easily endured, that is, “happiness.” Its opposite is **dukkha** = *du-* (hard, difficult) + *√KHAM*, literally, “that which is difficult to endure,” that is, “suffering, unsatisfactoriness.”

2.1.1.2 “That’s just what this happiness is here, avuso, where there is *no* feeling!” (*etad eva khv-
ettha āvuso sukham, yad ettha n’atthi vedayitam*) [§2.2]. Sāriputta’s statement can be paraphrased,
thus: **nirvana is true happiness because it has *no* feeling.** To understand the meaning of this statement,
we need to understand the nature of feeling (*vedanā*).

2.1.2 The 3 kinds of feelings. The (*Vedanā*) *Āgāra Sutta* (S 36.14), SD 55.4(2), describes our being to be
like a “**guest-house**” (*āgantuk’āgāra*), wherein people of all kinds from everywhere lodge. Even so, we
feel the 3 kinds of feelings and the 2 kinds of feelings. **The 3 kinds of feelings** are the best known, that is,
those that are *pleasant*, that are *painful*, and that are *neither*, that is, neutral. Each of these 3 kinds of
feelings can be divided into 2 more kinds [2.2.1].

2.1.3 Can “feeling” be neutral?

2.1.3.1 Before we continue, one nagging point, especially for those unfamiliar with Pali and the
suttas: How can “**feeling**,” especially where it connotes a preference, that is, like or disliking, be neutral.
We can say, for example, “This cup of drink feels warm,” where “feels” refers to a sensation.¹ Sometimes,
“feeling” actually means “liking,” such as when we say, “He likes or has a liking for meditation.” We also
sometimes say, “You have hurt his feelings,” where “feelings” (plural) means emotions (which is a cate-
gory of its own in early Buddhist psychology): *saṅkhārā*.² There are other examples, but these will suffice
here. Even at this preliminary stage, we can see that, in English at least, feeling has a broad range of
meanings, depending on how we use it.

2.1.3.2 The word “**feeling**” is often used as a translation for *vedanā*, the 2nd of the 5 aggregates.³
Vedanā is the abstract noun from *vedeti* or *vediyati* (Vedic, *vedayati*), “to sense, know.” However, the
usual verb that translates “to feel” is *paṭisaṃvedeti*, derived from *paṭi-* (suggesting interactivity) + *saṃ-*
(showing convergence, like Latin *com-/con-*) + *√VID*, to know. Hence, *paṭisaṃvedeti* has the sense of
“knowing in an engaged and interactive way,” that is, to “experience, feel (in a broad sense).”⁴

2.1.3.3 For practical reasons, we should translate the key Pali verb, *paṭisaṃvedeti* broadly as “to ex-
perience” (such as in a karma context) and more specifically as “to feel” (especially in a feeling context).
Understandably, we would say, “He feels *happy*; he feels *sad*”; and we can also say, “He feels *neutral*.”

The last case—“he feels neutral”—refers to the experience of neither a pleasant feeling nor a painful
feeling. In other words, it is a “*neutral*” feeling, either one that is hedonically or affectively neutral, or we
are unable to discern an unfamiliar sensation. This last experience may happen to a new meditator when,
say, he notices a deep sense of calm or peace arising for the first time.

Since he has never experienced such an inner peace, he does not know what to make of it. Even
though it would be pleasant to a seasoned meditator, the neophyte may feel *bored* or *fearful* with it,
since he is not used to a “neutral” sensation.

¹ On feeling and sensation, see SD 17.3 (1.2).

² On feeling and emotion, see SD 17.3 (1.3).

³ The 5 aggregates (*pañca-k, khandha*) are: form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), formations (*saṅ-
khārā*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*); see SD 17.

⁴ On the perceptual role of feeling, see SD 17.3 (1.4). On how feeling arises, see SD 17.3 (3.1). On the cognitive
dimension of *vedanā*, incl *paṭisaṃvedeti*, see SD 17.3 (1.2.2).

2.1.3.4 A note on words and usage. A good scholar or a better student keeps an open mind about how words are used. When we read a passage, we need to understand how the key words are used and how the context can colour or modify their sense. When we use English to translate or explain early Buddhist concepts, it is helpful at the start or in the notes, **to define our terms**. Words are how we use them, and consistency helps; however, there must also be room for latitude of **polysemy**,⁵ which is common and vital in sutta teachings.

2.2 “THIS NIRVANA, AVUSO, IS HAPPINESS!” (*sukham idaṃ āvuso nibbānaṃ*) [§1.2].

2.2.1 The (Vedanā) Āgāra Sutta (S 36.14), as we have noted [2.2.3] speaks of 2 kinds of feelings: the carnal (*s’āmisa*) and the spiritual (*nirāmisa*), thus:

- (1) **the carnal** (*s’āmisa*) can be pleasant, painful or neutral feeling, all arising through carnal sensuality;
- (2) **the spiritual** (*nirāmisa*) can be pleasant, painful or neutral feeling, all of which are wholesome.

The spiritual feelings arise in the following ways:

- (1) **A spiritual** (*nirāmisa*) **pleasant feeling** is pleasant feeling arisen by way of the 1st dhyana, etc, or by way of insight, or by way of recollection (of the Buddha, etc).
- (2) **A spiritual** **painful feeling** is the feeling of displeasure (*domanassa*) arisen through yearning for the supreme liberation (especially the fruition of arhathood).
- (3) **A spiritual** **neutral feeling** is the neutral feeling arisen by way of the 4th dhyana.⁶

2.2.2 The Suddhika Nirāmisa Sutta (S 36.29) speaks of 3 levels of spiritual experiences of zest (*pīti*), of joy (*sukha*), of equanimity (*upekkhā*) and of liberation (*vimokkha*). These 3 levels are those of the carnal (*s’āmisa*), the spiritual (*nirāmisa*) and the superspiritual (*nirāmisa nirāmisa, tara*).

- (1) Essentially, **the carnal experiences** of the first 3 (of zest, of joy and of equanimity) are those that are sense-based (that is rooted in sense-pleasures), that is, of the sense-sphere.
- (2) **The spiritual** (*nirāmisa*) experiences are those that are dhyana-based.
- (3) **The superspiritual** (*nirāmisa nirāmisa, tara*, literally, “more than the spiritual”) refers to the arhat’s review knowledge, that is, when an arhat reflects on his mind that is freed from greed, from hate and from delusion—*zest* arises, *joy* arises, *equanimity* arises, *liberation* arises.⁷

2.2.3 What is of special interest to us here is **the superspiritual states** of the arhat, that is, his **zest, joy, equanimity** and **liberation**. **The Suddhika Nirāmisa Sutta** (S 36.29) describes these 4 states as follows:

- (1) THE ARHAT’S ZEST

And what, bhikshus, is **the zest [rapture] that is more than the spiritual** [superspiritual zest] (*nirāmisa nirāmisa, tara pīti*)?

Bhikshus, when a monk, **whose influxes⁸ are destroyed**, reviews his mind liberated from *greed*,

⁵ On Pali polysemy, see SD 1.1 (4.4.5); SD 10.16 (1.3.1-1.3.2; 2.2); SD 54.3b (2.1.1.4).

⁶ For details, see **(Vedanā) Āgāra S** (S 36.14), SD 55.4(2). On neutral feeling, see SD 17.3 (1.2.1).

⁷ **Suddhika Nirāmisa S** (S 36.29/4:235,21), SD 55.4. Cf **Pañca-t, taya Sutta** (M 102/2:236,25), SD 40a.12.

⁸ “Influxes” (*āsava*) are those of sensual lust, existence, ignorance; later list add “views” as the 3rd: see SD 30.3 (1.3.2).

reviews his mind liberated from *hate*,
reviews his mind liberated from *delusion*—**zest** arises—
 this, bhikshus, is called the **zest** that is **more than the spiritual**. (S 36.29,7), SD 55.4

(2) THE ARHAT’S JOY

And what, bhikshus, is **the joy that is more than the spiritual** [superspiritual joy] (*nirāmisā nirāmisā, tara sukha*)?

Bhikshus, when a monk, **whose influxes are destroyed**,
reviews his mind liberated from *greed*,
reviews his mind liberated from *hate*,
reviews his mind liberated from *delusion*—**happiness and mental joy** arises—
 this, bhikshus, is called the **joy** that is **more than the spiritual**. (S 36.29,10), SD 55.4

(3) THE ARHAT’S EQUANIMITY

And what, bhikshus, is **the equanimity that is more than the spiritual**? (*nirāmisā nirāmisatarā upekkhā*)

Bhikshus, when a monk, **whose influxes are destroyed**,
reviews his mind liberated from *greed*,
reviews his mind liberated from *hate*,
reviews his mind liberated from *delusion*—**equanimity** arises—
 this, bhikshus, is called the **equanimity** that is **more than the spiritual**. (S 36.29,13), SD 55.4

(4) THE ARHAT’S LIBERATION

And what, bhikshus, is **the liberation that is more than the spiritual** (*nirāmisā nirāmisā, taro vimokkho*)?

Bhikshus, when a monk, **whose influxes are destroyed**,
reviews his mind liberated from *greed*,
reviews his mind liberated from *hate*,
reviews his mind liberated from *delusion*—**liberation** arises—
 this, bhikshus, is called the **liberation** that is **more than the spiritual**.

This last passage, (4) The arhat’s liberation, describes how an arhat (like Sāriputta) reviews his arhat-hood—how he is free from the 3 unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion—“liberation arises” in him. This does not mean that he “*becomes* an arhat”—he *is* already one. Rather, it means that **the joy of nirvana** (“liberation”) is felt in him. This is what Sāriputta feels when he makes this statement [§1.2].

3 How the absence of feeling is true happiness

3.0 In the (Navaka) Nibbāna Sutta (A 9.34), Sāriputta explains how “nirvana is true happiness by the very fact that there is *no* feeling therein.” To explain this, he describes these **4 things**:

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|--|----------|-------|
| (1) the 5 cords of sense-pleasures (<i>pañca kāma, guṇa</i>); | (§3) | [3.1] |
| (2) the 4 form dhyanas (<i>rūpa jhāna</i>); | (§§4-7) | [3.2] |
| (3) the 4 formless attainments (<i>arūpa samāpatti</i>); and | (§§8-11) | [3.3] |
| (4) the cessation of perception and feeling (<i>saññā, vedayita, nirodha</i>). | (§12) | [3.4] |

The last 3 sets form an important set of its own known as the “**9 progressive abodes**” (*anupubba-vihāra*), comprising the 4 form dhyanas, the 4 formless attainments and cessation: as such, they are sometimes called “the 9 dhyanas.” These abodes are attainable only by the Buddha and the arhats, and perhaps some non-returners who excel in meditation.⁹

3.1 THE 5 CORDS OF SENSE-PLEASURES [§3]

3.1.1 First, Sāriputta describes the most common of feelings: those arising from **the 5 cords of sense-pleasures** (*kāma,guṇa*). These are the pleasure of the 5 physical senses which we, the unawakened, regard as “desirable, attractive, pleasant, endearing, associated with sensual desires, delightful.” This is called “sense-based happiness” (*kāma,sukha*)—because they arise dependent on our physical senses [§3]. In other words, **mental pleasure** arises from the 5 physical senses, not on its own [§3.2].

3.1.2 These cords of sense-pleasures are listed first to act as a foil for **the 9 progressive abodes** [3.0]: to show why the meditative states provide far better joy than sensual pleasures; and how all this relates to the last abode, that of cessation [§12].

3.2 THE 4 FORM DHYANAS [§§4-7]

3.2.1 Next, Sāriputta describes how each of **the 4 form dhyanas** outshines sensual pleasures in terms of joy or happiness (*sukha*). Each of the 4 form dhyanas are defined with their stock passages. Of **the 1st dhyana**, Sāriputta says:

“Just as pain were to arise to one feeling pleasure only to afflict him,
even so, **when that attention and perception associated with sensuality occurs in him, it is an *affliction* to him.**” [§4.3]

Now, the 1st dhyana arises when all the physical sense-stimuli have stopped at least temporarily. This frees the mind from having to process the various sense-data, and so dissipate itself. Once on its own, the mind settles, clears and brightens up. However, whenever any kind of sense-stimulus, even a sensually pleasurable one, what more a painful one, tries to intrude into the freed mind, it becomes distracted; hence, it is afflicted, since it loses its calm, clarity and joyful radiance. Hence, Sāriputta declares for each and every dhyana, “Indeed, avuso, this affliction is called suffering by the Blessed One.” [§4.4 etc]

“In this way,” adds Sāriputta, “It can be indirectly (*pariyāyena*) understood how nirvana is happiness.” [§4.5]. Imagine: even what we see as profound enjoyment of our physical senses only brings *mental pain* since this disrupts the dhyana, which is a higher form of mental joy. This important explanation applies, in its own way to the other form dhyanas and formless attainments.

3.2.2 The 2nd dhyana [§5], which is more pleasurable and peaceful than the 1st dhyana, arises when “**thinking**” (*vitakka*) ceases for that duration. Now this “thinking” is a shorthand for “thinking and pondering” (*vitakka,vicāra*), or technically, “initial application and sustained application”, when they become subtle mental processes whereby the mind is directed (“applied”) to the meditation object, and then fixed there (“sustained”), thus giving mental focus leading to the 1st dhyana.

When *vitakka,vicāra* cease—the mind is free of even the subtlest thoughts—the 2nd dhyana arises. But when they return, we fall back to the 1st dhyana, which means we return to a grosser

⁹ See **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,34.2-42), SD 1.11; **Jhānābhīññā S** (S 16.9), SD 50.7 (1.2.1.2); (**Navaka**) **Jhāna S** (A 9.36), SD 33.8; also SD 33.8 (2); SD 1.8 (2.2.3) (3)n.

state of meditation—this is *mentally painful*. It “**afflicts**” us because we have our attention and perception drawn to that “thinking.” We would rather stay on in the 2nd dhyana. Hence, Sāriputta declares:

“While that monk (the meditator) is dwelling in this way [in the 2nd dhyana], **attention and perception associated with thinking** (vitakka) were to occur in him, he feels it as an affliction” [§5.2]. When we see that even the return of thinking can afflict us in the 2nd dhyana, we can imagine how a subtle state that is nirvana can be even happier.

3.2.3 The 3rd dhyana [§6], which is more pleasurable and peaceful than the 2nd dhyana because there the exuberant zest subsides for that duration, so that the subtler **joy or happiness prevails**, and the mind dwells “happily ... in equanimity and mindfulness” [§6.1]. However, should any “attention and perception associated with zest” occur in us, we would fall away from the 3rd dhyana—this will afflict us. When we see that even the return of zest can afflict us in the 3rd dhyana, we can imagine how a subtle state that is nirvana can be even happier.

3.2.4 When all joy and pain are abandoned, **the 4th dhyana** [§7] arises, characterized by equanimity. However, when “attention and perception to joy connected with equanimity” were to arise in us, we will fall away from the 4th dhyana—this is an “affliction.” When we see that even the subtle feeling of joy in equanimity can afflict us in the 4th dhyana, we can imagine how a subtle state that is nirvana can be even happier.

3.3 THE 4 FORMLESS DHYANAS [§§8-11]

3.3.1 When we have risen above all perception of form (here meaning the 4th dhyana), then, we attain the 1st formless attainment, that is, **the base of infinite space** [§8]. However, when any idea connected with form arises, we fall from this formless attainment. When we see that even the subtle feeling of form can afflict us in *the 1st formless attainment*, we can imagine how a subtle state that is nirvana can be even happier.

3.3.2 Completely transcending the base of infinite space, we attain **the base of infinite consciousness** [§9]. However, should any “attention and perception associated with” the previous base of infinite space arise, we will fall from this attainment—this is an affliction. When we see that even the subtle base of infinite consciousness can afflict us in the 2nd formless attainment, we can imagine how a subtle state that is nirvana can be even happier.

3.3.3 The next attainment is that of **the base of nothingness** [§10]. Should any “attention and perception associated with” the previous attainment arise here, we fall from this attainment. When we see that even the subtle base of infinite consciousness can afflict us in the 3rd formless attainment, we can imagine how a subtle state that is nirvana can be even happier.

3.3.4 The subtlest of the attainments is that of **the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception** [§11]. Should any “attention and perception associated with” the previous attainment arise here, we fall from it. When we see that even the subtle base of nothingness can afflict us in the 4th formless attainment, we can imagine how a subtle state that is nirvana can be even happier.

3.4 CESSATION OF PERCEPTION AND FEELING. Finally, there is the 9th and highest attainment, that of **the cessation of perception and feeling** [§12], a state we usually understand as some kind of profound suspend-

ed animation which can last up to one straight week.¹⁰ This is attained by completely transcending the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, the highest of the formless attainments. Sāriputta mentions the arhat, whose “influxes are utterly destroyed” as attaining and dwelling in cessation. This is the highest and subtlest of the 9 progressive abodes. Nirvana is yet beyond this. “In this way ... it can be indirectly understood how nirvana is happiness.” [§12.2].

3.5 INTERESTING SUTTA ASPECTS

3.5.1 “This affliction is called suffering by the blessed one”

3.5.1.1 In each of the passages on the form dhyanas [§4.4 etc] and the formless attainments [§8.4 etc], Sāriputta explains how when a quality from a lower state intrudes, that dhyana is lost due to being “afflicted” by that intruding quality (for example, when sensuality intrudes into the 1st dhyana). Each time, Sāriputta declares: “**Indeed, avuso, this affliction (*ābādha*) is called suffering by the Blessed One.” [§§4.4, 5.4, 6.4, 7.4, 8.4, 9.4, 10.4, 11.3].**

3.5.1.2 Each of these 8 statements is one of **irony** (where the meaning of a word takes a contrary sense). In the 1st dhyana, for example, when sensuality (such as a lustful thought) intrudes, it is an *irony*. In the sense-world, sensuality is, as a rule, taken to be pleasurable; but not so in the 1st dhyana, where it will actually disrupt the dhyana. The possibility of this disrupting effect is described as occurring right up to the 4th attainment, the 8th of the 9 progressive abodes [3.0].

In other words, what seems profoundly supremely pleasant at a certain level can be actually **painful** in a higher spiritual state. We do not regard such a quality as being an “affliction, until—like the Buddha—we experience this ironic effect in the dhyanas and attainments.

The 9th and last of these abodes—that of **the cessation of perception and feeling**—suffers no external intrusion. The reason for this is clear: it is simply the nirvanic experience in this life itself for the arhat and sometimes the non-returner.

3.5.2 The “understanding partaking of falling away” (*hāna, bhāginī paññā*)

3.5.2.1 The **Vibhaṅga** describes an “understanding partaking of falling away” starts off the process of freeing the mind from “falling away” (*hāna*) from dhyana. In Chapter 16 (*Ñāṇa Vibhaṅga*, “the classification of knowledge”), it says in connection with **the 1st dhyana**, thus:

- (1) Therein, what is “**understanding partaking of falling away**”? When attention and perception accompanied by sensual pleasure¹¹ prompts one who is in **the 1st dhyana**, this is the understanding partaking of falling away¹² (*hāna, bhāginī paññā*).
- (2) (His) mindfulness in conformity with that state (*tad anudhammatā*) stands still¹³—this is understanding partaking of stationariness (*ṭhiti, bhāginī paññā*).

¹⁰ On cessation, see SD 48.7 (3.2); SD 50.7 (1.2).

¹¹ Vbh Mūlaṭṭikā says that what is meant here is not sense-desires but “sense-objects as the mental objects” (*vatthu, kāma’ārammaṇā*) (VbhMuṬ:Be 23:204,23).

¹² *Paṭhamassa jhānassa lābhiṃ kāma, sahaḡatā saññā, manasikāra samudācarati hāna, bhāginī paññā.*

¹³ Comy: This is said in reference to wrong mindfulness, not right mindfulness. For, when the sense of attraction (*nikanti*) of a kind whose nature is suitable to the 1st dhyana arises in someone, having seen the 1st dhyana as peaceful and sublime, he takes satisfaction and finds delight. Owing to his sense of attraction, the understanding of the 1st dhyana neither diminishes nor increases: it is of the stationary type (*ṭhiti, koṭṭhāsika*). Hence, it is called “**under-**

- (3) No attention and perception accompanied by initial application prompts one¹⁴—this is understanding of distinction (*visesa, bhāginī paññā*).
- (4) Attention and perception accompanied by revulsion, connected with dispassion [letting go], prompt him¹⁵—this is understanding partaking of penetration (*nibbedha, bhāginī paññā*).
- (Vbh §799/330,19-25)

This same cycle of 4 instances (*catu ṭhāna*) applies to the other dhyanas and attainments as given in **the (Navaka) Nibbāna Sutta** (A 9.34) [3].¹⁶ Basically, the meditator, noticing the intrusion (by then he is already emerged from the dhyana), letting it go with insight and returning to the dhyana, move on to higher stages.

3.5.3 “There is still something to be done”

3.5.3.1 The (Navaka) Nibbāna Sutta (A 9.34) records Sāriputta using a tenfold cycle of dharmas to show how nirvana is true happiness on account of its being free from feeling. The 10 dharmas are the “5 cords of sense-pleasures” [§3] followed by the 9 progressive abodes [§§4-12; 3.0]. This progressive cycle of dharmas should remind us of another cycle often used by the Buddha to remind us not to stay stuck and satisfied with our practice until we have attained the highest, that is arhathood itself.

This is, of course, the Buddha’s famous reminder to the unawakened: “**There is still something to be done.**”¹⁷ We have to be diligent in attaining “**progressively higher distinction** (*uḷāraṃ pubbenāparaṃ visesaṃ*),” given in cycles of teachings—usually the 4 form dhyanas followed by the 4 formless dhyanas, or the 4 stages of noble sainthood—until the full freedom, that is arhathood or nirvana, has been won.¹⁸

3.5.3.2 For lay followers—and monastics who have difficulties meditating—we “still have something to be done” [3.5.3.1], and that is, we must attain at least **streamwinning** in this life itself. We should not be deluded into thinking that we are unable to attain arhathood, so we should leave it to some future life. The fact is that we are often so caught up with the world, we rarely realize that we are more likely to be reborn in a subhuman realm, if we are not already caught up in one right now.

Our spiritual life truly begins by **aspiring for streamwinning** right now. Then, we should at least carefully reflect on **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), for assurances from the Buddha himself that we will gain streamwinning in this life itself, if not, certainly *at the moment of passing away* (SD 16.7).

4 Related suttas on nirvana

The (Navaka) Nibbāna Sutta (A 9.34) [4.4] is one of a number of suttas bearing the title *nibbana*. There are at least 6 such suttas, as listed here:

standing partaking of stationariness.” (VbhA 418,23-29). Mūla,ṭīkā: “Wrong view”arises on account of either the sense of attraction or the consciousness arising associated with a sense of attraction. (VbhAMuṬ:Be 23:104,26 f)

¹⁴ Comy: This is (understanding) accompanied by an absence of applied thought by way of object arising from attending to the 2nd dhyana, peaceful and sublime, without applied thought. (VbhA 418,30 f)

¹⁵ Simply, Comy explains that since the meditator is revulsed at the distraction, with insight, he turns away from it, so that there is “fading away” of the defilement, directed towards nirvana. (VbhA 418,36-418,13)

¹⁶ Vbh 330,26-331,28.

¹⁷ *Atthi c’ev’ettha uttarim karaṇīyaṃ*. See **(Majjhima) Subha S** (D 10,1.31 + passim), SD 40a.13; **Assa,pura S** (M 39,3.5/1:271), SD 10.13; **(Gaha,pati) Potaliya S** (M 54,14), SD 43.8; **Sevitabbasevitabba S** (M 114), SD 39.8 (1.1.1.8); see also SD 51.17 (3.4.2.5);

¹⁸ See **Dhamma,cetiya S** (M 89,12+18), SD 64.10; **Bhikkhuṇī Vāsaka S** (S 47.10,3), SD 24.2; **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118,2,2+6.2), SD 7.13; as *uḷāraṃ visesaṃ*, only in **Lohicca S** (D 12 passim), SD 34.8.

4.1 (Tika) Nibbāna Sutta (A 3.55/1:158 f). The Buddha explains to Jānussoni the meaning of seeing nirvana in this life itself. (SD 50.6)

4.2 (Catukka) Nibbāna Sutta (A 4.179/2:167). Sāriputta explains to Ānanda why some beings do not attain nibbāna in this very life.

4.3 (Chakka) Nibbāna Sutta (A 6.101/3:442 f). It is impossible that one who thinks that nirvana is suffering to ever reach the path.

4.4 (Navaka) Nibbāna Sutta (A 9.34/4:414-418). Sāriputta explains to the monks how nirvana is happiness, in that it is free from feeling. (SD 55.1)

4.5 (Jambu,khādaka) Nibbāna Sutta or **Nibbāna,pañha Sutta** (S 38.1/4:251 f). At Nālaka, Sāriputta explains to the wanderer Jambu,khādaka that nirvana is the destruction of greed, hate and delusion, and that the path to its realization is the noble eightfold path. This is the first of 16 suttas, which form **the Jambu,khādaka Saṃyutta** (S 38.1-38.16). All these teachings are identical to those of the following **Sāmaṇḍaka Saṃyutta** (S 39), differing only in the interlocutor: in the former it is the wanderer Jambu,khādaka, in the latter the wanderer Sāmaṇḍaka [4.6]. (SD 75.22(1))

4.6 (Sāmaṇḍaka) Nibbāna Sutta (S 39.1/4:261 f). Sāriputta teaches that nirvana is the destruction of greed, hate and delusion, and that the path to its realization is the noble eightfold path. This is the first of 16 suttas forming the **Sāmaṇḍaka Saṃyutta** (S 39.1-39.16/4:261 f). These 16 suttas record related teachings that Sāriputta gives to the wanderer Sāmaṇḍaka. They are identical to those of the preceding **Jambu,khādaka Saṃyutta** (S 38), differing only in the interlocutor [4.5]. (SD 75.23(1))

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(Navaka) Nibbāna Sutta

The (Nines) Discourse on Nirvana

A 9.34

Nirvana is true happiness

1 At one time, the venerable Sāriputta was dwelling in the squirrels' feeding-ground in the Bamboo Grove outside Rāja,gaha. There, the venerable Sāriputta addressed the monks, thus:

1.2 “**This nirvana, avuso, is happiness!** This nirvana, avuso, is happiness!”¹⁹

2 When this was said, the venerable Udāyi²⁰ said to the venerable Sāriputta: **[414]**

“But, avuso Sāriputta, what happiness can there be here, where there is no feeling?”²¹

2.2 “That’s just what this happiness is here, avuso, **where there is no feeling** [nothing that is felt]!”²²

¹⁹ *Sukham idaṃ āvuso nibbānaṃ, sukham idaṃ āvuso nibbānan’ti.*

²⁰ Comy identified him as the elder Lāl’udayi (AA 4:194,8): V 1:115; J 2:164 (his past life). See **(Dhamma,desaka) Udāyi S** (A 5.159), SD 46.1; contradicts Sāriputta: **(Sāriputta) Nirodha S** (A 5.166), SD 47.15.

²¹ *Kiṃ paṇ’ettha āvuso sāriputta sukhaṃ, yad ettha n’atthi vedayitan’ti.*

²² *Etad eva khv-ettha āvuso sukhaṃ, yad ettha n’atthi vedayitaṃ.*

Sense-pleasures and sensual happiness

3 There are these **5 cords of sense-pleasures** (*kāma,guṇa*), avuso. What are the five?

- (1) forms cognizable by the eye,
desirable, attractive, pleasant, endearing, associated with sensual desires, delightful;²³
- (2) sounds cognizable by the ear,
desirable, attractive, pleasant, endearing, associated with sensual desires, delightful;
- (3) smells cognizable by the nose,
desirable, attractive, pleasant, endearing, associated with sensual desires, delightful;
- (4) tastes cognizable by the tongue,
desirable, attractive, pleasant, endearing, associated with sensual desires, delightful;
- (5) touches cognizable by the body,
desirable, attractive, pleasant, endearing, associated with sensual desires, delightful.

3.2 These, avuso, are the 5 cords of sense-pleasures. Dependent on these 5 cords of sense-pleasures, avuso, arises **mental pleasure**.²⁴

This, avuso, is called **sensual happiness** [sense-based joy] (*kāma,sukha*).

THE 4 FORM DHYANAS²⁵

(1) The 1st dhyana

4 Here, avuso, a monk, quite secluded [detached] from sense-objects,²⁶ secluded from unwholesome mental states,

attains and dwells in **the 1st dhyana**,²⁷

accompanied by initial application and sustained application, and
with zest and joy born of solitude.²⁸

4.2 If, avuso, while that monk is dwelling in this way, attention and perception²⁹ associated with sensuality (*kāma*) were to occur in him, he feels it as an affliction.³⁰

²³ *Cakkhu,viññeyyā rūpā iṭṭhā kantā manāpā piya,rūpā kāmūpasamhitā rajanīyā*. The usual tr we see have the disjunctive “that are” before “desirable” throughout, implying that only “desirable, etc” sense-objects are meant. However, when the adjs *iṭṭhā*, etc, follow the noun rather than precede it in all the 6 sentences, they function as a nexus (connector), ie, they qualify the respective nouns, and emphasizing them: see A K Warder, *Introduction to Pali*, 2nd ed, 1974:61. This tr also refutes the wrong view that in dhyana (said to be “detached from sensual pleasures,” *vivicc’eva kāmehi*, D 22,21/2:313 f, M 141,31/3:252), “neutral feelings” still remain. This view is curious because it is clear that in the 1st dhyana, there are “zest and joy” (*pīti,sukha*), which make it impossible for any neutral feeling to be felt at that time: see **Mahā Nidāna S** (D 15), which says that only one feeling (pleasant, painful, or neutral) is experienced at a time (D 15,28/2:66), SD 5.17. (I thank Sylvester LAM Cheng Poh of Singapore for drawing my attention to this interesting point.)

²⁴ *Yaṃ kho āvuso ime pañca kāma,guṇe paṭicca uppajjati sukhaṃ somanassaṃ*.

²⁵ From here until the end are listed “the 9 progressive abodes” (*nava anupubba,vihāra*): SD 50.7 (1.2.1.2). These are listed in **Jhānābhiññā S** (S 16.9,1-18), SD 50.7.

²⁶ On the tr of *kāmehi* (pl), see SD 8.4 (5.1.1.1).

²⁷ This sentence is the 1st-dhyana pericope, see **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,77), SD 8.10.

²⁸ “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 “stillness” (*samādhi*) here, see **The layman and dhyana** (SD 8.5).

²⁹ Comy takes *saññā,manasikāra* as a dvandva: *saññā ca manasikāro ca* (SA 2:233). Tech, it refers to attention associated with perception, that is, it is (both) advertent attention and impulsion perception (*javana,saññā ca tad*

4.3 Just as pain were to arise to one feeling pleasure only to afflict him, even so, when that attention and perception associated with sensuality occurs in him, it is an affliction to him.

4.4 Indeed, avuso, this affliction is called suffering by the Blessed One.³¹

4.5 In this way, avuso, it can be indirectly³² understood how nirvana is happiness.³³

(2) The 2nd dhyana

5 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,³⁴

free from initial application and sustained application,
with zest and joy born of stillness [samadhi].³⁵

5.2 *If, avuso, while that monk is dwelling in this way, attention and perception associated with thinking (vitakka)³⁶ were to occur in him, he feels it as an affliction.*

5.3 *Just as pain were to arise to one feeling pleasure only to afflict him, even so, when that attention and perception associated with thinking [416] occurs in him, it is an affliction to him.*

5.4 *Indeed, avuso, this affliction is called suffering by the Blessed One.*

5.5 *In this way, avuso, it can be indirectly understood how nirvana is happiness.*

(3) The 3rd dhyana

6 Furthermore, avuso, a monk, with the fading away of zest, remains equanimous, mindful and clearly knowing, and feels joy with the body.³⁷

He attains and dwells in the 3rd dhyana,³⁸

of which the noble ones declare, ‘Happily he dwells in equanimity and mindfulness.’

6.2 *If, avuso, while that monk is dwelling in this way, attention and perception associated with zest (pīti) were to occur in him, he feels it as an affliction.*

āvajjana,manasikāro ca, saññā,sampayutta,manasikāro’pi vaṭṭati (PmA 1:139). In simple term, it refers to the mind cognizing something and acting on it. See **Saññā Manasikāra S 1** (A 11.7), SD 53.20a, + **Saññā Manasikāra S 2** (A 11.8), SD 53.20b.

³⁰ *Tassa ce āvuso bhikkhuno iminā vihārena viharato kāma,saññā,manasikārā samudācaranti, sv-assa hoti ābādho.*

³¹ *Yo kho pan’āvuso ābādho, dukkham etaṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā.*

³² Comy glosses *pariyāyena* with “by reasoning” (*kāraṇena*, AA 4:194,13). See **Pariyāya nippariyāya** SD 68.2.

³³ *Iminā’pi kho etaṃ āvuso pariyāyena veditabbaṃ yathā sukhaṃ nibbānaṃ.*

³⁴ This sentence is the 2nd-dhyana pericope, see **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,79), SD 8.10.

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ “Thinking” (*vitakka*) here is a shorthand for “initial application and sustained application” (*vitakka,vicāra*), a pair of dhyana-factors of the 1st dhyana. With its disappearance, the 2nd dhyana arises. See SD 33.4.

³⁷ On this point, see **The Buddha discovers dhyana** @ SD 33.1b (6.4.1): On coming out of dhyana.

³⁸ This sentence is the 3rd-dhyana pericope, see **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,81), SD 8.10.

6.3 *Just as pain were to arise to one feeling pleasure only to afflict him, even so, when that attention and perception associated with zest occurs in him, it is an affliction to him.*

6.4 *Indeed, avuso, this affliction is called suffering by the Blessed One.*

6.5 *In this way, avuso, it can be indirectly understood how nirvana is happiness.*

(4) The 4th dhyana

7 Furthermore, avuso, a monk, with the abandoning of joy and abandoning of pain,³⁹ and with the earlier disappearance of pleasure and displeasure, attains and dwells in **the 4th dhyana**⁴⁰

that is neither painful nor pleasant, and with mindfulness fully purified by equanimity.⁴¹

7.2 *If, avuso, while that monk is dwelling in this way, **attention and perception to joy connected with equanimity** (*upekkhā*)⁴² were to occur in him, he feels it as an affliction.*

7.3 *Just as pain were to arise to one feeling pleasure only to afflict him, even so, when that attention and perception associated with [the joy that is] **equanimity** occurs in him, it is an affliction to him.*

7.4 *Indeed, avuso, this affliction is called suffering by the Blessed One.*

7.5 *In this way, avuso, it can be indirectly understood how nirvana is happiness.*

THE 4 FORMLESS ATTAINMENTS

(5) The attainment of the base of infinite space

8 Furthermore, avuso, a monk, by completely transcending *the perceptions of form*, with the disappearance of the perceptions of sense-reaction,⁴³ with non-attention to perceptions of diversity,

aware that ‘Space is infinite,’ attains and dwells in **the base of infinite space**.

8.2 *If, avuso, while that monk is dwelling in this way, **attention and perception associated with form** (*rūpa*) were to occur in him, he feels it as an affliction.*

³⁹ “Joy and ... pain,” *sukha ... dukkha*: this refers to bodily feelings. The next phrase—“pleasure and displeasure,” *domanassa-somanassa*—refers to mental feelings, which have been transcended earlier. Mental feelings need to be overcome first so that the mind is not distracted by itself, as it were. Then, all the other feelings (arising from the physical sense-contacts) are transcended: on its significance, see **Sall’atthena S** (S 36.6/4:207-210), SD 5.5.

⁴⁰ This sentence is the 4th-dhyana pericope, see **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,83), SD 8.10.

⁴¹ Here, **Vibhaṅga** gives 3 factors of the 4th dhyana—equanimity (*upekkhā*), mindfulness (*satī*) and one-pointedness of mind (*cittassa ek’aggatā*)—according to the Sutta analysis (Vbh 261), and 2 factors—equanimity and one-pointedness of the mind—according to the Abhidhamma analysis (Vbh 164; Vism 4.183/165). See **Dhyana @** SD 8.4 (5.4).

⁴² All the main editions (Be Ce Ee Se) read *upe(k)khā,sahagatā saññā,manasikārā*. A:Ee 1899:416 nn6+7, however, Be + Ce list the vl *upekkhā,sukha,sahagatā saññā,manasikārā*, “attention and perception to joy connected equanimity.” This reading is found in the descriptions of the 4th dhyana in **(Navaka) Vihāra S 2** (A 9.33/4:412,5+8), SD 95.2, + **Tapussa S** (A 9.41/4:442,27+32 + 443,5), SD 62.16. It’s possible that this was the original textual reading. See (3.2.4).

⁴³ “Perceptions of sense-reaction,” *pañigha,saññā*, also “sensory impact” (M:ÑB 267), “resistance-perception, reflex-perception” (BDict), said to be absent in the formless dhyanas. This is one of those terms that are only used contextually. See Vbh 245, §262; Vism 10.12-16.

8.3 *Just as pain were to arise to one feeling pleasure only to afflict him, even so, when that attention and perception associated with **form** occurs in him, it is an affliction to him.*

8.4 *Indeed, avuso, this affliction is called suffering by the Blessed One.*

8.5 *In this way, avuso, it can be indirectly understood how nirvana is happiness.*

(6) The attainment of the base of infinite consciousness

9 Furthermore, avuso, a monk, by completely transcending *the base of infinite space*, aware that ‘Consciousness is infinite,’

attains and dwells in **the base of infinite consciousness**.

9.2 *If, avuso, while that monk is dwelling in this way, attention and perception associated with the base of infinite space (*ākāsānañc’āyatana*) were to occur in him, he feels it as an affliction.*

9.3 *Just as pain were to arise to one feeling pleasure only to afflict him, even so, when that **attention and perception associated with the base of infinite space** occurs in him, it is an affliction to him.*

9.4 *Indeed, avuso, this affliction is called suffering by the Blessed One.*

9.5 *In this way, avuso, it can be indirectly understood how nirvana is happiness.*

(7) The attainment of the base of nothingness

10 Furthermore, avuso, a monk, by completely transcending *the base of infinite consciousness*, aware that ‘There is nothing,’

attains and dwells in **the base of nothingness**.

10.2 *If, avuso, while that monk is dwelling in this way, attention and perception associated with the base of infinite consciousness (*viññāṇañc’āyatana*) were to occur in him, he feels it as an affliction.*

10.3 *Just as pain were to arise to one feeling pleasure only to afflict him, even so, when that **attention and perception associated with the base of infinite consciousness** occurs in him, it is an affliction to him.*

10.4 *Indeed, avuso, this affliction is called suffering by the Blessed One.*

10.5 *In this way, avuso, it can be indirectly understood how nirvana is happiness.*

(8) The attainment of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception

11 Furthermore, avuso, a monk, by completely transcending *the base of nothingness*, attains and dwells in **the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception**.

11.2 *If, avuso, while that monk is dwelling in this way, attention and perception associated with the base of nothingness (*ākīñcaññāyatana*) were to occur in him, he feels it as an affliction.*

11.3 *Just as pain were to arise to one feeling pleasure only to afflict him, even so, when that **attention and perception associated with the base of nothingness** occurs in him, it is an affliction to him.*

11.4 *Indeed, avuso, this affliction is called suffering by the Blessed One.*

11.5 *In this way, avuso, it can be indirectly understood how nirvana is happiness. [418]*

(9) The cessation of perception and feeling

12 Furthermore, avuso, a monk, by completely transcending *the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception*,

attains and dwells in **the cessation of perception and feeling**.⁴⁴

12.2 And, having seen with understanding, his influxes are utterly destroyed.⁴⁵

12.3 *In this way, avuso, it can be indirectly understood how nirvana is happiness.*

— evaṃ —

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⁴⁴ “The cessation of perception and feeling,” *saññā,vedayita nirodha*: see (3.4). More briefly, it is “the attainment of cessation” (*nirodha,samāpatti*, S 14.11/2:151) or simply, “cessation” (*nirodha*): see SD 48.7 (3.2); SD 50.7 (1.2).

⁴⁵ *Paññāya c’assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti.*