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Nav'aṅg'uposatha Sutta

The Discourse on the 9-limbed Observance | A 9.18

Theme: Lovingkindness empowers moral virtue

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2016, 2021

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 The Nav'aṅg'uposatha Sutta (A 9.18), as the name suggests, is about the 9-limb observance on the full-moon and new-moon days of the lunar months, and, often enough, during the 8th days in between these days. The “observance” here refers to the keeping of the 8 precepts (*aṭṭha sīla*) [2.1.1], which are kept by preceptees on that day (that is until the following dawn).¹

1.2 The special feature of the Sutta is its “**9 limbs**” (*nav'aṅga*), which refers to the 8 precepts [§§2-9] and the cultivation of lovingkindness (*mettā bhāvanā*) [§10]. The idea here is that the cultivation of moral virtue is enhanced by the wholesome emotion of lovingkindness. Lovingkindness helps us to better keep the precepts, and in turn strengthens our heart of lovingkindness.

1.3 Both these practices are the bases or support for our mental cultivation of mindfulness (*sati*) or concentration (*samādhi*). **Mindfulness**, in practical terms here refers to the perception of impermanence (*anicca, saññā*) and possibly some level of deeper concentration, giving deeper calm and clarity of mind, which is then directed to the same practice (the perception of impermanence) leading to the rise of deep insight.

Concentration (*samadhi*) is the development of our meditation focus to a deeper level called dhyāna, that is, when the mind is fully free from the body (the 5 physical senses) and from thoughts, so that the mind is able to be at least temporarily free from distractions. On emerging from dhyana, we then direct the calm and clear mind to cultivating **insight** (*paññā* or *vipassanā*), such as by way of the perception of impermanence. This practice, according to **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), leads to the attaining of streamwinning in this life itself.²

2 Significance of the uposatha

2.1 THE UPOSATHA FOR MONASTICS

2.1.1 Pātimokkha recital

For both monastics and the laity, the observance (*uposatha*) days are the 8th and the 14th or 15th days of the lunar fortnight. On such a day, the sangha gathers for the “act of observance” (*uposatha, -kamma*) or sangha observance (*saṅgh'uposatha*). The day of observance itself is called **tad-ah'uposatha** (“this day of observance”).³

This is a gathering of the monastics of the same monastery or those living within the same “boundary” (*sīmā*) or “parish.” During this gathering, the first thing to do is to confess their offences (*āpatti*) (those that entail confession) to one another. Having assembled, at the appointed time, in the convoca-

¹ However, traditionally, in ancient India, the duration is from sunset of the previous day to sunset of the precept day itself. See SD 4.18 (2.2.2).

² S 25.1 (SD 16.7).

³ See eg **(Tad-ah') Uposatha S** (A 3.70), SD 4.18.

tion-hall (*uposatha,ghāra*), they listen to the Pātimokkha (code of monastic rules) recited by a competent reciter.⁴

2.1.2 Reckoning of days

The days are not reckoned by the month (as we do today) but by the fortnight (*pakkha*), that is, by the waxing phase (the bright fortnight, *juṅhā,pakkha*) and the waning fortnight (*kāla,pakkha*).⁵ Hence, the 3 seasons of northern India—the cold (*hem'anta*), the warm (*gimhāna*) and the rainy (*vassāna*)—each has a total of 8 fortnights (4 lunar months), that is, 8 occasions for the observance.

The observance days of the 3rd and 7th fortnights have the 14th day observance (*cātu-d,dasī uposatha*), while the others—the 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, 6th and 8th—fortnights have the 15th day observance (*paññarasī uposatha*). This is following the traditional calendars of the Theravāda communities of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The laity normally keeps the observance day in the local monastery, temple or centre, or observe the 8 precepts with meditation, sutta study or listening to Dharma instructions on the 1st, 8th, 15th and 23rd days of the lunar month.⁶

2.1.3 KINDS OF MONASTIC OBSERVANCES

2.1.3.1 A fully convened observance (*saṅgha uposatha*) must be attended by at least 4 or more fully ordained monastics. It is also called a “rule-reciting” observance (*sutt'uddesa uposatha*), since the monastic rules (a rule is called a *sutta*), that is, the Pātimokkha, is recited in the assembly.⁷

2.1.3.2 When only 2-3 monastics comprise the gathering, it is called a **group observance** (*gaṇa uposatha*). In this case, the monastics only proclaim their “entire purity” (*parisuddhi*) amongst themselves. Hence, it is also called a “purity” observance (*parisuddhi uposatha*).

2.1.3.3 When the observance is kept by only 1 monastic, it is called an **individual observance** (*puggala uposatha*). The individual monastic makes a resolve (*adhiṭṭhāna*) to keep the observance; hence, it is also called an “observance by resolve” (*adhiṭṭhāna uposatha*).

2.1.3.4 The harmony observance (*sāmaggī uposatha*) is an act of sangha fellowship, and can be held on any day other than the 14th or the 15th day of the fortnight. This is specially convened to confirm that a dispute has been settled. Hence, it is a “reconciliation observance.”

It is also called **sammagga uposatha,kamma**, “the formal act of observance of conciliation.”⁸ It is a plenary session, meaning that it is to be attended by all the monks of the same monastery (*ek'āvāsa*). Such a monastery is understood to have its own “convocation hall” (*uposatha,ghāra*) or uposatha-hall. Monks who reside in the vicinity without their own uposatha-halls should also join in such an assembly.

⁴ Further on the **uposatha** (*Skt upavasatha*), see **Tad-ah'uposatha S** (A 3.70), SD 4.18 (1+2); **Dhammika S** (A 4:-254 f = Sn 400 f), SD 27.3(2.1).

⁵ Mv 2.1.1-3 (V 1:101), Mv 2.3.3 (V 1:103), V 1:38, 176; J 1:165, 4:498.

⁶ On the lunar cycle, see SD 4.18 (If you are keen on observing the uposatha but do not know which are the days, a good start or interim method is to follow the Chinese lunar calendar, where the 1st day of the lunar month is the newmoon day, and the 15th day is the fullmoon day. Once we are able to know the early Buddhist calendar of uposatha from, say, a reputable forest monastery, we can then switch to those dates so that we are able to keep the observance with the Dharma community.

⁷ Mv 2.26.1-10 (V 1:124 f)

⁸ Mv 2.5.1 (V 1:105,2).

2.2 THE UPOSATHA FOR THE LAITY

2.2.1 The uposatha precepts

For the laity, these observance days are also colloquially called precept days, that is, when there will be those who observe the 8 precepts (*aṭṭha, sīla* or *uposatha, sīla*).⁹ The lay practitioner's keeping of the uposatha has been given in detail elsewhere.¹⁰ We will here reflect on the uposatha-keeping as a practice in **renunciation** (*nekkhamma*).

It is greatly beneficial to see the uposatha as an "opening" (*okāsa*) for cultivating the path, that is, the 3 trainings in moral virtue, mental concentration and wisdom. The 1st training is that in moral virtue (*sīla, sikkhā*). **Moral virtue as renunciation** means that we see keeping the precepts as renouncing, letting go, of all liking or disliking towards all beings. We accept them unconditionally, just as they are, to begin with: "May they all be well and happy!"

The **lovingkindness** in us makes it more urgent and easier for us:

- (1) not to kill, to respect life;
- (2) not to take the not-given, to practise charity to all;
- (3) not to indulge in lust and sex, to be contented with mental joy;
- (4) not to speak any falsehood or wrong speech, to speak only when wholesomely necessary;
- (5) not to take any kind of intoxicant or drug, to keep the mind calm and clear;
- (6) not to take food outside the allowable time, to be moderate in eating;
- (7) not to indulge in any entertainment or beautification, to restrain all my sense-doors;
- (8) not to use high and large beddings, to maintain watchfulness.

The purpose of these 8 precepts is to focus on my mind, cultivate it, directing it to insight wisdom, beginning with the perception of impermanence.

2.2.2 Practice of renunciation

2.2.2.1 When the body is well restrained with the renunciation of unwholesome bodily karma and verbal karma, we easily direct our efforts to cultivating mental concentration. We begin to notice our memories, the past, parading before us, some dancing, some limping, some skulking, on our mind's stage. We welcome them like characters in a play, the play of our life; we let them come, we let them play, we let them go. This is the renunciation of thoughts.

When the time is right, the stage lights suddenly turn on. A great vision floods before us; we are a bright part of it. It absorbs us completely in its fullness, like a flower in the cool morning dew, dripping from every petal. Every cell and tissue of our being tingle and sparkle in this overpowering silence from which all sounds and music arise: we can hear it all. In truly letting go, we are filled with the all of being and light. This is the full of **the heart of renunciation**.

2.2.2.2 Emerging from such a boundless stillness, it is as if we are born again, fully conscious, all our senses merged in a single mind that feels all, knows all. We have to leave this behind to be back to the here and now, where we started, as it were. The calm clarity of our vision is total: we feel how we can only speak of this fullness in the emptiness of words. By sound or sight, these words must move so that

⁹ **The 8 precepts** are the 5 precepts (*pañca, sīla*) [SD 59.5], with the 3rd precept "upgraded" to that of complete celibacy, ie, (1-5) abstaining from all forms of sex (*abrahma, cariyā*); (6) the precepts to abstain from food at the wrong times, (7) from entertainment and beautification, and (8) from using high and luxurious beds. See **(Tad-ah') Uposatha S** (A 3.70,9-16), SD 4.18.

¹⁰ The layman's keeping of the observance is fully explained in **(Tad-ah') Uposatha S** (A 3.70), SD 4.18.

we see this space between them, behind them, inside them, outside them. How else can we speak of change, impermanence.

Yet, we can only know all this like the very breath that now lights our life in the space of day and the dreams of night. We feel a sense of completeness in this flow of breath: what we take in, we must give back. That's life completing itself. We cannot hold a single breath and say, that's me. It comes, it's gone. We are not it, we are not that (*atam, mayatā*):¹¹ this is the heart of renunciation, the life of awakening. We must only rejoice in it.

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Nav'aṅ'uposatha Sutta

The Discourse on the 9-limbed Observance

A 9.18

1 “Bhikshus, when **the observance (uposatha) is kept, fulfilled in 9 limbs**, it is of great fruit, great benefit, great radiance, great pervasiveness.¹²

And how, bhikshus, is the observance kept, fulfilled in 9 limbs, so that *it is of great fruit, great benefit, great radiance, great pervasiveness*?

2 Here, bhikshus, a noble disciple reflects thus:¹³

(1) THE 1ST PRECEPT—AGAINST HARMING LIFE

‘As long as they live, the arhats dwell

having given up harming any living being, abstaining from harming any living being,
laying aside rod and sword, conscientious [knowing shame], showing kindness,
dwell compassionate towards all living beings.¹⁴

Today I, too, for this night and this day,

*having given up harming any living being, abstain from harming any living being,*¹⁵
laying aside rod and sword, conscientious, showing kindness,
dwell compassionate towards all living beings.

I will emulate the arhats in this manner and the observance will be kept by me.’

This is the 1st limb it has fulfilled.

(2) THE 2ND PRECEPT—AGAINST TAKING THE NOT-GIVEN

3 ‘As long as they live, the arhats dwell

having given up taking the not-given, abstaining from taking the not-given,
accepting only what is given, expecting only what is given,

¹¹ See *Atam, mayatā*, SD 19.13.

¹² This is an expanded version of **Saṅkhitta Uposatha S** (A 8.41/4:248-251 (SD 89.89.11a)), but here the 8 precepts are supported by lovingkindness.

¹³ This whole section on the 8 precepts [§§2-9], except for the final refrain line, recur at **(Tad-ah’) Uposatha S** (A 3.70,9-16), where it is called the noble observance (*ariy’uposatha*) SD 4.18.

¹⁴ *Yāva, jīvaṃ arahanto pāṇātipātāṃ pahāya pāṇātipātā paṭiviratā nihita, daṇḍā nihita, satthā lajjī dayāpannā sabba, pāṇa, bhūta, hitānukampī viharanti.*

¹⁵ The basic formula for **the 1st** of the 8 precepts is: *Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhā, padarṇ samādiyāmi.*

dwell not by theft but with a mind of purity.¹⁶

Today I, too, for this night and this day,

*having given up taking the not-given, **abstain from taking the not-given**;*¹⁷

accepting only what is given, expecting only what is given,

dwell not by theft but with a mind of purity.

I will emulate the arhats in this manner and the observance will be kept by me.' [389]

This is the 2nd limb it has fulfilled.

(3) THE 3RD PRECEPT—AGAINST ANY SEXUAL ACT

4 'As long as they live, the arhats dwell

having given up incestibacy, **living a celibate life,**

dwelling alone,¹⁸ abstain from coupling, the way of the world.¹⁹

Today I, too, for this night and this day,

*having given up incestibacy, **live a celibate life**,*²⁰

dwell alone, abstain from coupling, the way of the world.

I will emulate the arhats in this manner and the observance will be kept by me.'

This is the 3rd limb it has fulfilled.

(4) THE 4TH PRECEPT—AGAINST FALSE SPEECH

5 'As long as they live, the arhats dwell

having given up false speech, **abstaining from false speech;**

speaking the truth, the truth is their bond,²¹ trustworthy, reliable, no deceiver of the world.²²

Today I, too, for this night and this day,

*having given up false speech, **abstain from false speech**,*²³

speaking the truth, the truth is my bond, trustworthy, reliable, no deceiver of the world.

I will emulate the arhats in this manner and the observance will be kept by me.'

This is the 4th limb it has fulfilled.

(5) THE 5TH PRECEPT—AGAINST HEEDLESSNESS

6 'As long as they live, the arhats dwell

having given up strong drinks, distilled drinks, fermented drinks, the basis for heedlessness,

abstaining from strong drinks, distilled drinks, fermented drinks, the basis for heedlessness.

Today I, too, for this night and this day,

having given up strong drinks, distilled drinks, fermented drinks, the basis for heedlessness,

abstain from strong drinks, distilled drinks, fermented drinks, the basis for heedlessness.²⁴

I will emulate the arhats in this manner and the observance will be kept by me.'

¹⁶ "A mind of purity," *sūci, bhūtena attanā*. Here *attanā* refers to "mind."

¹⁷ The basic formula for **the 2nd** of **the 8 precepts** is: *Adinn'ādānā veramaṇī sikkhā, padam samādiyāmi*.

¹⁸ "Dwelling alone," *anācarī, vll ārā, cārī, anācārī*.

¹⁹ "The way of the world," *gāma, dhamma*, lit "the way of village."

²⁰ The basic formula for **the 3rd** of **the 8 precepts** is: *Abrahma.cariyā veramaṇī sikkhā, padam samādiyāmi*.

²¹ "The truth is his bond," *sacca, sandha*. Comy glosses as *saccena saccam sandahati*, "he joins truth with truth" (MA 1:206 = DA 1:73).

²² *Sacca, vādī sacca, sandho theto paccayiko avisaṃvādako lokassa*. This line as in **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30,2.16/3:170) @ SD 36.9.

²³ The basic formula for **the 4th** of **the 8 precepts** is: *Musā, vādā veramaṇī sikkhā, padam samādiyāmi*.

²⁴ The basic formula for **the 5th** of **the 8 precepts** is: *Surā, meraya, majja, pamāda-ṭ, ṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhā, padam samādiyāmi*.

This is the 5th limb it has fulfilled.

(6) THE 6TH PRECEPT—AGAINST MEALS AT THE WRONG TIMES

7 ‘As long as they live, the arhats dwell
eating only one meal a day, **abstaining from eating at night and from untimely meals.**

Today I, too, for this night and this day,
eating only one meal a day,

abstain from eating at night and from untimely meals.²⁵

I will emulate the arhats in this manner and the observance will be kept by me.’

This is the 6th limb it has fulfilled.

(7) THE 7TH PRECEPT—AGAINST ENTERTAINMENT AND BEAUTIFICATION

8 ‘As long as they live, the arhats dwell
abstaining from dancing, singing, music,²⁶ **watching unseemly shows, and**
from wearing and adorning themselves with garlands, scents and cosmetics.²⁷

Today I, too, for this night and this day,

abstain from dancing, singing, music, watching unseemly shows, and

from wearing and adorning myself with garlands, scents and cosmetics.²⁸

I will emulate the arhats in this manner and the observance will be kept by me.’

This is the 7th limb it has fulfilled.

(8) THE 8TH PRECEPT—AGAINST HIGH AND LUXURIOUS BEDS

9 ‘As long as they live, the arhats dwell
having given up high and luxurious beds,
abstain from high and luxurious beds,
using a low bed, that is, a small bed or a straw mat.

Today I, too, for this night and this day,

having given up high and luxurious beds,

abstain from high and luxurious beds,²⁹

using a low bed, that is, a small bed or a straw mat.

I will emulate the arhats in this manner and the observance will be kept by me.’

This is the 8th limb it has fulfilled.

(9) CULTIVATION OF LOVINGKINDNESS

10 Here, a noble disciple dwells pervading
one quarter with a mind imbued with lovingkindness,
likewise the 2nd quarter, the 3rd quarter, and the 4th quarter.

Thus above, below, across, and everywhere, and to all as to himself,

he dwells pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with lovingkindness,

vast, exalted, measureless, without enmity, without ill will.’

This is the 9th limb it has fulfilled.

²⁵ The basic formula for **the 6th** of **the 8 precepts** is: *Vikāla, bhojanā veramaṇī sikkhā, padaṃ samādiyāmi.*

²⁶ “Music,” *vādita.*

²⁷ The basic formula for **the 7th** of **the 8 precepts** is: *Nacca, gīta, vādita, visūka, dassana, mālā, gandha, vilepana, dhāraṇa, maṇḍana, vibhūsaṇa-ṭ, ṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhā, padaṃ samādiyāmi.*

²⁸ “Cosmetics,” *vilepana.*

²⁹ The basic formula for **the 8th** of **the 8 precepts** is: *Uccā, sayana, mahā, sayanā veramaṇī sikkhā, padaṃ samādiyāmi.*

11 It is in this way, bhikshus, that the observance is kept, fulfilled in 9 limbs, so that it is of great fruit, great benefit, great radiance, great pervasiveness.”

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