

(Khandha) Āditta Sutta**The Discourse on the (Aggregates as) Burning**

[The aggregates burn with pain]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.61/3:71)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2005

Fire simile

The fire simile used in this sutta is a very common one. In other suttas, it is variously used in the positive as well as in the negative senses. In **the Āditta,pariyāya Sutta** (S 35.28), fire is used to represent the three unwholesome roots (greed, hate, delusion).¹ These same three fires are listed in **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33)² and are the subject of a poem in **the Aggi Sutta** (It 3.5.4).³ In **the (Uggata,sarīra) Aggi Sutta** (A 4.44),⁴ reminiscent of **the Kūṭadanta Sutta** (D 5), the Buddha reinterprets the three fires to be tended (*aggi pāricariyā*)⁵ for the benefit of the brahmin Uggata,sarīra. These three fires are also listed in the Saṅgīti Sutta.⁶

The Sigāl'ovāda Sutta (D 31) expands these three fires to be tended into the six directions of social relationships and reciprocal responsibilities.⁷ In the (Khandha) Āditta Sutta, which appears to be an abridged version of the Āditta,pariyāya Sutta, the aggregates are said to be on fire. Bhikkhu Bodhi thinks,

Perhaps the present [(Khandha) Āditta Sutta] was composed by simply replacing the sense bases with the aggregates, and was then compressed so that it would not “steal the show” from the more famous sutta, popularly known as the Fire Sermon, regarded by the Pāli tradition as the third formal discourse of the Buddha’s ministry. (S:B 1067 n94)

Discourses on fire

The (Khandha) Āditta Sutta is a very short sutta that compares the experiences of the unawakened being as that of “burning” or “blazing” (*āditta*), so that one should immediately let go of them. The word *khandha* (Skt *skandha*) has at least two common meanings.⁸

- (1) literally, “mass,” as in *aggi-k,khandha*, “a huge blaze” (M 2:34, 41) or “bulk,” as in *hatthi-k,khandha*, “an elephant’s back” (J 1:235); *sañjata,khandha*, “grown in bulk (of the back)” (Sn 53);
- (2) a tree, especially the trunk, as in *nigrodhassa khandhaja*, “born of a banyan trunk” (S 1:207 = Sn 272).

This has lead scholars like Richard Gombrich to take *khandha* as referring to bulky wood or timber, especially used as “a bundle of fuel.”⁹ Referring to **the Bhāra Sutta** (S 22.22),¹⁰ Gombrich goes on to say:

I wonder whether this was not the original form of the metaphor “being on fire”: the experience of the unenlightened are like five bundles of firewood which are on fire. That would make them

¹ S 35.28/S 4:19 f = SD 1.3.

² D 33.1.10(32)/3:217.

³ It 3.5.4/92.

⁴ A 4.44/4:41-46.

⁵ A 4.44.12-13.

⁶ D 33.1.10 (33)/3:217.

⁷ D 31.27/3:189 f. For further discussion, see **(Uggata,sarīra) Aggi S** (A 4.44) = SD 3.16 Introd.

⁸ On the 5 aggregates, see **(Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa S** (S 22.56/3:58-61) = SD 3.7, esp Introd (4) on the metaphor of fuel and fire.

⁹ Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began*, 1996:67.

¹⁰ S 22.22/3:25 = SD 17.4.

very uncomfortable to carry! Indeed, I wonder whether these two short texts [the Bhāra Sutta, S 3:25 f, and the Āditta Sutta, S 3:71] were not originally together. (1996:68)

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The Discourse On the (Aggregates as) Burning (S 22.61/3:71)

1 At Sāvattihī.

2 There (the Blessed One) said:

3 “Monks,¹¹

form	is burning,
feeling	is burning,
perception	is burning,
formations	are burning,
consciousness	is burning.

4 Seeing thus, monks, the learned noble disciple¹² is revulsed [disillusioned] with form, with feeling, with perception, with formations, with consciousness.

Through revulsion, he becomes dispassionate.

Through dispassion, his mind is freed.

When it is freed, there arises the knowledge: ‘Freed am I!’

5 He understands: ‘Destroyed is birth. The holy life has been lived. What needs to be done has been done. There is no more of this state of being.’”

— evaṃ —

051216; 060927; 070513a; 090804a

¹¹ On the 5 aggregates, see **(Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa S** (S 22.56/3:58-61) = SD 3.7, esp Introd (4) on the metaphor of fuel and fire.

¹² *ariya, sāvaka*, ie one of the eight kinds of Saints: the stream-winner, the once-returner, the non-returner and the arhat (both “-to-be” and “-become”).