

Nāvā Sutta

The Discourse on the Ship

[The noble eightfold path leads to awakening]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 51.158/5:51)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2006

Introduction

The short Nāvā Sutta is actually one of numerous parables (totaling some 32) in **the Magga Saṃyutta**, all of which deal with the noble eightfold path. This *saṃyutta* is part of the Mahā Vagga (of the Saṃyutta Nikāya), where the *viveka, nissita* (“dependent on solitude”) formula is systematically applied to the factors of the noble eightfold path, the awakening factors, the spiritual faculties and the spiritual powers.¹ The *viveka, nissita* formula runs thus:²

dependent on solitude,³ dependent on fading away (of lust) [dispassion],⁴ dependent on cessation (of suffering),⁵ ripening in letting go (of defilements).⁶

viveka, nissitaṃ virāga, nissitaṃ nirodha, nissitaṃ vossagga, pariṇāmiṃ

This well known formula states the clear purpose of the religious life—that of spiritual liberation. As such, the formula is applied to the awakening factors (*bojjhaṅga*), as in **the Ānāpāna, sati Sutta** (M 118).⁷ Here, in the Nāvā Sutta, the *viveka, nissita* formula qualifies the noble eightfold path [§3].

As the Sutta title suggests, it contains the well known parable of the ocean-going ship (*nāvā*). The same parable is found in **the Vāsijaṭṭa Sutta** (S 22.101)⁸ and **the Bhāvanā Sutta** (A 7.67), and explained in detailed in the Saṃyutta Commentary.⁹

¹ As noted by Gethin (2001:163 n87), here the sections referred to are common to all the seven sets (see **Bodhi, pakkhiyā Dhammā** = SD 10.1(1)) and the dhyanas (cf Gethin 2001 ch 7.5). The *viveka, nissita* formula, however, is applied in these only to the items named; see S 5:29-31, 32-34, 35 f, 38-42, 45-62, 134-140, 239-243, 249-253.

² For the *viveka, nissita* formula, see SD 20.4.

³ Here “solitude” (*viveka*), or seclusion, has a special reference to the overcoming of the 5 mental hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇā*). This whole phrase, beginning with “dependent on solitude is called **the viveka, nissita formula**.” See Gethin 2001:162-168. According to **Paṭisambhidā, magga**, there are 5 kinds of “solitude” (*viveka*), ie overcoming of the hindrances: (1) solitude through suppression (*vikkhambhana viveka*); (2) solitude through the substitution of opposite or displacement by opposites (*tad-aṅga viveka*); (3) solitude through cutting off (*samuccheda viveka*); (4) solitude through tranquillization (*paṭipassaddhi viveka*); and (5) solitude through escape (*nissaraṇa viveka*) (Pm 1:27, 2:219-224; Vism 13.12/410, 22.110/693). See also “Introduction to the Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas” = SD 13.1 §4.2c.

⁴ *Virāga*, also tr as “dispassion.”

⁵ *Nirodha*, ie, “cessation of suffering.”

⁶ MA says that there are 2 kinds of letting go or relinquishment (of suffering) (*vossagga*): “giving up” (*pariccāga*), ie the abandonment of defilements, and “entering into” (*pakkhandana*), ie culminating in nirvana. **Gethin** notes that this phrase is not unique to the 7 *bojjhaṅgā*, but is also found in connection with the factors of the noble eightfold path, the *indriyā* and *balā* (2001:162 f). This formula shows that that each *bojjhaṅga* is to be developed successively “as dependent on solitude, dispassion [fading away] and cessation” (Gethin 2001:166).

⁷ M 118.42/3:88 = SD 7.13.

⁸ The parable occurs in **Vasi, jaṭṭa S** (S 22.101/3:155) = **Bhāvanā S** (A 7.67.3/4:127). See Vāsijaṭṭa S Intro (2.3) = SD 15.2a Introd (2.3).

⁹ SA 2:330 f: see SD 15.2a Intro (2.3).

The Discourse on the Ship

(S 51.158/5:51)

Parable of the ship

2a Suppose, bhikshus, an ocean-going ship, rigged with masts and stays,¹⁰ having been worn out by the water for six months, were to be hauled up onto dry land for the cold season.¹¹ The ropes that have been worn out by the wind and sun, thoroughly soaked by the rains, would easily weaken and waste [rot] away.¹²

Cultivation of the noble eightfold path

2b Even so, bhikshus, it is with the monk who cultivates, continuously develops the noble eightfold path, his fetters would easily weaken and waste [rot] away.

2c And how, bhikshus, does the monk cultivate, continuously develop the noble eightfold path¹³ so that his fetters would easily weaken and waste [rot] away?

3 Here, bhikshus, he cultivates

- (1) right view,
- (2) right thought,
- (3) right speech,
- (4) right action,
- (5) right livelihood,
- (6) right effort,
- (7) right mindfulness,
- (8) right samadhi,

that is dependent on solitude, on letting go (of craving) [dispassion], on ending (of suffering), ripening in release.

In this way, bhikshus, the monk cultivates, continuously develops the noble eightfold path so that his fetters would easily weaken and waste [rot] away.

— evaṃ —

051026; 060208; 090111

¹⁰ “Rigged with masts and stays,” *vetta, bandhana, bandhanāya*. Here I follow S:W 5:40.

¹¹ “The cold season,” *hemantikena*. See Intro (2.3) above.

¹² The parable occurs in **Vāsi, jaṭa S** (S 22.101/3:155) = **Bhāvanā S** (A 7.67.3/4:127). See Intro.

¹³ For an insightful study of the eightfold path, see Gethin 2001:190-226 (ch 6).