

Āsīvisôpama Sutta

The Discourse on the Serpent Similes

[The four elements, the aggregates and liberation]

(Sāmyutta Nikāya 35.238/4:172-175)

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Introduction

1 The Commentary to the Āsīvisôpama Sutta says that the discourse is addressed to monks who were practising meditation using the characteristic of suffering (*dukkha, lakkhaṇa*) as their meditation subject. **The Āsīvisôpama Sutta** (S 35.238) presents a set of similes beginning with the parable of the four serpents. The similes can be summarized as follows:

A man is warned of *four serpents of fierce heat and deadly venom* [§3], and so he flees from them. Then he is warned of *five murderous enemies* [§4b] pursuing him, and again flees. He is now warned about *a sixth murderer* [§5b], an intimate friend in disguise, seeking to kill him. He flees again and comes to *an empty village* [§6b], where he is warned that *bandits* will be attacking at that very moment. Fleeing, he comes to *a great stretch of water* [§7b] with no means of crossing over. While on *the near shore*, fraught with dangers, he fashions *a makeshift raft* [§8], and *paddling with all four limbs* [§9], he crosses over the waters to the safety of *the far shore* [§9].

2 The four types of serpents are listed in **the Āsīvisa Sutta** (A 4.110; Pug 4.14).¹ The Commentary says that these serpents were raised by kings to ward off robbers, and explains how each serpent's venom destroys its victim (SA 3:6-8). The first, the wooden-mouth serpent (*kaṭṭha, mukha*), further comprises of four kinds in terms of how their venom works (quoting **the Puggala Paññatti**):

- (1) one whose venom is fast-acting but not strong,
- (2) one whose venom is strong but not fast-acting,
- (3) one whose venom is fast-acting and strong, and
- (4) one whose venom is neither fast-acting nor strong.

These four respectively illustrates four kinds of persons, that is,

- (1) one who is easily angered but his anger abates quickly,
- (2) one who does not anger easily but whose anger lasts long,
- (3) one easily angered and whose anger lasts long, and
- (4) one who neither angers easily nor does his anger last long (Pug 4.14/48).

3 **Buddhaghosa** quotes verses by the Commentators (*aṭṭhakathâcariya*), where it is said that

- the wooden-mouthed serpent (*kaṭṭha, mukha*) rouses its *earth element* so that its sting would stiffen the victim's body to be like dry wood;
- the putrid-mouthed (*pūti, mukha*) serpent rouses its *water element* so that the victim's body rots, decaying and oozing like rotting fruit;
- the fiery-mouthed serpent (*aggi, mukha*) burns the victim's body so that it disintegrates like ashes or chaff,² and
- the dagger-mouthed serpent (*sattha, mukha*) breaks up the victim's body like a pole struck by lightning. (Vism 11.102/367*f = SA 3:13* qu at DhsA 300*. See also SA 3:12; SnA 458)

4 The etymology of *āsīvisa* is uncertain. The Commentary gives three alternative folk etymologies:

- (1) "besprinkled with venom" (*āsitta, visā*), because its venom is stored as if it were sprinkled (*āsīñcivā viya*) on its whole body;
- (2) "with eaten venom" (*asita, visa*), because whatever it eats becomes venomous; and
- (3) "with sword-like venom" (*asi, sadisa, visa*), because the venom is sharp like a sword. (SA 3:8)

¹ A 4.110/2:110 f; also at Pug 4.14/48.

² The chaff simile as at **Upasena S** (S 35.69/4:40).

The Vinaya Commentary offers this gloss: “It is a serpent because its venom acts quick and fast” (*āsu sīgham etassa visam āgacchati ti āsiviso*, VA 1:220,13).

5 The Buddha goes on to clarify what the meaning of the similes [§§10-21], thus:

The four serpents of fierce and deadly venom	the 4 primary elements (<i>mahā, bhūta</i>). ³
	the wooden-mouthed serpent = the earth element;
	the putrid-mouthed serpent = the water element;
	the fiery-mouthed serpent = the fire element;
	the dagger-mouthed serpent = the wind element.
The five murderers	the 5 aggregates of clinging (<i>pañc’upādāna-k, khandha</i>).
The sixth murderer	delight-and-lust (<i>nandī, rāga</i>).
The empty village	the 6 internal sense-bases (<i>ajjhata āyatana</i>).
The village-attacking dacoits	the 6 external sense-bases (<i>bahiddha āyatana</i>).
A great stretch of water	the 4 floods (<i>ogha</i>): sense-desire, existence, views, ignorance.
The near shore	self-identity (<i>sakkāya</i> , taking the aggregates to be self).
A makeshift raft	the noble eightfold path (<i>ariy’atth’āṅgika magga</i>).
Paddling with all four limbs	the exertion of effort (<i>viriy’āmbha</i>).
Crosses over to the far shore	the arhat (<i>arahata</i>).

6 In this parable, *the first five murderers refer to the five aggregates* [§12]. They are like murderers because they are impermanent, suffering and not self,⁴ and they bind us to samsara, wherein we are repeatedly reborn and re-die.

7 The parable of the sixth murderer, “an intimate with a drawn sword”⁵ [§13], has an interesting parallel in **the Yamaka Sutta** (S 22.85), where an assassin first befriends his intended victim, winning his confidence so that he becomes a trusted servant, and at the right time kills the unwary victim.⁶

The Commentary explains that delight-and-lust (*nandī, rāga*) is like a murderer with a drawn sword in two ways:

- (1) because when greed arises for a specific object, it fells one’s head, that is, the head of wisdom;
- (2) because it sends one off to rebirth in the womb, and all fears and punishments are rooted in rebirth. (SA 3:16)

8 ‘A great stretch of water’ refers to the four **mental influxes** (*āsava*). The term *āsava* (lit “in-and-out-flow”) comes from *ā-savati* “flows towards or inwards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as taints (“deadly taints,” TW Rhys Davids), corruptions, cankers, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma, as here, lists four mental influxes: (1) of sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) of (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) of views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), (4) of ignorance (*avijjāsava*).⁷ These four are also known as “floods” (*ogha*) and “yokes” (*yoga*).

The influx of existence is the attachment and desire for the realm of form and of formlessness, and as such, is the craving for the dhyanas, on account of *the false views* of eternalism and annihilationism. As such, *the influx of view* is subsumed under the influx of existence (MA 1:67). The list of three influxes (omitting that of views) is probably older and is found more frequently in the Suttas.⁸ The destruction of these *āsavas* is equivalent to arhathood.⁹

³ See *Rūpa* = SD 17.2a (2). Cf DhsA 2:300*; SnA 458.

⁴ See **Yamaka S** (S 22.85/3:114 f) = SD 21.12: see below.

⁵ An erstwhile intimate companion or spy (*antara, cara*), closely pursuing with a drawn sword.

⁶ S 22.85/3:114 f = SD 21.12.

⁷ D 16.1.12/2:82, 16.2.4/2:91, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937.

⁸ D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63.

⁹ See BDict: āsava.

9 The Commentary says that self-identity (*sakkāya*) refers to *the five aggregates* pertaining to the three planes.¹⁰ Like the near shore [§17] with its serpents, etc, self-identity is dangerous and fearful because of the four great elements and so forth. (SA 3:20)

10 “**Paddling with all four limbs**” refers to the exertion of effort (*viriy’āmbha*), that is, the four right efforts. A common definition of the four right efforts, found in all the four Nikāyas and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, goes thus:

Bhikshus, there are these four right exertions. What are the four?

(1) Here, bhikshus, a monk brings forth desire for the non-arising (*saṃvara*) of unarisen evil unwholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives.

(2) Here, bhikshus, a monk brings forth desire for the abandoning (*pahāna*) of arisen evil unwholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives.

(3) Here, bhikshus, a monk brings forth desire for the arising (*bhāvanā*) of unarisen wholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives.

(4) Here, bhikshus, a monk brings forth desire for the maintenance [guarding] (*anurakkhana*) of arisen wholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives.

These, bhikshus, are the four right exertions.

(D 3:221; M 2:11; S 5:244; A 4.13/2:15, 4.14/2:16 f, 4.69/2:74; Vbh 208; cf A 4.14/2:16 f)¹¹

11 According to **Mahāvamsa**, the Sinhalese legendary chronicle, the Āsīvisôpama Sutta was taught by the elder Majjhantika to the inhabitants of Kasmīra (Kashmir). (Mahv 12.26)

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¹⁰ The 3 worlds are the sense world (*kāma,loka*), the form world (*rūpa,loka*), and the formless world (*arūpa,loka*). See **The Body in Buddhism** = SD 29.6a (5.2) & **The Person in Buddhism** = SD 29.6b (7.2). For details, see *Vīññāna-tthitī* = SD 23.14.

¹¹ See (**Cattāro**) **Padhāna S** (D 33.1.11(10)/3:225 f = A 4.14/2:16 f) = SD 10.2. **The Āgama version** (preserved in Chinese tr)—at SĀ 647 = T2.182bc & SĀ 877-879 = T2.221ab—reverses the positions of the first two strivings.

The Discourse on the Serpent Similes

(S 35.238/4:172-175)

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time, the Blessed One was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika's park in Jeta's grove near Sāvathī.

2 Then the Blessed One said this to the monks,

The 4 serpents

3 "Bhikshus, suppose there were four serpents of great potency and fierce venom [very deadly and venomous].¹²

Then a person were to come along, that is, one desiring to live, not desiring to die, desiring happiness, averse to suffering.

And they would tell him thus,

'My good man, there are these four serpents of great potency and fierce venom. [173]

From time to time, they should be lifted up.

From time to time, they should be bathed.

From time to time, they should be fed,

From time to time, they should be laid down to rest.¹³

But, my good man, if one or other of these serpents of great potency and fierce venom were to become angry with you, then you, my good man, will meet with death or deadly pains. As such, my good man, do whatever needs to be done!'

4a Then, bhikshus, that person, fearing the four serpents of great potency and fierce venom, would flee in one direction or other.

The 5 murderous enemies

4b Then they would tell him thus,

'My good man, these five murderous enemies are pursuing very close behind you, thinking,

"When we see him, we will kill him right there!"

As such, my good man, do whatever needs to be done!'

5a Then, bhikshus, that person, fearing the four serpents of great potency and fierce venom, and of the five murderers, would flee in one direction or other.

The 6th murderer

5b Then they would tell him thus,

'My good man, a sixth murderer, an intimate companion with a drawn sword, is pursuing very close behind you, thinking,

"When I see him, I will kill him right there!"

As such, my good man, do whatever needs to be done!'

6a Then, bhikshus, that person, fearing the four serpents of great potency and fierce venom, and of the five murderous enemies, and of the sixth murderer, would flee in one direction or other.

The empty village

6b He would see an empty village. Whichever house he were to enter would be deserted, void, empty.

Then they would tell him,

¹² *Seyyathā'pi, bhikkhave, cattāro āsīvisā ugga, tejā ghora, visā.*

¹³ Be Ke Se *samvesetabbā*; Ee *pavesetabbā*. Comy glosses with *nipajjāpetabba*, "should be made to lie down" (SA 3:8), and gives an elaborate background story, making this a punishment imposed on the man by the king.

‘Now, my good man, village-raiding dacoits are entering [will pillage]¹⁴ this empty village! As such, my good man, do whatever needs to be done!’ [174]

7a Then, bhikshus, that person, fearing the four serpents of great potency and fierce venom, and of the five murderous enemies, and of the sixth murderer, an intimate companion with a drawn sword, and of the village-raiding bandits would flee in one direction or other.

The great waters and the raft

7b Then he would see a great stretch of water, whose near shore is unsafe and fraught with danger, and whose far shore is safe and free from danger. But there would be neither boat nor bridge over which he could go across to the far shore.

8 **CROSSED OVER.** Then, bhikshus, it would occur to him,

‘This great stretch of water, its near shore is unsafe and fraught with danger, while the far shore is safe and free from danger. But there is neither boat nor bridge over which I could go across to the far shore.

Suppose I collect grass, wood, branches and leaves, and bind them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and using my hands and feet, I go safely across to the far shore.’

9 And then the man collects grass, wood, branches and leaves, and binds them together into a raft, and supported by the raft, and exerting effort with his hands and feet, goes safely across to the far shore.¹⁵

Crossed over, gone beyond, the brahmin¹⁶ stands on dry land.¹⁷

Meaning of the parable

10 Bhikshus, I have made up this parable, to make a point, and the meaning here is this:

11 ‘**The four serpents of great potency and fierce venom**’: this is an expression for the four great elements—the earth element, the water element, the fire element, the wind element.¹⁸

12 ‘**The five murderous enemies**’: this is an expression for the five aggregates of clinging, namely,¹⁹

the aggregate of clinging that is	form,
the aggregate of clinging that is	feeling,
the aggregate of clinging that is	perception,
the aggregate of clinging that are	formations,
the aggregate of clinging that is	consciousness.

13 ‘**The sixth murderer**, an intimate companion with a drawn sword’: this is an expression for delight-and-lust.²⁰

14 ‘**The empty village**’: this is an expression for the six internal sense-bases.

If, bhikshus, one who is intelligent, competent, and wise, examines them with *the eye*, it would seem to be hollow, void, empty. [175]

If, bhikshus, one who is intelligent, competent, and wise, examines them with *the ear*, it would seem to be hollow, void, empty.

If, bhikshus, one who is intelligent, competent, and wise, examines them with *the nose*, it would seem to be hollow, void, empty.

If, bhikshus, one who is intelligent, competent, and wise, examines them with *the tongue*, it would seem to be hollow, void, empty.

¹⁴ Be Se *pavisanti*; Ce Ee *vadhissanti*.

¹⁵ Cf a similar parable at **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22.13/1:134 f) = SD 3.13.

¹⁶ “Brahmin,” on the Buddha’s adaptation of brahminical terms and buddhicizing them, see **Why the Buddha Hesitated** = SD 12.1 (6.2).

¹⁷ As in **Samudda S 1** (S 35.228/4:157); cf **Udakūpama S** (A 7.15.9/4:13) = SD 28.6.

¹⁸ See Intro 3+5.

¹⁹ See Intro 6.

²⁰ See Intro 7.

If, bhikshus, one who is intelligent, competent, and wise, examines them with *the body*, it would seem to be hollow, void, empty.

If, bhikshus, one who is intelligent, competent, and wise, examines them with *the mind*, it would seem to be hollow, void, empty.

15 ‘**The village-raiding bandits**’: this is an expression for the six external sense-bases.

The eye,	bhikshus, is assaulted by agreeable and disagreeable	forms.
The ear,	bhikshus, is assaulted by agreeable and disagreeable	sounds.
The nose,	bhikshus, is assaulted by agreeable and disagreeable	smells.
The tongue,	bhikshus, is assaulted by agreeable and disagreeable	tastes.
The body,	bhikshus, is assaulted by agreeable and disagreeable	touches.
The mind,	bhikshus, is assaulted by agreeable and disagreeable	mental states.

16 ‘**The great stretch of water**’: this is an expression for the four floods [currents], namely,²¹
the flood of sensuality,
the flood of existence,
the flood of views, and
the flood of ignorance.

17 ‘**The near shore, unsafe and fraught with danger**’: this is an expression for self-identity.²²

18 ‘**The far shore, safe and free from danger**’: this is an expression for nirvana.

19 ‘**The raft**’: this is an expression for the noble eightfold path, namely,

right view,
right thought,
right speech,
right action,
right livelihood,
right effort,
right mindfulness, and
right concentration.

20 ‘**Exerting effort with hands and feet**’: this is an expression for the exertion of effort.²³

21 ‘**Crossed over, gone beyond, the brahmin stands on dry land**’: this is an expression for an arhat.

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²¹ See Intro (8).

²² On self-identity (*sakkāya*), see Intro (8).

²³ See Intro (10).