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(Khandha) Āditta Sutta

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

Theme: The aggregates burn with pain

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2005

1 Fire parable

The fire parable used in this sutta is a very common one. In other suttas, it is 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 3 unwholesome roots (greed, hate, delusion).¹ These same 3 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 **Kūṭa,danta Sutta** (D 5), the Buddha reinterprets the 3 fires to be tended (*aggi pāri-cariyā*) for the benefit of the brahmin Uggata,sarīra.⁵ These 3 fires are also listed in the Saṅgīti Sutta.⁶

The **Sigāl'ovāda Sutta** (D 31) expands these 3 fires to be tended into the 6 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)

2 Discourses on fire

The (Khandha) Āditta Sutta is a very short text that compares the experiences of the unawakened being as that of “burning” or “blazing” (*āditta*), so that we should immediately let go of them. The word *khandha* (Skt *skandha*) has at least 2 common meanings:⁸

- (1) literally, “mass,” as in *aggi-k,khandha*, “a huge mass of 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 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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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.

The Discourse On the (Aggregates as) Burning

S 22.61/3:71

- 1 At Sāvattḥī.
- 2 There (the Blessed One) said:

The aggregates are burning

- 3 “Bhikshus,¹¹

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

Revulsion¹²

4 Seeing thus, bhikshus, the learned noble disciple¹³ is revulsed [disillusioned] with form, with feeling, with perception, with formations, with consciousness.

Liberation: The arhat’s review knowledge¹⁴

4.2 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; 101207; 130410; 130517r

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

¹² On revulsion, see *Nibbidā*, SD 20.1.

¹³ *ariya, sāvaka*, ie one of the 8 kinds of saints: the streamwinner, the once-returner, the non-returner and the arhat (both “-to-be” and “-become”).

¹⁴ As in **Anatta, lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59,23-24/3:68), SD 1.2.