

Vāsi,jaṭṭa Sutta (Nāvā Sutta)

The Discourse on the Adze's Handle (or the Ship)

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.101/3:152-155)

= **Bhāvanā Sutta** (Aṅguttara Nikāya 7.67/4:125-127)

[How to meditate]

Annotated translation by Piya Tan ©2006

Introduction

1 Connection with other Suttas

The opening section of the Vāsijaṭṭa Sutta [§§1-4] are also found in **the Upanisā Sutta** (S 12.23),¹ but with a different sequel. Section 4 of our Sutta is a stock meditation formula on the five aggregates, found in a number of other suttas² and in the two Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas.³ **The Bhāvanā Sutta** (A 7.67) is identical to the Vāsijaṭṭa Sutta without this opening section.⁴

The Sutta's sub-thesis is found in §1a, paraphrased as: "Spiritual liberation cannot be attained through wishing (or prayer)."⁵ The main thesis, found in §2a can be paraphrased thus: "Spiritual liberation can only be attained by a cultivated mind, even if one makes no wish of it." Bodhi notes here:

The theme of this sutta might be compared with [the **Bhūmija Sutta**, M 126], which deals with the question whether, in living the holy life, it is necessary to make a wish (*āsaṇ ce pi karitvā*) in order to achieve the fruit (*phalassa adhigamāya*). Here the word rendered "wish" is *icchā*.
(S:B 1089 n211)

The cultivated mind is said to have understood what constitutes the 37 "limbs of awakening" (*bodhi, pak-khiyā dhammā*) [§1b], that also serves as a summary of the Buddha's teaching.⁶

2 The Sutta parables

2.1 THE INCUBATION PARABLE. In referring to meditation, the Sutta first applies the well known parable of the hen's incubating her eggs. The wrong way of meditation is illustrated by the hen, not properly sitting on her eggs, merely wishes for them to hatch [§1cd]. The proper method of meditation is illustrated by the hen that single-mindedly sits on her eggs [§2bc]. The meaning of these paired parables is best understood by examining similar parables of egg-incubating hens found elsewhere in the Canon.

Both **the Ceto,khila Sutta** (M 16) and **the Sekha Sutta** (M 53) identically word the incubation parable in these words:

Suppose there were a hen with eight, ten or twelve eggs, which she has properly sat on, properly incubated, properly brooded.⁷ Even though she does not wish: "O, that my chicks might break the shell with their claw-tips or with their beaks,⁸ and hatch out safely!" Yet these chicks are still capable of breaking through their shells with their claw-tips or with their beaks, and hatch out safely.
(M 16.27/1:103 f = M 53.19-22/1:356-359)

¹ S 12.23/2:28.

² For example, **Upanisā S** (S 12.23.3/2:29), **Siha S** (S 22.78.7/3:85), **Khemaka S** (S 22.89.23/3:130 f), **Vāsi,jaṭṭa S** (S 22.101.4/3:152 f).

³ D 22.14/2:301,29-302,13; M 10.38/1:61,3-8 = SD 13.

⁴ A 7.67/4:125-127.

⁵ On the Buddha's admonition on prayer, see **Brahma,deva S** (S 6.3) = SD 12.4 Intro (2).

⁶ See SD 10.1.

⁷ "Properly sat on,...properly brooded," *sammā adhisāyitāni sammā pariseditāni sammā paribhāvitāni*.

⁸ "With the points...beaks," *pāda,nakha,sikhāya vā mukha,tuṇḍakena vā*.

The *Ceto, khila Sutta* speaks of fifteen factors that cause one to break out into awakening, that is to say, the abandoning of the five mental wildernesses (*ceto, khila*), the breaking of the five mental shackles (*cetaso vinibandhā*), and the five bases of spiritual power (*iddhi, pāda*). One who has these fifteen factors breaks out of the shell of ignorance, like a chick breaking out of its egg-shell.⁹

The *Sekha Sutta*, on the other hand, applies this parable to the disciple's breaking out into the three types of true knowledges (*te, vijjā*).¹⁰

The most elaborate application of the incubation parable, however, is found in a **Vinaya** passage in the *Pārājika Kaṇḍa*, where one's awakening is compared to the hen's incubating her eggs, thus:¹¹

the hen's preparatory work	=	like the meditator's devotion to cultivation;
the non-rotting of the eggs	=	his not falling away from insight knowledge;
the drying up of the moisture in the eggs	=	the drying up of attachment to the three worlds; ¹²
the thinning of the egg-shells	=	the lessening of ignorance;
the maturation of the chicks	=	the maturation of insight knowledge;
the chicks' cracking the shell and emerging	=	the meditator breaks the shell of ignorance and attains arhathood; and
the chicks go about adorning the village field	=	the arhat enters into fruition attainment taking nirvana as its object, and thus adorns the monastery (in the case of a monk).
(V 3:3-5 = Pārājika 1.1.4-8)		

The Vinaya incubation parable quoted here actually begins with a separate, but shorter, incubation parable, focussing on one specific aspect of spiritual cultivation, that is, of Buddhahood itself:

"Suppose, brahmin, there were a hen with eight, ten or twelve eggs, which she has properly sat on, properly incubated, properly brooded. Is that chick than has broken through the shell with its claw-tip or with its beak, and hatched out safely, to be called the eldest or the youngest?"

"He is to be called the eldest, venerable Gotama, for he is the eldest of them."

"Even so, brahmin, amongst beings full of ignorance, egg-born, enveloped (in ignorance), I, having broken through the shell of ignorance, am unique in the world, fully realized perfect awakening. I, brahmin, am the world's eldest and highest." (V 3:3 f = Pārājika 1.1.4)

2.2 THE PARABLE OF THE CARPENTER'S ADZE. The second parable of the *Vāsi, jaṭa Sutta* is that of the carpenter's adze handle (*vāsi, jaṭa*) [§18]. The PED defines *vāsi* as "a sharp knife, axe, hatchet, adze,"¹³ and the word is found only in post-canonical works. The word *vāsi, jaṭa*, "adze handle," however, is found in the Canon.¹⁴ The parable centres on how, by constantly and carefully noticing the wear-marks on the adze-handle, the user would be able to know to what extent the handle has worn away. Like the other two parables, this one, too, connotes persistent and focussed effort that brings its own result in good time.

2.3 THE SHIP PARABLE. The parable of the ship is the most complicated of the three parables of the *Sutta*:

Seyyathāpi bhikkhave samuddikāye nāvāya vetta, bandhana, bandhanāya cha, māsāni udake pariyaḍāya hemantike thalam ukkhittāya vāt'ātapa, paretāni bandhanāni tāni pāvussakena megheṇa abhippavaṭṭanāni appa, kasiren'eva paṭippassanbhanti pūtikāni bhavantī ti

⁹ M 16.27/1:103 f.

¹⁰ M 53.19-22/1:356-359.

¹¹ V 3:3-5 (Pārājika 1.1.4-8).

¹² Ie, the sense-worlds, the form worlds and the formless worlds.

¹³ J 1:32, 199, 2:274, 3:281, 4:344; DhA 1:178; KhA 49.

¹⁴ V 4:168; S 3:154; A 4:127.

20 Suppose, bhikkhus, an ocean-going ship rigged with masts and stays,¹⁵ having been worn out by the water for six months, would be hauled up onto dry land for the cold season.¹⁶ The ropes that have been worn out by the wind and sun, thoroughly soaked by the rains, would easily weaken and waste [rot] away. (S 22.101.20/3:155)

The Sāmyutta Commentary explains this parable in more elaborate (even prolix) details than the Vinaya incubation parable [2.1], thus:

the ocean	= the teaching or dispensation (<i>sāsana</i>);
the ship	= the meditator or “yogi” (<i>yogāvacara</i>); ¹⁷
the wearing out of the ship by the ocean	= the monk’s activities (<i>vicaraṇa</i>) of less than 5 rains ¹⁸ in the presence of his preceptor and teacher;
the wasting away and lessening of the ship’s rigging by the ocean waters	= the lessening of the renunciant’s mental fetters by his going forth, study and questioning;
the time the ship is hauled up onto dry land	= the time when the practitioner, having been discharged from (that is, completed) his tutelage, dwells in the forest for meditation;
the drying up of the rigging by wind and sun during the day	= the drying up of craving and lust by insight knowledge;
the wetting by snow at night	= the “wetting” (<i>temana</i>) (that is, extinguishing of craving) of the mind by zest and gladness arisen from meditation;
the weakening of the rigging being dried by the wind and sun during the day, and being wetted by wet snow in the night	= greatly weakening of the mental fetters through zest, gladness and insight knowledge gained through merely a day’s of good weather, etc;
the rain pouring down	= knowledge of the path of arhathood;
the rotting of the ship’s rigging by rain-water ¹⁹	= the attainment of the fruit of arhathood;

¹⁵ “Rigged with masts and stays,” *vetta, bandhana, bandhanāya*. Here I follow S:W 5:40.

¹⁶ “The cold season,” *hemantikena*. The cold season (*hem’anta*) is from Nov-Mar. The hot season (Apr-Oct) is usually marked by heavy rains over eastern India and the Gangetic plains, and SE Asia. South & SE Asian climate is characterized by the **monsoons** (Arabic *mausim*, “season”), strong winds that seasonally reverse direction, prevailing mainly over south and southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean. It blows from the northeast (the NE monsoon) as a steady strong wind sweeping down across the South China Sea, in Nov-Jan, transporting ships from China and east Asia into SE Asia, and from there to south Asia. Then it gradually weakens, with a transitional period in Apr-May, followed by the SW monsoon, Jun-Aug, with another transitional period in Oct-Nov. The whole cycle then repeats. See Ency Brit (15th ed) 12:389-394: Monsoons. For the Indian seasons, see SD 9.2(9d). For the Indian year, see **Ānāpāna, sati S** (M 118.3/3:79) n on Uposatha = SD 7.13.

¹⁷ This is a late and peculiarly Abhidhamma term for “meditator.”

¹⁸ “Less than five rains,” *ūna, pañca, vassa, kāle*. This statement is curious as the stipulated minimum period of dependence (*nissaya*), ie tutelage, for capable monk is 5 rains, but for one incapable it is for life (V 1:80 = Mv 1.53.4; cf V 1:92 = Mv 1.73).

¹⁹ This is an abridged tr. The full passage is *megh, vuṭṭhi, udakena nāvāya bandhe pūti, bhāvo viya āradḍha, vipassakassa rūpa, sattak’ādi, vasena vipassanariṇ vaḍḍhentassa okkhāyamāne pakkhāyamāne kammaṭṭhāne eka, divasaṃ utu, sappāy’ādini laddhā eka, pallāṇkena nisinnassa arahatta, phal’ādhigamo*, “the rotting of the ship’s rigging by rain-water is like a vipassana practitioner, going deep into and shining forth in meditation, developing vipassana by way of *rūpa, sattaka* (form as the seventh, or form septad) and so on, on a day of good weather, etc, and gaining the fruit of arhathood in one sitting.” I’m not sure what *rūpa, sattaka* here refers to.

the persistence of the rigging in a decrepit state	=	the fetter-free arhat's remaining behind (<i>thāna</i>) for the benefit of the masses;
the breaking-up of the decrepit rigging	=	the arhat's attainment of the nirvana element without residue. (SA 2:330 f)

The ship parable recurs in **the Nāvā Sutta** (S 45.158),²⁰ where it is slightly longer, and which in place of “who devotes himself to mental cultivation,” has “cultivates, continuously develops, the noble eight-fold path.” Although the Nāvā Sutta centres on the noble eightfold path, and the Vāsi,jaṭa Sutta deals with mental cultivation, the former actually forms a very apt conclusion to the latter.

The Discourse on the Adze's Handle (or the Ship) (S 22.101/3:152-155)

1 Thus have I heard.

Once the Buddha was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika's Park in Jeta's Forest near Sāvattṭhī.

2 There the Blessed One addressed the monks, “Bhikshus!”

“Bhante!” the monks replied in assent.

The Blessed One said this:²¹

3 “Bhikshus, I say that the destruction of the cankers²² is for one who knows and sees, not for one who knows not and sees not.

4 And, bhikshus, knowing what and seeing what, is there the destruction of cankers?

‘Such is form;	such is its arising;	such is its ending.
Such is feeling;	such is its arising;	such is its ending.
Such is perception;	such is its arising;	such is its ending.
Such is formations;	such is its arising;	such are their ending.
Such is consciousness;	such is its arising;	[153] such is its ending.’

—Bhikshus, knowing thus and seeing thus, there is the destruction of cankers.²³

[Bhāvanā Sutta]

²⁰ S 45.158/5:51 = SD 15.2b.

²¹ *Evam me sutam ekam samayaṃ bhagavā sāvattṭhiyaṃ viharati jetavane anāthapiṇḍikassa ārāme, tatra kho bhagavā bhikkhū āmantesi bhikkhavo ti, bhadante tit e bhikkhū bhagavato paccassosum, bhagavā etad avoca* (reconstructed by A Glass, 2006:309 f). The sutta origin or introduction (*nidāna*) is abbreviated differently in the modern eds: *sāvattṭhi, nidānam* (Be, Ne VRI); *sāvattṭhiyaṃ* (Ce, Ke); *sāvattṭhi* (PTS); *sāvattṭhī* (Se).

²² “Mental cankers,” *āsava*. The term *āsava* (lit “cankers”) comes from *ā-savati* “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as influxes, taints (“deadly taints”, RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists four *āsava*: the canker of (1) sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) wrong views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*) (D 16.2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These four are also known as “floods” (*ogha*) and “yokes” (*yoga*). The list of three cankers (omitting the canker of views) [43] is probably older and is found more frequently in the Suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these *āsavas* is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict: *āsava*.

²³ This opening section also at **Upanisā S** (S 12.23/2:29): see Intro.

(A 7.67/4:125-127)

One cannot wish away defilements

5 Bhikshus, even though a monk who does not devote himself to mental cultivation²⁴ might wish, “O, that my mind might be free from the cankers²⁵ by non-clinging!” his mind would still not be freed from the cankers by non-clinging.”²⁶

6a What is the reason for this?

Because his mind is not cultivated should be the answer.

The mind is not cultivated in what?

6b The 37 LIMBS OF AWAKENING. In the four focusses of mindfulness, the four right strivings, the four bases of success, the five spiritual faculties, the five spiritual powers, the seven factors of awakening, and the noble eightfold path.²⁷

Parable of the hen not properly incubating her eggs

7 Suppose, bhikshus, a hen has eight, ten or twelve eggs, which she has not properly sat on, not properly incubated, not properly brooded.

8 Even though that hen may wish, “O, that my chicks might break the shell with their claw-tips or with their beaks,²⁸ and hatch out safely!” Yet these chicks are still incapable of breaking through their shells with their claw-tips or with their beaks, and hatch out safely.

9 What is the reason for this?

Because the hen has not properly sat on, not properly incubated, not properly brooded them enough for hatching.

10 Even so, bhikshus, even though a monk who does not devote himself to mental cultivation might wish, “O, that my mind might be free from the cankers by non-clinging!” his mind would still not be freed from the cankers by non-clinging.

11 What is the reason for this?

Because he his mind is not cultivated, should be the answer.

The mind is not cultivated in what?

In the four focusses of mindfulness, the four right strivings, the four bases of success, the five spiritual faculties, the five spiritual powers, the seven factors of awakening, and the noble eightfold path.

²⁴ “Mental cultivation,” *bhāvanā*. See Intro (1) above.

²⁵ “Mental cankers,” *āsava*. The term *āsava* (lit “cankers”) comes from *ā-savati*, meaning “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously tr as influxes, taints (“deadly taints,” RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untr. The Abhidhamma lists 4 kinds of *āsava*: the cankers of (1) sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) wrong views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijj’āsava*) (D 16.2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These 4 are also known as “floods” (*ogha*) or “yokes” (*yoga*). The list of 3 cankers (omitting the canker of views) is probably older and is found more frequently in the Suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these cankers is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict: *āsava*.

²⁶ On that prayer does not help, see **Iṭṭha S** (A 5.43/3:47-49): abr tr in **Brahma,deva S** (S 6.3/1:140-142) = SD 12.4(2) & **Ādiya S** (A 5.41) = SD 2.1(3). It is interesting that a recent comparative study of the “Sāmyukta-type” version in Gandhārī (from the Senior Collection) by Andrew Glass (2006), this whole para is missing and in its place is this passage: *asa o añeare bhikhu bhayavata eḍaḍ oya eva jaṇad(*a) ev(*a pa)ś*adūda aṣavana kṣaya vadeṣi aṣa kispi iṣe egacaṇa bhikhuṇa ṇa aṇuadehi aṣavehi jita vimucaḍi abhavi(*datva taṣa vaca)ṇio*, “Then a certain monk said this to the Lord, ‘You say the destruction of the taints [*aṣavana*] is for one who know thus, who sees thus. Then, why, in regard to this, is the mind of some monks not liberated from the taints without clinging?’ ‘It must be said, “Due to (*its) non-cultivation.”’” (2006:171)

²⁷ Namely, *satipaṭṭhāna*, *samma-p, padhāna*, *iddhi, pāda*, *indriya*, *bala*, *bojjhaṅga*, *ariy’atṭhaṅgika magga*, respectively. These are the “seven sets,” comprising the 37 “limbs of awakening” (*bodhi, pakkhiyā dhammā*), that is a summary of the Buddha’s teaching: see SD 10.1. See Intro above.

²⁸ “With the points...beaks,” *pāda, nakha, sikhāya vā mukha, tuṇḍakena vā*.

Mental cultivation will take its own course

12 Bhikshus, even though a monk who devotes himself [154] to mental cultivation might *not* wish, “O, that my mind might be free from the cankers by non-clinging!” his mind would still be freed from the cankers by non-clinging.

13 What is the reason for this?

Because his mind is cultivated, should be the answer.

The mind is cultivated in what?

In the four focusses of mindfulness, the four right strivings, the four bases of success, the five spiritual faculties, the five spiritual powers, the seven factors of awakening, and the noble eightfold path.

Parable of the hen properly incubating her eggs

14 Suppose, bhikshus, a hen has eight, ten or twelve eggs, which she has properly sat on, properly incubated, properly brooded. Even though that hen may not wish, “O, that my chicks might break the shell with their claw-tips or with their beaks, and hatch out safely!” Yet these chicks are still capable of breaking through their shells with their claw-tips or with their beaks, hatch safely.

15 What is the reason for this?

Because the hen has properly sat on, properly incubated, properly brooded them enough for hatching.

16 Even so, bhikshus, even though a monk who devotes himself to mental cultivation might not wish, “O that my mind might be free from the cankers by non-clinging!” his mind will still be freed from the cankers by non-clinging.

17 What is the reason for this?

Because his mind is cultivated, should be the answer.

The mind is cultivated in what?

In the four focusses of mindfulness, the four right strivings, the four bases of success, the five spiritual faculties, the five spiritual powers, the seven factors of awakening, and the noble eightfold path.

Parable of the carpenter's adze

18 Suppose, bhikshus, a carpenter²⁹ or a carpenter's apprentice has an axe and its handle shows the marks of his fingers and thumb. He will not know that so much of the handle had worn away today, so much yesterday, and so much at other times. But he will know from what is worn away that it has worn away.

19 Even so, bhikshus, it is with a monk who devotes himself [155] to mental cultivation. Even though he has no knowledge how much of the cankers has worn away today, how much yesterday, and how much at other times, he will know from what is wasted away that they have wasted away.

Parable of the ocean-going ship

20 Suppose, bhikshus, an ocean-going ship rigged with masts and stays,³⁰ having been worn out by the water for six months, would be hauled up onto dry land for the cold season.³¹ The ropes that have been worn out by the wind and sun, thoroughly soaked by the rains, would easily weaken and waste [rot] away.³²

21 Even so, bhikshus, it is with the monk who devotes himself to mental cultivation: his fetters³³ will easily weaken and waste away.

²⁹ PTS *phala,gaṇḍassa*; Be Ce *palagaṇḍassa* (preferred). SA glosses as *vaḍḍhakissa*.

³⁰ “Rigged with masts and stays,” *vetta,bandhana,bandhanāya*. Here I follow S:W 5:40.

³¹ “The cold season,” *hemantikena*. See Intro (2.3) above.

³² This parable occurs in *Nāvā S* (S 45.158/5:51) = SD 15.2b. See Intro (2.3) above.

³³ “Fetters,” *saṃyojanā*, of which there are 10, that imprison one to the cyclic world of suffering. **The 10 fetters** (*dasa saṃyojanā*) are: (1) Self-identity view (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*) [see *Antā S* (S 22.103) = SD 14.1], (2) persistent doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rules and rituals (*sīla-b,bata,parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma,rāga*), (5) repulsion (*paṭigha*), (6) greed for form existence (*rūpa,rāga*), (7) greed for formless existence (*arūpa,rāga*), (8) conceit

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051026; 060813; 081225; 091112

(*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61; A 5:13; Vbh 377). In some places, no 5 (*kāma-rāga*) is replaced by illwill (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are the lower fetters (*orambhāgiya*), so called because the lower realms, ie, the sense-worlds, and the rest, the higher fetters (*uddhambhāgiya*), so called because they bind one to the higher realms, ie, the form worlds and the formless worlds. On the sequence of the fetters broken by the saints, see **Kiṭṭagiri S** (M 70) = SD 11.1 Intro (5) & **Ānāpānasati S**, M 118.8-12/3:80 f) = SD 7.13.