

SN 35.238

Saṃyutta Nikāya
The Connected Discourses

Salāyatana Saṃyutta
Connected Discourses on the Six Sense Spheres
Āsīvis Vagga
The Section on the Deadly Snakes

Āsīvisopama Sutta
“Simile of the Deadly Snakes”

Translated by Bhikkhu Candana

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This is what I personally heard.

Once, while The Blessed One was living in Sāvattṭhī, at the monastery offered by Anāthapiṇḍika in Jeta’s Park, He addressed the Bhikkhus by saying:

“Bhikkhus, just imagine there were four aggressive and poisonous snakes, that are deadly with their fast-acting venom, and then suppose there was a man, who is very much happy to be alive, fearful of pain and death, as he desires to continue to live and therefore does not want to die.

“Now, imagine someone else would come and tell him the following:

‘You there! Here are these four aggressive and poisonous snakes, deadly with their fast-acting venom. Now, you must take care of them, by picking them up from time to time; wash them individually, from time to time; feed them, from time to time; and place them back down so they could go to sleep.

‘But you must know this fact also about these snakes: they are extremely moody and unpredictable, so if any one of them gets irritated with you, they will bite you on the spot, and you will die, after having suffered tremendously due to their poisonous venom!’

‘So, now you may go ahead and do whatever you see fit to be done!’

“Then, that poor fellow, becoming terrified of the prospect of being bitten by those four aggressive and poisonous snakes, so deadly with their fast-acting venom, would simply rush out of there immediately, trying to escape whether this way or that, without ever looking back.

“Then, imagine that same man being approached again, where this time he is told the following:

‘Sir! There are these five murderous and very dangerous enemies coming after you in hot pursuit, wanting to hunt you down, and determined in their goal, as they claim:

“When we see him, we will grab hold of him, tear him into pieces and kill him right on the spot!”

‘So, now having been forewarned, go quickly and do whatever you have to do to save yourself!’

“Then, that poor fellow, becoming terrified of the prospect of being bitten by those four aggressive and poisonous snakes, so deadly with their fast-acting venom, and from being captured and killed on the spot by those enemies who are in hot pursuit of him, rushes out of there immediately, trying to escape whether in this or that direction, without ever looking back.

“Now, imagine that same man being approached yet again, and this time he is given the following warning:

‘Sir, we want to warn you of yet a sixth assassin! Be careful, because he too has been coming after you with his drawn-out sword in hand, eagerly driven by the single purpose of hunting you down, for he too has determined:

“When I see him, I’m going to chop his head off cleanly, right then and there!”

‘So, sir, please, now you have been warned! Go quickly and do whatever you have to do to save yourself!’

“Now again, that poor fellow, becoming terrified of the prospect of being bitten by those four aggressive and poisonous snakes, so deadly with their fast-acting venom, and from being captured and killed by those five murderous enemies, or of having his head chopped off cleanly the moment he is spotted by that sixth assassin, with his drawn-out sword in hand, simply rushes out of there immediately, trying to escape whether in this or that direction, without ever looking back.

“Then, imagine that man reaching an abandoned village that is desolate, whereby whichever house he rushes to hide in, he finds it to be utterly vacant, deserted, and empty of life. Similarly, with every water jar or food bowl he reaches towards to find some sustenance, he is disappointed to find them also vacant and empty of whatever he was looking for.

“Then, someone approaches and informs him the following:

‘My good sir, there are marauding thieves and thugs who come pillaging and terrorizing these villages and towns! In fact, they might be returning to strike yet again, any minute now!’

‘So sir, please, now you have been warned! Go quickly and do whatever you have to do to save yourself!’

“Then, that poor man, terrified of the prospect of being bitten by those four aggressive and poisonous snakes, so deadly with their fast-acting venom, and from being captured and killed by those five murderous enemies, or of having his head chopped off cleanly the moment he is spotted by that sixth assassin, with his drawn-out sword in hand, in addition to being a victim at the hands of those marauding thieves and bandits who come pillaging and terrorizing villages, quickly rushes out of there immediately, trying to escape whether in this or that direction, without ever looking back.

“As he is trying to flee from all these dangers, he comes across a vast and terrible flood in front of him, where he notices that the nearer shore to him is quite dangerous to seek refuge in or rest upon, being fraught with many life-threatening hazards.

“But he does notice how further on the opposite shore, there is true safety, where he could finally find peace and security. However, he observes that there are no means of travel for him to cross over to the farther shore, whether through a bridge, a boat, or a ferry.

“So, he reflects on his predicament, while encouraging himself:

‘What if I collect some tree branches, twigs, and grass as I start building myself a raft? That way, once I build the raft, I can use my arms and legs to paddle myself through the floodwaters and cross to the other side!’

“Building himself the raft, he throws himself on it and starts paddling away using both his arms and legs, as he crosses over the floodwaters and finally reaches the farther shore!

“Once there, that brahmin now stands on solid dry land of safety, the refuge he sought, gaining his peace and security, at last.

“Now, Bhikkhus, I have given you this simile to demonstrate an important fact to you, the meaning of which is the following:

A) “First, those four aggressive and poisonous snakes, so deadly with their fast-acting venom, is a synonym or designation for the Four Great Primaries, which are:

“The element of earth, the element of water, the element of fire, and the element of air or wind.

B) “Next, the five murderous and *very dangerous enemies*, is a synonym or designation for the five aggregates one grabs on to, which are:

“The form aggregate one grabs onto; the feeling aggregate one grabs onto; the perception or memory aggregate one grabs onto; the habitual drives aggregate one grabs onto; and the sense awareness aggregate one grabs onto.

C) “Further, the sixth murderous assassin, who is on the hunt with his drawn-out sword in hand, chasing and determined to chop off one’s head, is a synonym or designation for delighting and lust.

D) “Next, the desolate village, empty of all signs of life, is a synonym or designation for the six internal sense bases. Thus:

1. “If an intelligent, masterful, and perceptive individual was to look carefully and investigate the nature and function of the eye, it would be very clear to him, beyond any doubt, that the internal sense base of the eye is, on its own, quite vacant, desolate, and empty of life, for in fact, it merely serves a function.
2. “If an intelligent, masterful, and perceptive individual was to look carefully and investigate the nature and function of the ear, it would be very clear to him, beyond any doubt, that the internal sense base of the ear is, on its own, quite vacant, desolate, and empty of life, for in fact, it merely serves a function.
3. “If an intelligent, masterful, and perceptive individual was to look carefully and investigate the nature and function of the nose, it would be very clear to him, beyond any doubt, that the internal sense base of the nose is, on its own, quite vacant, desolate, and empty of life, for in fact, it merely serves a function.
4. “If an intelligent, masterful, and perceptive individual was to look carefully and investigate the nature and function of the tongue, it would be very clear to him, beyond any doubt, that the internal sense base of the tongue is, on its own, quite vacant, desolate, and empty of life, for in fact, it merely serves a function.
5. “If an intelligent, masterful, and perceptive individual was to look carefully and investigate the nature and function of the body, it would be very clear to him, beyond any doubt, that the internal sense base of the body is, on its own, quite vacant, desolate, and empty of life, for in fact, it merely serves a function.
6. “And, if an intelligent, masterful, and perceptive individual was to look carefully and investigate the nature and function of the mind, it would be very clear to him, beyond any doubt, that the internal sense base of the mind is, on its own, quite vacant, desolate, and empty of life, for in fact, it merely serves a function.

E) “Now, as for the marauding thieves and thugs who come pillaging and terrorizing, that is a synonym or designation for the six external sense bases. Thus:

1. “The eye, Bhikkhus, is constantly being assaulted by both enjoyable and unwelcome sights.
2. “The ear, Bhikkhus, is constantly being assaulted by both enjoyable and unwelcome sounds.

3. “The nose, Bhikkhus, is constantly being assaulted by both enjoyable and unwelcome odors.
4. “The tongue, Bhikkhus, is constantly being assaulted by both enjoyable and unwelcome flavors.
5. “The body, Bhikkhus, is constantly being assaulted by both enjoyable and unwelcome touches.
6. “And the mind, Bhikkhus, is constantly being assaulted by both enjoyable and unwelcome thoughts and mental objects.

F) “As for the vast and terrible flood, Bhikkhus, that is a synonym or designation for the four Great Floods, namely:

“The floodwaters of sensual pleasures; the floodwaters of the desire to rebecome; the floodwaters of views and opinions; and the floodwaters of ignorance.

G) “The nearer shore, Bhikkhus, that is quite dangerous to seek refuge in or rest upon, being fraught with many life-threatening hazards, is a synonym or designation for the identification with the concept of a substantial self-hood, the mistaken notion of a non-existent personhood.

H) “The farther or opposite shore, meanwhile, Bhikkhus, where there is true safety and where one could finally find peace and security, is a synonym or designation for the Release, that is Nibbāna Supreme.

I) “The raft, Bhikkhus, which takes one to the farther shore, is a synonym or designation for the Noble Eightfold Path. That is:

“Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Stability and Collectedness of Mind.

J) “Meanwhile, ‘paddling away by using both one’s arms and legs,’ is a synonym or designation for mustering up the wholesome intention and drive to maintain one’s course, by putting in the persevering effort necessary to make the journey to the farther shore.

K) “And finally, ‘crossing over the floodwaters and finally reaching the farther shore, whereby the brahmin now stands on solid dry land of safety, the refuge that he sought, gaining his peace and security at last,’ that is a synonym or designation for the Arahant.”

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