

# On the Metaphor of the Raft in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*

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## 1 Introduction

In the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (MPS) 1.33–34 (DN III 89), the Buddha suggests that he and his disciples are ones who have already crossed the river of craving and no longer need a raft (*kulla*). The aim of this paper is to clarify the exact meaning of the metaphor of the raft in the context of the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* 1.33–34 and compare the metaphor with those appearing in other suttas, such as *Alagaddūpamasutta* (AUS, MN I 22), *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhayasutta* (MTS, MN I 38), as well as the commentaries thereon by Buddhaghosa (5th cent).

## 2 *Mahāparinibbānasutta* 1.33–34

### 2.1 The Outline of the Story

The *Mahāparinibbānasutta* 1.33–34 describes the Buddha’s discourse with monks at the Ganges river in Pāṭali village. The Buddha went for the meal with his disciples of monks to the dwelling of Sunīdha and Vassakāra, chief ministers of Magadha, according to their invitation. After finishing his meal, the Buddha gave his gratitude by verses of rejoicing, and then, rising from his seat, left for the next destination.

MPS 1.33 (DN III 89.12–20):

*Atha kho Bhagavā yena Gaṅgā nadī ten’ upasaṅkami. Tena kho pana समयena Gaṅgā nadī pūrā hoti samatittikā kākapeyyā. App ekacce manussā nāvaṃ pariyesanti app ekacce uḷumpaṃ pariyesanti app ekacce kullaṃ bandhanti aparāparaṃ gantukāmā. Atha kho Bhagavā seyyathā pi nāma balavā puriso samiñjitaṃ vā bāhaṃ pasāreyya pasāritaṃ vā bāhaṃ samiñjeyya, evam evaṃ Gaṅgāya nadiyā orimaṭṭire antarahito pārimaṭṭire paccuṭṭhāsi saddhiṃ bhikkhu saṃghena.*

“Then the Blessed One reached the Ganges river. At that time the Ganges river was full and overflowing its banks so that a crow could drink from it. Wishing to cross over to the other side, some people were looking for a boat (*nāvā*), some people were looking for a wooden raft (*uḷumpa*),<sup>1</sup> some people were binding together a log raft (*kulla*).<sup>2</sup> Then the Blessed One, just as a strong man would stretch out his bent arm, or bend back his outstretched arm, vanished

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<sup>1</sup>The word *uḷumpa* refers to a wooden raft whose beams are bound together by ropes of cloth (V III 63). But note that VA 1096 says that it is a wooden raft whose beams are nailed together. See also MPSV on MPS 1.33 [542.18]: *Uḷumpān ti pāraṃgamanatthāya āṇiyo koṭṭetvā kataṃ. (An [2005: 62]: “A raft (ulumpān): in order to go to the further bank, they make it by beating in pegs.”)*

<sup>2</sup>The word *kulla* refers to a log raft or a roughly made float whose parts are tied together with creepers etc. (V I 230; M I 135; U 90). MPSV on MPS 1.33 [542.19]: *Kullan ti valliādāhi bandhitvā kātabbāṃ. (An [2005: 62]: “A float (kullan) is to be made by tying it together by means of things like creepers.”)*

with the order of monks from the near bank of the Ganges river and landed on the farther bank.”<sup>3</sup>

When the Buddha reached the Ganges river, it was full and overflowing. There, he saw people wishing to cross over to the other side. Some people were looking for a boat; some people were looking for a wooden raft; some people were binding together a log raft. Then the Buddha, without using a boat or a raft, crossed over to the opposite side of the river by means of the supernatural power. He vanished with the company of monks<sup>4</sup> from the near bank of the river and appeared again with the monks on the farther bank.

MPS 1.34 (DN III 89.21–28):

*Addasā kho Bhagavā te manusse app ekacce nāvāṃ pariyesante app ekacce uḷumpaṃ pariyesante app ekacce kullaṃ bandhante aparāparaṃ gantukāme. Atha kho Bhagavā etam atthaṃ viditvā, tāyaṃ velāyaṃ imaṃ udānaṃ udānesi:*

“Then, the Blessed One saw those people wishing to cross over to the other side; some were looking for a boat, some were looking for a wooden raft, and some were binding together a log raft. And at that time, the Blessed One, knowing their intention, breathed forth a solemn utterance (*udāna*).”<sup>5</sup>

After landing on the opposite bank, the Buddha beheld again those people who were wishing to cross the river and breathed forth a solemn utterance (*udāna*), which will be discussed below.

It is to be noted that the Buddha here uses his psychic power to teleport himself and his disciples across the river. The redactors of the *sutta* added this episode despite that the Vinaya prohibits the

<sup>3</sup> Davids [1910: 94]: “But the Exalted One went on to the river. And at that time the river Ganges was brimful and overflowing; and wishing to cross to the opposite bank, some began to seek for boats, some for rafts of wood, whilst some made rafts of basket-work. Then the Exalted One as instantaneously as a strong man would stretch forth his arm, or draw it back again when he had stretched it forth, vanished from this side of the river, and stood on the further bank with the company of the brethren.” Nakamura [1980: 42]: 「次いで尊師はガンジス河におもむいた。そのときガンジス河は水が満ちていて、水が渡し場のところまで及んでいて、平らかであるから鳥でさえも水が飲めるほどであった。或る人々は舟を求めている。或る人々は（大きな）筏をもとめている。また或る人々は（小さな）桴を結んでいる。いずれもかなたの岸辺に行こうと欲しているのである。そこで、あたかも力士が屈した腕を伸ばし、また伸ばした、また伸ばした腕を屈するように、まさにそのように（僅かの）時間のうちに、こちらの岸において没して、修行僧の群れとともに向かう岸に立った。」

<sup>4</sup> According to the Sarvāstivādin’s account, only the Buddha crosses the Ganges by his own power; his direct disciples swim across the river, and other lay disciples build a raft (Waldschmidt [1950-51: 158]). The import of this imagery is clear: the Buddha is the only one who cross the ocean of suffering; his direct disciples cross the river of suffering by their own efforts; and the lay disciples are working on their means of salvation.

<sup>5</sup> Davids [1910: 94]: “And the Exalted One beheld the people who wished to cross to the opposite bank looking some of them for boats and some of them for rafts of wood, and some of them for rafts of basket-work; and as he beheld them he brake forth at that time into this song:” Nakamura [1980: 42]: 「ついで尊師は、或る人々が舟を求め、或る人々は筏を求め、或る人々は桴を結んで、あちらとこちらへ行き来しようとしているのを見た。そこで尊師はこのことを知って、そのときこの感興のことはをひとりつぶやいた。」

public display of psychic powers.<sup>6</sup> It is apparent that they regard the episode as symbolic of the Buddha's attainment of the other side of transmigration, i.e., *nibbāna*.

## 2.2 The Buddha's *udāna*

The following is the Buddha's statement in the *udāna*:

MPS 1.34 (DN III 89.29–31):

*Ye taranti aṇṇavaṃ saraṃ setuṃ katvāna visajja pallalāni.*

*Kullaṃ hi jano pabandhati tiṇṇā medhāvino janā.*<sup>7</sup>

“Those who cross the ocean (*aṇṇava*) or a river (*sara*)<sup>8</sup> [do so] after building a bridge (*setu*) and avoiding small ponds (*pallala*).<sup>9</sup> A man binds together a log raft (*kulla*); indeed, wise men have already crossed.”<sup>10</sup>

In accordance with Davids' note,<sup>11</sup> this *udāna* is to be interpreted as follows: The ocean is a metaphor for craving (*taṇhā*); and a bridge is for the noble path (*ariyamagga*) that enables one to cross the ocean of craving. Although ordinary beings (*puthujjana*), who have not crossed the river of craving, have yet to build the bridge of the noble path, they look for salvation from rites, and ceremonies, and gods. But the noble beings cross the ocean of craving by means of building the bridge of the noble path. Those who have crossed the ocean of craving are saved and said to be wise.

## 2.3 Buddhaghosa's Interpretation

It is evident that Davids' interpretation derives partly from Buddhaghosa's *Sumaṅgalavilāsīnī*. Let us consider his commentary on the *udāna*. Buddhaghosa says the followings:

<sup>6</sup>See *Kevaddhasutta* (DN I 212.16–18).

<sup>7</sup>The Sanskrit parallel of this passage is found in the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* (Waldschmidt [1950: 158]), which runs as follows: *ye taranti h(y) ā(rṇavaṃ sa)raḥ setuṃ kṛtvā visṛjya palvalāni — kolaṃ hi ja(nā)ḥ prabadhnate tīrṇā medhāvino jan(ā)ḥ —*

<sup>8</sup>According to Buddhaghosa's commentary, *sara* here does not mean “a lake” but “a river.” MPSV on MPS 1.34 [542.22–23]: *Saran ti idha nadī adhippetā*. (An [2005: 62.12]: “**Lake** (*sara*) here means a river (*nadī*).”)

<sup>9</sup>MPSV on MPS 1.34 [542.25–26]: *Visajja pallalāni ti anāmasitvā va udakabharitāni ninnaṭṭhānāni*. (An [2005: 62]: “**Having left behind marshes**: without touching low ground full of water.”)

<sup>10</sup>Davids [1910: 94]: “They who have crossed the ocean drear making a solid path across the pools, whilst the vain world ties its basket rafts. These are the wise, these are the saved indeed!” Nakamura [1980: 42]: 「沼地に触れないで、(広く深い) 海や湖を渡る人々もある。(木切れや蔓草を) 結びつけて筏をつくらせて渡る人々もある。聡明な人々は、すでに渡り終わっている。」

<sup>11</sup>Davids [1910: 95, n.1]: “That is, those who cross the ‘ocean drear’ of *taṇhā*, or craving; avoiding by means of the ‘dyke’ or causeway of the Aryan path, the ‘pools’ or shallows of lust, and ignorance, and delusion (comp. Dh.p.91) whilst the vain world looks for salvation from rites, and ceremonies, and gods,— ‘these are the wise, these are the saved indeed!’ ”

MPSV on MPS 1.34 [542.23–24]:

*Idaṃ vuttaṃ hoti: ye gambhīraṃ vitthataṃ taṅhāsaraṃ taranti, te ariyamaggasambhātaṃ setuṃ katvāna.*

“The following is said [in this *udāna*]. Those who cross over the river of craving, which is deep and broad, [do so] after building a bridge that is known as the noble path.”<sup>12</sup>

MPSV on MPS 1.34 [542. 26–29]:

*Ayaṃ pana idaṃ appamattakaṃ udakaṃ taritukāmo pi kullaṃ hi jano pabandhati. Buddhā ca Buddhasāvākā ca vinā yeva kullena tiṅṅā medhāvino janā ti.*<sup>13</sup>

“But this person, who wishes to cross over this small amount of water, binds together a log raft. The Buddhas and their disciples are wise men since they have crossed [the ocean or a river] without a raft.”<sup>14</sup>

Buddhaghosa makes it clear that the river (*sara*) is a metaphor for craving and that a bridge (*setu*) is for the noble path (*ariyamagga*). Furthermore, he identifies “wise men” (*medhāvino janā*) with the Buddhas and their disciples. The idea implied here is that the Buddhas and their disciples are said to be wise since they have already crossed the river of craving by means of the bridge that is known as the noble path.

### 3 The metaphor of the raft in other *suttas*

Next, we examine the metaphor of the raft that appears in the *Alagaddūpamasutta* and *Mahātaṅhāsaṅkhasutta*.

#### 3.1 The metaphor of the raft in the *Alagaddūpamasutta*

In the *Alagaddūpamasutta*, the Buddha says that his teachings (*dhamma*) are intended as the means of attaining salvation and not for anything else. Thus he warns his disciples not to pervert the teachings as a means of gratifying their personal desires or reproaching the Buddha. To convey this idea, he uses the parable of the raft, as can be seen in the following paragraphs.

AUS (MN I 134.37–135.9):

*tassa evam assa: Ayaṃ kho mahā udakaṇṇavo orimaṃ ca tīraṃ sāsakaṃ sappaṭibhayaṃ pārimaṃ tīraṃ khemaṃ appaṭibhayaṃ, natthi ca nāvā. santāraṇī uttarasetu vā apārā pāraṃ gamanāya, yaṃ nūnāhaṃ tiṅkaṭṭhasākhāpalāsaṃ saṅkaḍḍhitvā kullaṃ bandhitvā taṃ kullaṃ nissāya hatthehi ca pādehi ca vāyamamāno sotthinā pāraṃ uttareyyaṃ ti. Atha kho so bhikkhave puriso tiṅkaṭṭhasākhāpalāsaṃ saṅkaḍḍhitvā kullaṃ bandhitvā taṃ kullaṃ nissāya hatthehi ca pādehi ca vāyamamāno sotthinā pāraṃ uttareyya.*

<sup>12</sup>An [2005: 62]: “It is said, Those who cross over the river of craving deep and broad, making a cause way which is known as the noble path.”

<sup>13</sup>I follow the punctuation suggested by An [2005: 63, n.1].

<sup>14</sup>An [2005: 62–63]: “But **here a person**, wishing to cross over this small stretch of water **constructs a raft**; both the Buddhas and their disciples are **wise people** who have crossed without a raft.”

“He might think thus: ‘This is a surely a huge water flood, whose near shore is dangerous and fearful and whose further shore is safe and free from fear. But there is no ferryboat or bridge for going to the far shore. What if I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves, bind them together into a raft, and, by means of the raft, get safely across the far shore by making an effort with my hands and feet?’ And then, Bhikkhus, suppose that man collects grass, twigs, branches, and leaves, bind them together into a raft, and, by means of the raft, get safely across the far shore by making an effort with my hands and feet.”

AUS (MN I 135.9–14):

*tassa tiṅṅassa pāraṅgatassa evam assa: Bahukāro kho me ayaṃ kullo, imāhaṃ kullaṃ nissāya hatthehi ca pādehi ca vāyamamāno sotthinā pāraṃ uttiṅṅo, yan nūnāhaṃ imaṃ kullaṃ sise vā āropetvā khandhe vā uccāretvā yena kāmaṃ pakkameyyan ti.*

“Then, when he arrives at the far shore, he might think thus: ‘This raft was very helpful to me, since, by means of the raft, I got safely across the far shore by making an effort with my hands and feet. What if I hoist it on my head or load it on my shoulder, and then go wherever I want?’ ”

AUS (MN I 135.17–24):

*Idha bhikkhave tassa purisassa tiṅṅassa pāraṅgatassa evam assa: Bahukāro kho me ayaṃ kullo, imāhaṃ kullaṃ nissāya hatthehi ca pādehi ca vāyamamāno sotthinā pāraṃ uttiṅṅo, yan nūnāhaṃ imaṃ kullaṃ thale vā ussādetvā uduke vā upalāpetvā yena kāmaṃ pakkameyyan ti. Evaṃkāri kho so bhikkhave puriso tasmim kulle kiccakārī assa. Evam eva kho bhikkhave kullūpamaṃ mayā dhammo desito nittharaṇatthaāya no gahaṇatthāya.*

“Here, Bhikkhus, when that man got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: ‘This raft was very helpful to me, since, by means of the raft, I got safely across the far shore by making an effort with my hands and feet. What if I haul it onto the dry land or set it adrift in the water, and then go wherever I want?’ Now, Bhikkhus, it is by so doing that that man would be doing what should be done with that raft. So, indeed, I have shown you how the *dhamma* is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over and not for the purpose of grasping.”

AUS (MN I 135.24–26):

*Kullūpamaṃ vo bhikkhave ājānantehi dhammā pi vo pahātabbā, pageva adhammā.*

“Bhikkhus, one who understands the simile of a raft should renounce even *dhammas*. How much more so that which are not *dhammas*?”

Here, the parable tells us that a raft is only useful for crossing the flood and not for anything else, and hence that it should be abandoned after arriving at the opposite bank. The Buddha says that *dhammas* are similar to the raft. This implies that the *dhammas* are to be relied upon only for the purpose of attaining the religious goal and not for grasping (*gahaṇa*), and hence that they should be renounced after attaining that goal.

Now, the question is what *dhamma* is in this context. Horner interprets *dhamma* as meaning “(right) mental objects.”<sup>15</sup> Buddhaghosa’s interpretation however differs from Horner’s. Buddhaghosa’s commentary on the last sentence runs as follows:

<sup>15</sup>Horner [1954: 173–4]: “you should get rid even of (right) mental objects, all the more of wrong ones.”

MNPS on AUS (109.14):

*Dhammā pi vo pahātabbā ti etta dhammā ti samathavipassanā.*

**One should renounce even dhammas.** Here [the term] *dhamma* means calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*).

Thus, Buddhaghosa takes *dhamma* here as meaning calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*). What he means to say is that one should not practice meditation purely for the pleasant states of meditative trance (*jhāna*), and that one should attain those states only for the sake of establishing calm and insight that serve as a means of understanding the truth and thereby attaining *nibbāna*.

As stated in the *Dhammapada*, calm and insight work together to lift us above mental distractions and hindrances just as a bird, free of all burden, flies with both its wings above the ground high into the sky.<sup>16</sup> It is however inappropriate to strengthen attachment to calm and insight. As long as one is unawakened, all the understandings of the truth, no matter how noble it may be, are still views (*diṭṭhi*) which ought to be abandoned. They are only different ways of viewing reality; and with those views, one cannot fully and directly perceive the truth. As the understanding of the truth grows, one should progressively let go of the views. Therefore, calm and insight, which are the means of obtaining the views, are taught by the Buddha just for the sake of overcoming the suffering of *saṃsāra* and not for the sake of grasping.

### 3.2 The metaphor of the raft in the *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhasutta*

Finally, we consider the metaphor of a raft in the *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhasutta*, which teaches the truth of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). The Buddha, after explaining the origination and cessation of nutriment (*āhāra*), says the followings:

MTS (MN I 260.32–36):

*Imaṃ ce tumhe bhikkhave diṭṭhiṃ evaṃ parisuddhaṃ evaṃ pariyodātaṃ allīyetha kelāyetha dhanāyetha mamāyetha, api nu tumhe bhikkhave kullūpamaṃ dhammaṃ desitaṃ ājāneyyātha nittharaṇatthāya no gahaṇatthāyāti. No h' etaṃ bhante.*

“Bhikkhus, if you adhere to this view (*diṭṭhi*), which is pure (*parisuddha*) and bright (*pariyodāta*) as such, cherish it, treasure it, and treat it as a possession, then, Bhikkhus, would it mean that you understood the *dhamma* that has been taught as similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping?” “No, venerable sir.”

MTS (MN I 260.36–261.4):

*Imaṃ ce tumhe bhikkhave diṭṭhiṃ evaṃ parisuddhaṃ evaṃ pariyodātaṃ na allīyetha na kelāyetha na dhanāyetha na mamāyetha, api nu tumhe bhikkhave kullūpamaṃ dhammaṃ desitaṃ ājāneyyātha nittharaṇatthāya no gahaṇatthāyāti. Evaṃ bhante.*

“Bhikkhus, if you do not adhere to this view (*diṭṭhi*), which is pure (*parisuddha*) and bright (*pariyodāta*) as such, cherish it, treasure it, or treat it as a possession, then, Bhikkhus, would

<sup>16</sup>Dhp 91: *Uyyuñjanti satimanto na nikete ramanti te, haṃsāva pallamaṃ hītvā okamaṃ jahanti te.* (“Those mindful ones make the effort [to keep their attentiveness always in trim]. They do not take pleasure in abodes. After leaving this abode, they leave that abode like a swan [leaving this and that] pond.”)

it mean that you understood the *dhamma* that has been taught as similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping?” “Yes, venerable sir.”

The Buddha teaches that one should not become slavishly attached to a philosophical view (*diṭṭhi*) even when it is true. This means that a philosophical view must be put to its proper use as part of the path (*magga*) and within the context of the rest of Buddhist teachings. Then, the following is a passage from the *Majjimanikāyaṭṭhakathā* by Buddhaghosa:

MNA on MTS (307.31–308.6):

*Tattha diṭṭhin ti vipassanāsammādiṭṭhim. Sabhāvadassanena parisuddham paccayadassanena pariyoḍātam. Allīyethā ti taṇhādiṭṭhīhi alliyitvā vihareyyātha. Kelāyethā ti taṇhādiṭṭhīhi kīlamānā vihareyyātha. Dhanāyetha ti dhanam viya icchatā gedham āpajjeyyātha. Mamāyethā ti taṇhādiṭṭhimamattam uppādeyyātha. Nītharanatthāya no gahaṇatthāya ti yo so mayā caturoghanittharanatthāya kullūpamo dhammo desito, no nikanivasena gahaṇatthāya, api nu tam tumhe ājāneyyāthā ti?*

“Here, the ‘**view**’ (*diṭṭhi*) means the right view through insight. It is perfectly ‘**pure**’ (*parisuddha*) by seeing the nature of things (*sabhāva*), and ‘**clear**’ (*pariyoḍāta*) by seeing conditionality. “**If you adhere to it**” (*allīyetha*) means: ‘**if you dwell clinging with views tainted by craving.**’ ‘**[If] you cherish it**’ (*kelāyetha*) means: ‘if you dwell cherishing, sporting, with views tainted with craving’. ‘**[If] you treasure it**’ (*dhanāyetha*) means: ‘if you produce greed as if wishing wealth’. ‘**[If] you treat it as a possession**’ (*mamāyetha*) means: ‘if you give rise to selfishness by means of the [wrong] view based on craving’. ‘**For the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping**’ (*nītharanatthāya no gahaṇatthāya*) means that the *dhamma* taught by me in the parable of the raft is for crossing over the four floods. Shouldn’t you realize that?”

Buddhaghosa clarifies that the Buddha’s *dhamma* is similar to a raft in the sense that it enables one to cross over the four floods (*ogha*), namely, sensuality (*kāma*), rebirth (*bhava*), view (*diṭṭhi*), and ignorance (*avijjā*). This of course does not mean that it is right to grasp the *dhamma* after crossing over the floods. What emerges from Buddhaghosa’s commentary is the idea that the philosophical view that is obtained through insight (*vipassanā*) is to be renounced after crossing over the four floods even if it is pure and bright. This keeps in line with the idea of the *Alaṅgaddūpamasutta*.

#### 4 Conclusion

We have seen so far the Buddha’s discourse employing the metaphor of the raft in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* and other *suttas*, as well as the commentaries thereon. Let us summarize the points made above:

1. In the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, the Buddha suggests that he and his disciples are ones who have already crossed the river of craving without using a raft or a bridge, which according to Buddhaghosa refers to the noble path (*ariyamagga*). The point stressed here is that the Buddha and his disciples are said to be wise since they have already crossed the river of craving and no longer need a raft of the noble path.

2. In the *Alagaddūpamasutta*, the Buddha states that the *dhammas*, which according to Buddhaghosa mean calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*), are similar to a raft. This means that the *dhammas* are to be relied upon only for the purpose of attaining the religious goal and not for grasping (*gahaṇa*), and hence that they should be renounced after attaining that goal just like a raft.
3. In the *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhasutta* also, the Buddha states that the *dhamma* is similar to a raft whose purpose is for crossing over and not for grasping. According to Buddhaghosa, this implies that the *dhamma* enables one to cross over the four floods (*ogha*), namely, sensuality, rebirth, view, and ignorance.

Thus we see that, while the latter two *suttas* using the metaphor of the raft focus on the fact that the *dhamma* is to be relied upon only for the purpose of attaining the religious goal, the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* emphasizes the point that the *dhamma* is not necessary for the Buddha and his disciples since they have already crossed the river of craving. The common idea underlying all these passages is that the Buddha's teachings are pragmatic and useful only in so far as they lead to the religious goal.

### References and abbreviations

DN: *Dīghanikāya*. See Rhys Davids and Carpenter [1966].

Dhp: *Dhammapada*. See Hinüber and Norman [1994].

MN: *Majjhimanikāya*. See Trenckner [1888].

MNA: *Majjhimanikāyaṭṭhakathā*. See Horner [1937-1938].

MPSV: *Mahāparinibbānasuttavaṇṇanā*. See Rhys Davids and Carpenter [1931].

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## 「大般涅槃經」における筏の比喻

ウェン・ランドベ・スニータ・テロ

本研究の目的は初期経典『長部』「大般涅槃經」に見られる筏 (kulla) の比喻の意味を、その他の初期経典およびブッダゴーサの注釈に依拠して明らかにすることである。

『長部』「大般涅槃經」の中で、ブッダと彼の弟子たちは筏や橋を用いることなく、既に川を渡り終えている者として描かれる。ブッダゴーサの注釈によれば、川は渴愛 (taṇhā) の隠喩であり、筏や橋は聖道 (ariyamagga) の隠喩である。ここで示唆されているのは、ブッダと彼の弟子たちは既に渴愛という川を渡り終えているので、聖道という筏を必要としないということである。次に『中部』「蛇喩經」においてブッダは、法 (dhamma) が筏に似た働きを持つと説く。ここでの「法」はブッダゴーサによれば止 (samatha) と観 (vipassanā) のことである。人は川を渡るために筏を使うが、川を渡った後は筏を捨てるように、涅槃という目的の達成のために法に依拠すべきであるが、目的達成後は法を捨て去るべきであると「蛇喩經」は説く。『中部』「大愛尽經」もまた、法の目的は筏と同じく彼岸に渡らしめることであり、それゆえ法に執着してはならないと説く。ブッダゴーサによれば、その法は四種の暴流 (ogha) — 欲 (kāma)、生 (bhava)、見解 (ditṭhi)、無明 (avijjā) — を克服するための手段である。

『中部』「蛇喩經」「大愛尽經」は筏の比喻を用いて、渴愛や苦を鎮めるという目的達成のためのみ法に依拠すべきであるという点を強調するが、「大般涅槃經」は同じ比喻を用いて、既に目的を達成したブッダと彼の弟子たちにとって法はもはや必要でないことを示唆する。これら全てに共通して説かれるのは、ブッダの法が宗教的目的をもたらず限りにおいて有用であるという点である。