

9

Avijjā Pahāna Sutta 2

The Discourse on Abandoning Ignorance 2 | S 35.80

Theme: How to let go of “all things”

Translated by Piya Tan ©2005

Introduction1 The (Moggallāna) Pacalā Sutta (A 7.58)

In the **(Moggallāna) Pacalā Sutta** (A 7.58), the newly ordained Moggallāna asks the Buddha regarding spiritual liberation, and the Buddha answers with the well-known “brief advice on liberation through the destruction of ignorance”:¹

[11] “In what way, bhante, in brief, is a monk liberated through the destruction of ignorance, that is, one who has reached total² perfection, the total security from bondage, the total holy life, the total consummation, the highest amongst gods and humans?”³

⁴11.2 “Here, Moggallāna, the monk has **learned**⁵ that nothing is worth clinging to.⁶

And, Moggallāna, a monk has learned that nothing is worth clinging to; thus, he **directly knows**⁷ all things [he directly understands the nature of the all].⁸ Having directly known the nature of all things, he **fully understands**⁹ everything.

¹ *Saṅkhittena taṇhā, saṅkhaya, vimutto (ovādo).*

² “Total,” *accanta*, also “absolute.”

³ In **Cūḷa Taṇhā, saṅkhaya S** (M 37,15/1:255 f), Sakra, the leader of the gods, on the instigation of Moggallāna, asks the same question and the Buddha’s answer is identical to the passage here. It is possible that this passage originally belongs to the Cūḷa Taṇhā, saṅkhaya S, but is added here by the Aṅguttara Reciters for a more complete Sutta. Requests for brief instructions are found elsewhere in the Canon, eg V 1:39 (Sāriputta to Assaji); S 22.1/3:1-5 (Nakula, pitā to the Buddha).

⁴ This passage [11.2] is also found in **Avijjā Pahāna S 2** (A 35/80). The ensuing passages, however, are different. See Intro (5) above.

⁵ “Has learned,” *sutam hoti*, lit “he is one who has heard.”

⁶ “Nothing is worth clinging to,” *sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāyā*, lit “all things are not worthy of adhering to.” “All things” here refer to the 5 aggregates, the 12 sense-bases and the 18 elements, all of which are not fit to be clung to. These factors have to do with insight (*vipassanā*). (AA 4:43)

⁷ “He directly knows,” *abhiñānāti*, here meaning “to know (by intuition),” ie through higher self-knowledge, or *abhiññā*. Traditionally, there are 6 “higher powers” or **superknowledges** (*abhiññā*): (1) psychic powers (*iddhi, vidhā*), (2) the “divine ear” or clairaudience (*dibba, sota*), (3) mind-reading, ie the ability to read the thoughts of others (*parassa ceto, pariya, ñāṇa*), (4) the recollection of one’s own past lives (*pubbe, nivāsānussati*), (5) the “divine eye” (*dibba, cakkhu*), ie the knowledge of the passing away and arising of beings, faring according to their karma, and (6) the destruction of mental cankers (*āsava-k, khaya*), ie arhathood. Nos 4-6 are known as “the 3 knowledges (*te, vijjā*)” (D 3:281; A 3:280). Comy says that this knowledge here refers to *ñāta, pariññā* (A 4:43): see foll n.

⁸ “He directly understands all things,” *so sabbaṃ dhammaṃ abhiñānāti*, alt tr, “he directly understands the nature of the all.” Here the “all” (*sabba*) refers to the 6 senses and their respective sense-objects (**Sabba S**, S 35.23/4:15 = SD 7.1).

⁹ “He fully understands,” *pariñānāti*, here meaning “to comprehend, know fully for certain.” This spiritual knowledge is called “**full understanding**” (*pariññā*), of which there are 3 kinds: (1) Full understanding of the known (*ñāta, pariññā*), ie the discernment of the specific characteristics of a phenomena (“Form as the characteristic of being oppressed’ feeling has the characteristic of being felt, etc”); (2) Full understanding by investigating (*tīraṇa, pariññā*), ie, insight wisdom (*vipassanā, paññā*) which, as the 3 universal characteristics (impermanence, unsatisfac-

11.3 Having fully understood everything,
he understands whatever **feelings** there are, whether pleasant, painful or neither painful nor pleasant.

11.4 As regards to those feelings,

he dwells contemplating impermanence in them.

He dwells contemplating dispassion [fading away of lust] in them.

He dwells contemplating ending [of suffering] in them'

He dwells contemplating letting go [of defilements].¹⁰

11.5 When he dwells contemplating impermanence in them—

contemplating *dispassion* [fading away of lust] in them,

contemplating *ending* [of suffering] in them;

contemplating *letting go* [of defilements]¹¹—

he does not cling to anything in the world.

Not clinging, he is not agitated;

being not agitated, he attains nirvana for himself.¹²

11.6 He understands,

'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done what is to be done, there is no more for this state of being.'¹³ (A 7.58/4:88), SD 4.11

Passage 11.2 of the Pacalā Sutta is very close to that in **the Avijjā Pahāna Sutta 2** (A 35.80) [6(1)+(2)]. The ensuing passage [6(2)], however, is different only in wording but is the same in spirit, applying the teaching of "the all" (*sabba*).¹⁴

2 The meaning of aññato

2.1 The key word of the Avijjā Pahāna Sutta 2 is **aññato** (Skt *anyatas*) [§6], which is an indeclinable formed from *añña*, "other." The Sanskrit form *anyatas* means "from another; from another motive; on

toriness, non-self) as its objects, and which arises when attributing a universal characteristic to a physical and mental state, eg "Form is impermanent; feeling is impermanent, etc"; (3) Full understanding as overcoming (or abandoning) (*pahāna, pariññā*), ie the insight-wisdom that has the universal characteristics as its objects, and arises after one has overcome the idea of permanence, etc." (Nm 52; Vism 20.3/606 f). Comy says that "full understanding" here refers to *tīraṇa, pariññā* (AA 4:43). The contemplation of impermanence (*aniccānupassanā*), etc, are given in the final tetrad (*Dhammānupassanā*, contemplation of mind-objects) of the breath meditation of the **Ānāpāna, sati S** (M 118,21/3:83).

¹⁰ The monk effects the abandoning of the mental hindrances by the contemplations on impermanence (*aniccānupassanā*), fading away (of lust) (*viragānupassanā*), cessation (of suffering) (*nirodhānupassanā*) and of letting go (of defilements) (*paṭinissaggānupassanā*), and thus comes to look upon feelings (all experiences) with equanimity.

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¹² *Anupādiyaṃ na paritassati, aparitassam paccattañ, ñeva parinibbāyati*. On *paccattam yeva parinibbāyati*, cf **Cūḷa Taṇhā, saṅkhaya S** (M 37,3/1:251 f, by fully understanding "the all, *sabba*"), SD 54.8; **Pacālā S** (A 7.58/4:88, by contemplating "nothing is worth clinging to"), SD 4.11. Comy says that he brings himself to nirvana (ie by his own efforts) by the utter extinction of defilements (*sayam eva kilesa, parinibbānena parinibbāyati*, MA 2:18, 299).

¹³ This para describing the arhat is stock: V 1:14; D 1:84; M 2:39; S 2:82.

¹⁴ Here the "all" (*sabba*) refers to the 6 senses and their respective sense-objects (**Sabba S**, S 35.23/4:15 = SD 7.1), here the respective consciousnesses are also included.

one side ... ; elsewhere; on the other side, on the contrary, in one direction; towards some other place” (SED). In simple terms, as such, it means “something other (than)” what is known or expected.

2.2 In the Pali usage in this Sutta, *aññato* means “otherwise, from another point of view” (CPD) or “as other (thing), as different” (DP). Both these dictionaries—the Critical Pali Dictionary and A Dictionary of Pali—quote *sabba, nimittāni aññato passati* [§6(10) etc] from this Sutta. The Saṃyutta Commentary explains this as “One sees it as not the self, not as the self” (*anattato passati, no attato*, SA 2:370,17).

2.3 The Commentary explains *aññato* [§6 line 4] as follows: “He sees all signs as other” (*sabba, nimittāni aññato passati*)¹⁵ means that he sees the signs of formations (*saṅkhāra, nimittāni*) ‘as other than’ from those who have not fully understood the worldly inclinations (*abhinivesā*). For such people see all signs as self, but one who has fully understood the worldly inclinations sees them as *non-self*, not as a self. Thus is the characteristic of non-self discussed in this Sutta. (SA 2:370).

Apparently here, the Commentary takes *aññato* to mean “as other than” in the sense of “differently,” that is, to say, the wise or the saint sees phenomena *differently* from the unawakened. Right as this might be, this is too general a remark to be helpful. Moreover, from the Sutta context, it is clear that *aññato* alludes to nonself specifically, and to all the 3 characteristics generally, that is, all the sense-states are impermanent, suffering and nonself.¹⁶

2.4 Hence, it is clear that *aññato* refers to seeing things as “**non-self**” as the key characteristic. This is correct, as far as scholastic exegesis goes, but in spiritual practice, especially for most of us (who are unawakened), this is at best an “intellectual” fact, quickly forgotten. It is thus more helpful if we include the perception of impermanence in this definition. This, in fact, fits both the expression and the passage perfectly, too.

2.5 Whatever becomes “**something other**” (*añña*) is certainly impermanent, too; Whatever that is impermanent is unsatisfactory, too; Whatever that is *impermanent and unsatisfactory* cannot be said to have any abiding nature; there is neither self nor soul.¹⁷ Furthermore, as evident from **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), the 6 senses (the eye, etc), are all impermanent, and should be reflected as such.¹⁸ As such, it is clear that it is not helpful to translate *aññato* here as “differently,” as has been done by Bodhi (S:B 1161).

2.6 The 6 teachings on each of the 6 sense-experiences [§6, from “he sees as other” down to “that, too, he sees as other”] are included in the “brief advice on freedom through the destruction of craving” (*saṅkhittena taṇhā, saṅkhaya, vimutto*) in **the Cūḷa Taṇhā, saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 37,2) and **the Pacalā Sutta** (A 7.58,11);¹⁹ the ensuing teaching for each of them, however, is differently worded. They are all the same in Dharma spirit: they are teachings on practice of seeing nonself (*anattā*).

¹⁵ On “sign” (*nimitta*), see SD 19.7.

¹⁶ The 3 characteristics (*lakkhaṇa*) are those of *impermanence*, *unsatisfactory* and *non-self*. While the first 2 refer to all conditioned things, ie, whatever exists in our universe, and the third to the principle underlying both these 2 characteristics. On all dharmas as being “non-self” (*sabbe dhammā anattā*), see **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.134/1:285), SD 26.8.

¹⁷ See eg **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59/3:66-68), SD 1.2.

¹⁸ S 25.1/3:225, SD 16.7.

¹⁹ **M 37,2.2+3/1:251,21-25** (SD 54.9); **A 7.58,11/4:88,11-15** + SD 4.11 (5).

The term *aññato* is expressed and explained as “changes, becomes other” (*vipariṇāmati aññathā hoti*) in the **Uddesa Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 138,20 f). It is treated as a “Vipassana” practice, reflecting on impermanence.²⁰

3 How to reflect on the Sutta teaching

The key Sutta passage that contains the teaching is §6, which should be carefully read, or recorded and listened to, and reflected upon constantly. This is a reflection on the *impermanence* of each of

- the sense-bases;
- the sense-object;
- the sense-consciousness;
- the sense-contact; and
- the feelings arising from the respective contacts.

This teaching is a reflection on links 5-7 of the cycle of dependent arising,²¹ where such a mindfulness prevents craving from arising. That is to say, we constantly note the impermanent nature of the sense-experience so that we can easily let go of it. Such a teaching is found, for example, in the **(Samuday’atthaṅga) Loka Sutta** (S 12.44).²²

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Avijjā Pahāna Sutta 2 The Second Discourse on Abandoning Ignorance

S 35.80

2 Then a certain monk approached the Blessed One, saluted him and then sat down at one side.

3 Seated thus at one side, he said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, is there the one thing (*eka, dhamma*) through whose abandoning ignorance (*avijjā*) is abandoned by a monk, and **true knowledge** (*vijjā*) arises?”

“There is the one thing, bhikshu, through whose abandoning ignorance is abandoned by a monk, and true knowledge arises.”

4 “And what is that one thing, bhante?”

“**Ignorance**, bhikshu, is the one thing through whose abandoning ignorance is abandoned by a monk, and true knowledge arises.”²³

²⁰ M 138,20 f/3:227 f (SD 33.14).

²¹ The 12 links of dependent arising are: (1) ignorance, (2) volitional formations, (3) consciousness, (4) name-and-form, (5) the 6 sense-faculties, (6) contact, (7) feeling, (8) craving, (9) clinging, (10) existence, (11) birth, (12) decay-and-death: see **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16 (8).

²² S 12.44/2:71-73 (SD 7.5). On breaking out of the cycle, see **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16 (18).

²³ Ignorance breeds ignorance, and this cycle drives craving which feeds greed, hatred and delusion, which bring on suffering. Hence, the “one thing” (*eka, dhamma*) at the root of it all; that is ignorance, which needs to be up-

5 “But, bhante, **how** should a monk know, how should he see, for *ignorance* to be abandoned by him, and for true knowledge to arise?”

One sees all forms as other

6 (1) “Here, bhikshu, the monk has learned [heard, <i>suta</i>] that	<i>nothing is worth clinging to.</i> ²⁴
And having thus learned that nothing is worth clinging to,	he directly knows all things. ²⁵
Having directly known all things,	he fully understands everything. ²⁶
Having fully understood everything,	he sees all signs as <u>other</u> (<i>aññato</i>): ²⁷
He sees the eye as <i>other</i> .	<i>cakkhu</i>
He sees <u>forms</u> as <i>other</i> .	<i>rūpa</i>
He sees <u>eye-consciousness</u> as <i>other</i> .	<i>cakkhu,viññāṇa</i>
He sees <u>eye-contact</u> as <i>other</i> .	<i>cakkhu,samphassa</i>
Whatever that is <u>pleasant, or painful, or neutral</u> ,	<i>sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkham-asukha</i>
that arises on account of eye-contact as condition—that, too, he sees as <u>other</u> .	

One hears all sounds as other

(2) Here, bhikshu, the monk has <u>learned</u> [heard] that	<i>nothing is worth clinging to.</i>
And having thus learned that nothing is worth clinging to,	he <u>directly knows</u> all things.
Having directly known all things,	he <u>fully understands</u> everything.
Having fully understood everything,	he <u>sees</u> all signs as <u>other</u> :
He sees the ear as <i>other</i> .	<i>sota</i>
He sees <u>sounds</u> as <i>other</i> .	<i>sadda</i>
He sees <u>ear-consciousness</u> as <i>other</i> .	<i>sota-viññāṇa</i>
He sees <u>ear-contact</u> as <i>other</i> .	<i>sota,samphassa</i>
Whatever that is <u>pleasant, or painful, or neutral</u> ,	
that arises on account of ear-contact as condition—that, too, he sees as <i>other</i> .	

One smells all smells as other

(3) Here, bhikshu, the monk has <u>learned</u> [heard] that	<i>nothing is worth clinging to.</i>
And having thus learned that nothing is worth clinging to,	he <u>directly knows</u> all things.
Having directly known all things,	he <u>fully understands</u> everything.

rooted. Cf Bodhi, S:B 1405 n42. Another explanation is that the certain monk has put the question wrongly, and the Buddha is merely giving the proper answer.

²⁴ *Idha bhikkhu bhikkhuno sutam hoti, “Sabbe* dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāyāti”* *(Be Ce Se; Ee omits).

²⁵ *Evañ ce taṃ bhikkhu bhikkhuno sutam hoti, “Sabbe dhamme nālaṃ abhinivesāyāti, so sabbaṃ dhammaṃ abhijānāti.*

²⁶ This and the next 2 sentences: *sabbaṃ dhammaṃ abhiññāya sabbaṃ dhammaṃ pari jānāti, sabbaṃ dhammaṃ pariññāya sabba, nimittāni aññato passati.* “He fully understands,” *pari jānāti*, meaning “he comprehends, knows fully for certain.” See Intro 1 (text) 11.2 n for details. “**All things**” (*sabba, dhamma*) covers only the nature of the world and existence; “**everything**” (*sabba*) includes “all thing” and the freedom from them (nirvana). See **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1. On “all things” (*sabbe saṅkhārā*) and “everything” (*sabbe dhammā*, Dh 279), see **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.134), SD 26.8. On the 3 characteristics, see SD 10.16 (1.3.1.5).

²⁷ *Sabbaṃ dhammaṃ pariññāya sabba, nimittāni aññato passati; cakkhum aññato passati, rūpe aññato passati, cakkhu, viññāṇaṃ aññato passati; ... yam p’idaṃ mano samphassa, paccayā uppajjati vedayitaṃ sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkham asukhaṃ vā. Tam pi annato passato.* See Intro (2), esp (2.6).

Having fully understood everything,		he <u>sees</u> all signs as <u>other</u> :
He sees the nose	as <i>other</i> ;	<i>ghāna</i>
He sees <u>smells</u>	as <i>other</i> ;	<i>gandha</i>
He sees <u>nose-consciousness</u>	as <i>other</i> ;	<i>ghāna,viññāṇa</i>
He sees <u>nose-contact</u>	as <i>other</i> .	<i>ghāna,samphassa</i>

Whatever that is pleasant, or painful, or neutral,
that arises on account of nose-contact as condition—that, too, he sees as *other*.

One tastes all tastes as other

(4) Here, bhikshu, the monk has <u>learned</u> [heard] that		<i>nothing is worth clinging to.</i>
And having thus learned that nothing is worth clinging to,		<i>he <u>directly knows</u> all things.</i>
Having directly known all things,		<i>he <u>fully understands</u> everything.</i>
Having fully understood everything,		he <u>sees</u> all signs as <u>other</u> :
He sees the tongue	as <i>other</i> ;	<i>jivhā</i>
he sees <u>tastes</u>	as <i>other</i> ;	<i>rasa</i>
he sees <u>tongue-consciousness</u>	as <i>other</i> ;	<i>jivhā,viññāṇa</i>
he sees <u>tongue-contact</u>	as <i>other</i> .	<i>jivhā,samphassa</i>

Whatever that is pleasant, or painful, or neutral,
that arises on account of tongue-contact as condition, that, too, he sees as *other*.

One feels all touches as other

(5) Here, bhikshu, the monk has <u>learned</u> [heard] that		<i>nothing is worth clinging to.</i>
And having thus learned that nothing is worth clinging to,		<i>he <u>directly knows</u> all things.</i>
Having directly known all things,		<i>he <u>fully understands</u> everything.</i>
Having fully understood everything,		he <u>sees</u> all signs as <u>other</u> :
He sees the body	as <i>other</i> ;	<i>kāya</i>
He sees <u>touches</u> [feelings] ²⁸	as <i>other</i> ;	<i>vedanā</i>
He sees <u>body-consciousness</u>	as <i>other</i> ;	<i>kāya,viññāṇā</i>
He sees <u>body-contact</u>	as <i>other</i> .	<i>kāya,samphassa</i>

Whatever that is pleasant, or painful, or neutral,
that arises on account of body-contact as condition, that, too, he sees as *other*.

One cognizes all mind-objects as other

(6) Here, bhikshu, the monk has <u>learned</u> [heard] that		<i>nothing is worth clinging to.</i>
And having thus learned that nothing is worth clinging to,		<i>he <u>directly knows</u> all things.</i>
Having directly known all things,		<i>he <u>fully understands</u> everything.</i>
Having fully understood everything,		he <u>sees</u> all signs as <u>other</u> :
He sees the mind	as <i>other</i> .	<i>mano</i>
He sees <u>mind-objects</u> (<i>dhamma</i>) ²⁹	as <i>other</i> .	<i>dhamma</i>
He sees <u>mind-consciousness</u>	as <i>other</i> .	<i>mano,viññāṇa</i>
He sees <u>mind-contact</u>	as <i>other</i> .	<i>mano,samphassa</i>

Whatever that is pleasant, or painful, or neutral,

²⁸ That is, feelings (*vedanā*) arising from sense-contact (*phoṭṭhabba*).

²⁹ *Dhamma* (properly, *dhammā*), ie, whatever that arises in the mind: thoughts, ideas, imaginations, dreams, etc.

that arises on account of mind-contact as condition—that, too, he sees as *other*.

7 Bhikshu, when a monk knows and sees thus, ignorance is abandoned by him and true knowledge arises.”

— evaṃ —

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