

# Avijjā Sutta 1

(Paṭhama Avijjā Sutta)

## The First Discourse on Ignorance

[How true knowledge arises]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 35.79/4:49 f)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2005

### (1) Introduction

Short and simple as this sutta may appear, but it is a profound teaching in connection with the practice of mindfulness. In fact, it is the essence of satipatthana practice: the contemplation of all phenomena as being impermanent. This exercise is found in the second and fourth parts of the expanded satipatthana formula, namely: “Watching the nature of arising, of passing away, and of arising and passing away.”<sup>1</sup> In the course of watching the body, feelings, the mind and dharmas, the practitioner goes on to watch the “nature of arising” (*samudaya, dhamma*), the “nature of passing away” (*vaya, dhamma*), and the “nature of (both) arising and passing away” (*samudaya, vaya, dhamma*).<sup>2</sup> **The Avijjā Sutta 1**<sup>3</sup> instructs that the senses, sense-objects and feelings that arise on account of the senses (whether pleasant, painful or neutral) are all impermanent—knowing this, one abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises in one.

In **the Madhu, piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18), Mahā Kaccāna explains how sense-experience arises, giving a more elaborate version than the one given here (and expounds it in terms of perception and mental proliferation):

<sup>4</sup>Friends, dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. **The meeting of the three is contact.**<sup>5</sup> With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one [112] perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about.<sup>6</sup> What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates.<sup>7</sup> What a

<sup>1</sup> Colloquially, this is often spoken of as “Watching the nature of rising, of falling (away), and of rising and falling (away).” See “The Satipatthana Suttas” = SD 13.1(3.1) Impermanence.

<sup>2</sup> See Gethin 2001:53 & Analayo 2003: 102 f. Cf AK Warder 1971b:282 f on this usage of *-dhamma* in the Nikāyas. The Comys, however, take *dhamma* as indicating the conditions for the arising and fall of the body, etc (see DA 3:765, 768, 769; MA 1:249 f), although the Subcomys also allow that *dhamma* can have the sense of “nature” here (DAṬ 2:381; MAPṬ:Be 1:350: *pakati, vācī vā dhamma, saddo*). In the end the point would seem to make little difference to the general purport of the expression: the *bhikkhu* sees how body, etc, arise and fall away. (Gethin’s fn; normalized)

<sup>3</sup> S 35.79/4:50 = SD 12.6.

<sup>4</sup> *Cakkhuñ ca āvuso paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhu, viññānam, tiṇṇam saṅgati phasso, phassa, paccayā vedanā, yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakketi, yaṃ vitakketi taṃ papañceti, yaṃ papañceti tato, -nidānam purisaṃ papañca, saññā, saṅkhā samudācaranti atītānagata, paccuppannesu cakkhu, viññeyyesu rūpesu.* A passage similar to this section is found in **the Pariññā S** (S 35.60) where, however, the learned noble disciple becomes disillusioned (*nibbindati*) with the contact arising from sense-organ, sense-object and sense-consciousness (also using the sentence, *tiṇṇam saṅgati phasso* [16]), and as such “becomes dispassionate (*virajjati*); through dispassion, he is liberated (*vimuccati*); through liberation, he understands, ‘Clinging has been fully understood by me.’” (S 35.60/4:32 f). **The Mahā Hatthi, padôpama S** (M 28) closes with a similar, beginning with the statement: “If, friends, internally **the eye** is unimpaired [intact] but no external forms come into its range, and there is no appropriate conscious engagement [appropriate act of attention] (*tajjo samannāhāro hoti*), then there is no appearance of that class of consciousness” (M 28.27-38/1:190 f). On Ñānananda’s notion of the three phases of mental proliferation, see **Madhu, piṇḍika S** (M 18) = SD 6.14 Introd (2).

<sup>5</sup> *Tiṇṇam saṅgati phasso*. For a discussion on this passage, see Bucknell 1999:318 f f.

<sup>6</sup> “One thinks about,” *vitakketi*. On how when thinking stops, desires do not arise, see **Sakka, pañha S** (D 21.2.2/2:277).

<sup>7</sup> This verse up to here is also found in (**Samuday’atthaṅgama**) **Loka S** (A 12.44/2:71-73) and (**Sabb’upā-dāna**) **Pariññā S** (S 35.60/4:32 f) in different contexts.

person mentally proliferates is the source through which perceptions and notions due to mental proliferation<sup>8</sup> impacts one regarding past, future and present forms cognizable through the eye.<sup>9</sup>

Friends, dependent on the ear and sounds, ear-consciousness arises....

Friends, dependent on the nose and smells, nose-consciousness arises....

Friends, dependent on the tongue and tastes, tongue-consciousness arises....

Friends, dependent on the body and touches, body-consciousness arises....

Friends, dependent on the mind<sup>10</sup> and mind-objects, mind-consciousness<sup>11</sup> arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates. What a person mentally proliferates is the source through which perceptions and notions due to mental proliferation impacts one regarding past, future and present mind-objects cognizable through the mind. (M 18.16/1:111 f)

The Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta actually relates what happens when the mind does not reflect on impermanence (as exhorted in the Avijjā Sutta here)—it “proliferates” (*papañceti*) into all kinds of distracting thoughts.

## (2) Related suttas

Similarly, **the Samudaya,dhamma Sutta 1**<sup>12</sup> is a reflection on the impermanence of the five aggregates. It should also be noted that the sutta defines “ignorance” (*avijjā*) as not knowing that the five aggregates are of the nature of arising, of passing away, and of arising and passing away; and “true knowledge” as truly knowing that the five aggregates are of the nature of arising, of passing away, and of arising and passing away.

While **the (Āyatana) Nandi-k,khaya Sutta 1**<sup>13</sup> shows how the mind is liberated through seeing the six senses as impermanent, its parallel, **the (Āyatana) Nandi-k,khaya Sutta 2**,<sup>14</sup> shows how the mind is liberated through seeing the six sense-objects as impermanent. Another parallel sutta, **the (Khandha) Nandi-k,khaya Sutta 1**,<sup>15</sup> on the other hand, shows how the reflection on the aggregates as being impermanent liberates one’s mind.

All this shows that “the direct experience of impermanence represents the ‘power’ aspect of meditative wisdom.”<sup>16</sup> **The Pañca Sekha,balā Sutta** (A 5.2)<sup>17</sup> mentions “the learner’s five powers,” that is, those qualities that would expedite a saint’s journey towards total arhathood. A parallel list, called “the factors of striving” (*padhāniyaṅga*), is given in **the Kaṇṇak-ṭṭhala Sutta** (M 90) and elsewhere.<sup>18</sup>

[For details of academic references, see SD 13 Bibliography.]

<sup>8</sup> *Papañca,saññā,saṅkhā*, see Introd (3).

<sup>9</sup> This important passage is the earliest statement on the Buddhist theory of perception. See Introd (4).

<sup>10</sup> “The mind,” *mana*. Here Comy glosses as *bhavaṅga,citta* (MA 2:79), the life-continuum, sometimes called the unconscious or sub-conscious.

<sup>11</sup> “Mind-consciousness,” *mano,viññāṇa*. Here Comy glosses as “advertence” (*āvajjana*) and impulsion (*javana*) (MA 2:77).

<sup>12</sup> S 22.126/3:171 = SD 12.5.

<sup>13</sup> S 35.156/142 = SD 12.7.

<sup>14</sup> S 35.156/142 = SD 12.8.

<sup>15</sup> S 22.51/3:51 = SD 12.9.

<sup>16</sup> Analayo 2003:103. Impermanence as the key aspect of insight is also emphasized by Fleishman 1986:11; Ledi 1999a:151; Nyanaponika 1958:60; Solé-Leris 1986:82; Than Daing 1970:62 (Analayo’s fn). See also Ledi 1965:283.

<sup>17</sup> A 5.2/3:2 = SD 12.10.

<sup>18</sup> M 90/2:125-133 = SD 10.8.

## The First Discourse on Ignorance

(S 35.79/4:49 f)

### How does true knowledge arise?

1 Originating in Sāvattḥī.

2 Then a certain monk approached the Blessed One, saluted him, and said down at one side. Having sat down at one side, he said this to the Blessed One:

3a “Venerable sir, is there the one thing, when abandoned by a monk, ignorance is abandoned, and true knowledge arises (in him)?”

3b “There is, monk, the one thing, when abandoned by a monk, ignorance is abandoned, and true knowledge arises (in him).”

4a “And what, venerable sir, is that one thing, when abandoned by a monk, ignorance is abandoned, and true knowledge arises (in him)?” [50]

4b “**Ignorance itself**, monk, is that one thing, when abandoned by a monk, ignorance is abandoned, and true knowledge arises (in him).<sup>19</sup>”

### Senses, sense-objects and feelings are impermanent

5 “But, venerable sir, how should a monk know, how should he see, so that he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him)?”

6 (1) “Monk, when a monk knows and sees **the eye as impermanent**, he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

When he knows and sees **forms** as impermanent, he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

When he knows and sees as impermanent **whatever feeling arising on account of eye-contact**—whether pleasant, or painful, or neutral [neither pleasant nor pleasant]—he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

7 (2) “Monk, when a monk knows and sees **the ear as impermanent**, he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

When he knows and sees **sounds** as impermanent, he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

When he knows and sees as impermanent **whatever feeling arising on account of ear-contact**—whether pleasant, or painful, or neutral [neither pleasant nor pleasant]—he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

8 (3) “Monk, when a monk knows and sees **the nose as impermanent**, he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

When he knows and sees **smells** as impermanent, he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

When he knows and sees as impermanent **whatever feeling arising on account of nose-contact**—whether pleasant, or painful, or neutral [neither pleasant nor pleasant]—he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

9 (4) “Monk, when a monk knows and sees **the tongue as impermanent**, he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

When he knows and sees **tastes** as impermanent, he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

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<sup>19</sup> Although this answer sounds tautologous in part, it reflects the question asked. Bodhi: “Though it may sound redundant that ignorance must be abandoned in order to abandon ignorance, this statement underscores the fact that ignorance is the most fundamental cause of bondage, which must be eliminated to eliminate all the other bonds.” (S:B 1405 n42).

When he knows and sees as impermanent **whatever feeling arising on account of tongue-contact**—whether pleasant, or painful, or neutral [neither pleasant nor pleasant]—he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

**10** (5) “Monk, when a monk knows and sees **the body as impermanent**, he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

When he knows and sees **touches** as impermanent, he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

When he knows and sees as impermanent **whatever feeling arising on account of body-contact**—whether pleasant, or painful, or neutral [neither pleasant nor pleasant]—he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

**11** (6) “Monk, when a monk knows and sees **the mind as impermanent**, he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

When he knows and sees **mind-objects [thoughts]** as impermanent, he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

When he knows and sees as impermanent **whatever feeling arising on account of mind-contact**—whether pleasant, or painful, or neutral [neither pleasant nor pleasant]—he abandons ignorance, and true knowledge arises (in him).

**12** Seeing thus, knowing thus, monk, ignorance is abandoned by a monk, and true knowledge arises (in him).”

—evam—

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