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(Sacca) Vijjā Sutta

The (Truth) Discourse on Knowledge | S 56.18

Theme: Fully understanding the noble truths brings awakening

Translated by Piya Tan ©2018

1 Sutta significance

1.1 The (Sacca) Vijjā Sutta (S 56.18) is a short text on the definition of **true knowledge** (*vijjā*) [1.2.4], that is, the “breakthrough into the 4 noble truths” [§§2-3]. Then, as in its “mirror” version,¹ **the (Sacca) Avijjā Sutta** (S 56.17), SD 53.30, the 4 truths are laid out in full. When we have broken through into the 4 noble truths we are said to be “accomplished in knowledge” (*vijjā,gata*) [§§4-5].

1.2 LIBERATING KNOWLEDGE

1.2.1 True knowledge liberates

1.2.1.1 The Vijjā Bhāgiya Sutta (A 2.3.10) gives this instructive definition of “**true knowledge**” (*vijjā*):

Bhikshus, there are these two things that comprise true knowledge. What are the two?
Calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*).²

Bhikshus, when **calm** is cultivated, what benefit does it bring? The mind is developed.
When the mind is developed, what benefit does it bring? All lust is abandoned.

Bhikshus, when **insight** is cultivated, what benefit does it bring? Wisdom is developed.
When wisdom is developed, what benefit does it bring? All ignorance is abandoned.

Bhikshus, a mind defiled by lust cannot free itself, and wisdom defiled by ignorance cannot grow.

Thus, bhikshus, through the fading away of lust there is the freedom of mind (*ceto,vimutti*);
through the fading away of ignorance, there is the freedom by wisdom (*paññā,vimutti*).

(A 2.3.10), SD 3.2(4.2)

Vijjā or liberating knowledge, then, arises from the common working of calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassana*).³ The calm mind is joyfully peaceful and the clear mind is wise and compassionate.

1.2.1.2 On a simple level, **calm** (*samatha*) refers to our mind fully at peace with itself, free from any distractions. This peaceful mental focus can arise from our mental cultivation, especially breath meditation⁴ or the cultivation of lovingkindness.⁵

¹ On “mirrored teachings,” see SD 53.14 (1.1.2).

² “Calm” (*samatha*) is the “one-pointedness of the mind” (*cittassa eka-g,gatā*), ie mental concentration culminating in the dhyanas (*jhāna*). “Insight” (*vipassanā*) is “the knowledge that comprehends the formations” (*saṅkhāra,pariggāhaka,ñāṇa*) as impermanent, unsatisfactory and not self” (AA 2:119).

³ A 2.3.10 (SD 3.2(4.2)).

⁴ On breath meditation, see **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118,5-7+15-22), SD 7.13; **Mahā Rāhu’ovāda S** (M 62,24-30), SD 3.11.

⁵ On cultivation of lovingkindness, see **Karaṇīya Metta S** (Khp 9 = Sn 1.8) & SD 38.3 (6).

On a deeper level, calm refers to the mental peace arising from dhyana (*jhāna*),⁶ that is, when our mind is fully free from all the 5 mental hindrances—lust for sensual pleasures, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt.⁷ This means that the mind, fully freed from the body, is fully focused on itself, at peace and blissful.

We should start by simply enjoying moments of a peaceful state of mind whenever we can. As we get used to this, we try to stay a bit longer when we enjoy the joy or peace. Then, we remain as long as we can, as long as we feel joyful or peaceful. Let all this happen naturally.⁸

In due course, we will notice periods of very profound peaceful or joyful states. At the end of such good meditations, we should review our meditation, even make journal notes if we like. Then, make an effort to understand what the suttas teach about dhyana (*jhāna*). As we improve in our dhyana meditation, we will emerge from it with a profoundly calm and clear mind.⁹

This is the kind of mind that is able to properly see and understand the nature of impermanence and suffering, and even non-self, in those who have developed the path, that is, attained streamwinning or beyond. When we are still unawakened, we should, having *aspired* for streamwinning, go on to reflect on **impermanence** regularly so that we will attain the path of streamwinning in this life itself.¹⁰

1.2.1.3 Vipassanā or “insight” is not itself the goal of Buddhist practice. It is only a vision—a seeing (*passanā*) through into (*vi*)—true reality.¹¹ A calm mind is the basis for insight, of seeing into true reality. Calmness is like a stable telescope with clean, clear lenses; insight is like our aiming the telescope in the right direction and looking at that area of the heavens.¹²

1.2.2 Direct knowledge

1.2.2.1 The Ākaṅkheyya Sutta (M 6), in a related teaching says that if we wish to gain **the direct knowledge** for attaining the liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom that are free from the mental influxes, that is, it (the direct knowledge) leads to arhathood. The Sutta’s commentary here explains that “mind” and “wisdom” refer respectively to concentration and wisdom associated with the fruition of arhathood.

1.2.2.2 Concentration is called “**freedom of mind**” (*ceto, vimutti*) because it frees us from *lust*; wisdom is called “**freedom by wisdom**” (*paññā, vimutti*) because it frees us from *ignorance* (by way of breaking through into the 4 noble truths).¹³

1.2.2.3 The freedom of mind is usually the result of meditative calm (*samatha*), while the freedom by wisdom is the result of meditative insight (*vipassanā*). But when they are coupled and described as “influx-free” (*anāsava*), they together arise from the destruction of the influxes by the path of arhathood.

⁶ On *jhāna*, see **Dhyana**, SD 8.4.

⁷ On the 5 mental hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇā*), see **Nīvaraṇā**, SD 32.1.

⁸ Traditionally, it is said that the longest a human can last in meditative dhyana is 7 days. After that, he has to emerge from it for a change of posture, to answer nature’s call and for sustenance.

⁹ See **Dhyana**, SD 8.4.

¹⁰ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

¹¹ See **(Vijjā Bhāgiya) Samatha Vipassanā S** (A 2.3.10), SD 3.2(4.2) + (4.3+4); **Refuge 2**, SD 3.2 (4.2).

¹² See SD 41.1 (3).

¹³ M 6,19/1:35 f (SD 59.1); MA 1:164 f.

1.2.3 Mind and wisdom

1.2.3.1 The Mahā Vedalla Sutta (M 43) summarizes these 5 qualities as the components that together bring about the fruition of arhathood in the manner just described [1.2.1.4]:

Right view should be supported:

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| (1) by moral virtue, | <i>sīlānuggahitā</i> |
| (2) by learning, | <i>sutānuggahitā</i> |
| (3) by discussion, | <i>sācakchā'nuggahitā</i> |
| (4) by calm, and | <i>samathānuggahitā</i> |
| (5) by insight. | <i>vipassanā'nuggahitā</i> ¹⁴ |

Right view, avuso, which

- (1) has freedom of mind for its fruit, and the benefit of the fruit of the freedom of mind; and
- (2) has freedom by wisdom for its fruit, and the benefit of the fruit of the freedom by wisdom, are assisted by these 5 factors. (M 43,14/1:294), SD 30.2

1.2.4 True knowledge

1.2.4.1 When **right view** (*sammā,ditṭhi*) pervades all the factors of the eightfold path—that is, our moral virtue, concentration and wisdom are all fully founded in right view—then we move on **right knowledge** (*sammā.ñāṇā*). While “right knowledge” specifically refers to the knowledge marking the completion of our journey on the noble path which frees us from suffering, **true knowledge** is a broader term for that freedom plus other attendant attainments. [1.2.4.2]

1.2.4.2 The oldest formula for “**true knowledge**” (*vijjā*) refers to “the 3 knowledges” (*te,vijjā*), which evolved in the suttas into a set of “eightfold knowledges (or superknowledges)” [1.3.4.3]. **The 3 knowledges** are:

- (1) the knowledge of the recollection of past lives (*pubbe,nivāsānussati ñāṇa*) or retrocognition;
- (2) the knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings according to their karma (*cutūpapāta,ñāṇa*), or the “divine eye” (*dibba,cakkhu*), that is, clairvoyance; and
- (3) the knowledge of the destruction of the mental influxes.

The first two knowledges are the 2 ways by which the Buddha authenticates his teachings, that is, by his personal experience or empirical evidence by way of the knowledge of (1) rebirth and (2) karma. But these 2 superknowledges (*abhiññā*) by themselves do not define awakening, since even someone unawakened, with the attainment of the 4th dhyana, may be able to attain them to some level. It is (3) the knowledge of the destruction of the mental influxes (those of sensual lust, existence and ignorance),¹⁵ that makes him an arhat or awakened one (like the Buddha).

¹⁴ “Insight” (*vipassanā*) here is clearly not a kind of meditation, but the various meditation-based knowledges into true reality that brings about the path of fruit of arhathood (MA 2:346).

¹⁵ The older formula gives these 3 influxes (respectively: *kām'āsava, bhav'āsava, āvijj'āsava*); **D 33**,1.10(20)/3:-216; **M 2**,99.3 (SD 8.10); **M 9**,70/1:55 (SD 11.14); **M 121**,12/3:108 (SD 11.3); **A 3.58**,5/1:165 (SD 94.5), **A 3.59**,4/-1:167 (SD 80.16), **A 6.63**,9/3:414 (SD 6.11). The later canonical formula adds a 4th influx, that of views (*dittṭh'āsava*) as no 3 (after that of existence): D 16,10.4 n (SD 9).

1.2.4.3 The set of “eightfold knowledges” (or superknowledges)” (**aṭṭha abhiññā*) is famously listed in the **Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2). They comprise the following:

(1) insight knowledge (on the nature of the conscious body);	<i>vipassanā,ñāṇa</i>
(2) the power of creating of a mind-made body;	<i>mano,mayā iddhi</i>
(3) psychic powers;	<i>iddhi,vidhā</i>
(4) the divine ear;	<i>dibba,sota</i>
(5) the knowledge of reading the minds of others;	<i>parassa ceto,pariya,ñāṇa</i>
(6) the knowledge of the recollection of one’s past lives;	<i>pubbe,nivāsānussati ñāṇa</i>
(7) the divine eye (recollection of others’ karma and past lives); and	<i>dibba,cakkhu or cutūpapāta,ñāṇa</i>
(8) the knowledge of the destruction of the mental influxes.	<i>āsava-k,khaya ñāṇa</i>

(D 2,85-100/1:76-85), SD 8.10¹⁶

This eightfold set contains the 3 knowledges—the last 3 knowledges—along with other attainments of the arhat. This is the most comprehensive definition of the knowledge of a full-fledged arhat, that is, a “6-knowledge arhat” (*cha-ḷ-abhiññā arahata*), one who has various psychic powers, and is able to know his past lives and those of others (although not as extensive as the Buddha’s powers).

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(Sacca) Vijjā Sutta The (Truth) Discourse on Knowledge

S 56.18

1 Then, a certain monk approached the Blessed One, saluted him and sat down at one side. Sitting at one side, the monk said to the Blessed One:

2 “**Knowledge**, knowledge! (*vijjā*),’ bhante, it is said. What, indeed, bhante, is knowledge? In what way is one **accomplished in knowledge** (*vijjâgata*)?”¹⁷ [430]

3 “Bhikshus, knowing **suffering**, knowing the **arising** of suffering, knowing the **ending** of suffering, knowing the **path** leading to the ending of suffering—

*dukkhe ñāṇaṃ
dukkha,samudaye ñāṇaṃ
dukkha,nirodhe ñāṇaṃ
dukkha,nirodha,gāminiyā
paṭipadāya ñāṇaṃ*

4 this, bhikshus, is called knowledge, and in that way, one is accomplished in knowledge.¹⁸

5 Therefore, bhikshus, You should devote yourself (to the reflection):¹⁹ “This is suffering.”

¹⁶ See also **Paṃsu,dhovaka S** (A 3.100,1-10/1:253-256), SD 19.11. On these 6 superknowledges, see SD 27.5a (5).

¹⁷ *Vijjā vijjā’ti bhante vuccati, katamā nu kho bhante vijjā? Kittāvatā ca vijjā,gato hotīti?* The suffix *-gata*, “gone (to)” (past part of *gacchati*, “he goes”) has a contextual sense; here, meaning “accomplished in (knowledge)”: cf its usage at (**Sacca**) **Avijjā S** (S 56.19,2)+n, SD 53.32. See §4 n.

¹⁸ *Ettāvatā ca vijjā,gato hoti*. This phrase replies to *Kittāvatā ca avijjā,gato hoti* [§1]; alt trs: *kittāvata*, “to what extent?” and *ettāvat,ā* “to that extent.”

¹⁹ *Idaṃ dukkhaṇ’ti yogo karaṇīyo*.

You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the arising of suffering.”
You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the ending of suffering.”
You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the path leading to the ending of suffering.”

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