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## Saṅkāsana Sutta

The Discourse on Explaining | S 56.19  
Theme: The profundity of the 4 noble truths  
Translated by Piya Tan ©2018

1 Sutta summary and significance

**1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY.** The **Saṅkāsana Sutta** (S 56.19) is about the versatility of the 4 noble truths. They—especially the 1<sup>st</sup> truth—can be explained in many different ways for our benefit [1.3]. This, however, is only fully efficacious when we have overcome our defilements [1.2.1].

The Buddha advises us to constantly reflect on these truths [§5]. As our understanding of the truths deepen, we begin to understand true reality better, and this helps us to identify and overcome our defilements [§5]. This further deepens our understanding of the 4 truths.

**1.2 DHAMMAPADA 352**

**1.2.1** The most difficult part of this Sutta is the key recurrent phrase qualifying each of the 4 truths, especially the underscored words: *Tattha aparimāṇā vannaṃ, aparimāṇā vyaññanā, aparimāṇā saṅkāsa-**nā* [§§1-4]. This verse from **the Dhammapada** throws some light on this phrase and this Sutta:

*Vīta,taṅho anādāno  
nirutti,pada,kovido  
akkharānaṃ sannipātāṃ  
jaññā pubba,parāni ca  
sa ve antima,sārīro  
mahā,pañño (mahā,puriso) 'ti<sup>2</sup> vuccati.*

Without craving, without grasping,  
skilled in words and their expression,<sup>1</sup>  
knowing how syllables are arranged,  
which come before and which after,  
the one in his final body is, indeed,  
said to be (a great person,) one of great wisdom.

(Dh 352)<sup>3</sup>

**1.2.2** The words *nirutti*, *pada* and *akkharānaṃ* are closely related to the 3 key terms in **the Saṅkāsana Sutta**. But first let us examine the meanings of these words. **Nirutti** is usually translated as “language,” and is the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the 4 analytic skills (*catu,paṭisambhidā*) [Dh 352b n]. Here, however, it has been rendered broadly as “expression.”<sup>4</sup>

**Pada** usually translates as “foot” or line of a verse;<sup>5</sup> but here, from the context, it is better to render it as “word.”<sup>6</sup> And **akkhara** (literally, “imperishable”; genitive plural *akkharānaṃ*) usually means “a vowel, a letter, a phoneme (*a ā* etc)” or “sound, syllable.”<sup>7</sup> Here, it is rendered as “syllables.”

<sup>1</sup> This line alludes to the 4 analytic insights (*paṭisambhidā*), ie, those in (1) meanings (*attha paṭisambhidā*); (2) dharma [causes and conditions] (*dhamma,paṭisambhidā*); (3) language (*nirutti,paṭisambhidā*); and (4) ready wit (*paṭibhāṇa,paṭisambhidā*): SD 28.4 (4); SD 41.6 (2.2).

<sup>2</sup> Both *mahā,pañño* and *mahā,puriso* (hypermetrical) and found in Comy. “Possibly *mahā,puriso* has been included in the text because of its occurrence in the Comy [DhA 4:71,7-12]” (Dh:N 148) n352. *Mahā,puriso* is omitted from Patna Dh verse.

<sup>3</sup> Appreciative thanks to Bh Anandajoti (Facebook message, 16 Aug 2018) for his Dh 352 tr and suggestions.

<sup>4</sup> Anandajoti suggests “explanation.”

<sup>5</sup> In western (such a Greek) prosody, a “foot” is a group of 2-3 syllables forming the basic unit of poetic rhythm.

<sup>6</sup> *Pada* occurs as “word” in Dh 44-45, 100 (*attha*~, “meaningful word”), 100-102 (*anatta*~, “useless words”), 101 (*gāthā*~, “a word of a verse”), 102, 352. See Dh:N 61 n1 & 148 n352.

<sup>7</sup> See DP sv for refs.

### 1.3 COMMENTARY

**1.3.1 The Saṃyutta Commentary** explains that *appamāṇā vaṇṇā* are the immeasurable vowels (*akkharāni*). *Byañjanā* [*vyañjanā*] are simply their synonym (*vevacanaṃ*); that is to say, *byañjanā* are the syllables (*vaṇṇānaṃ*) or a part thereof [1.3.2]. *Saṅkāsana* means grammar (*vibhatti*)<sup>8</sup> [1.3.3]. For, the truths in all their aspects are not given in detail within any one of the vowels and so on. Therefore, it is said thus.<sup>9</sup>

#### 1.3.2 “Vowels” and “consonants”

**1.3.2.1** The translation “Therein lie countless vowels, countless consonants” [§§1-4] is in keeping with the Pali idiom. This is the way that the ancients understood the profundity of the noble truths. The question now is how are we to understand this sentence today? For an insight into this idiomatic expression of the Pali passage, we have to analyse the two key words: vowels (*akkhara*) and consonants (*vyañjana*).

**1.3.2.2** Taken literally, *akkhara* is the “imperishable” quality of language or the Dhamma itself. This is clearly the sense when we speak of the Dharma as “pre-existent,” that is, the universal characteristics (impermanence, suffering and non-self) comprise true reality whether the buddhas arise or not.<sup>10</sup> This “imperishable” reality is expressed in human language as the 4 noble truths.

Furthermore, a vowel (*sara*) is what gives sound or voice to the *consonants* are the truths so that we are able to express them. What we can express can be discussed, examined, disseminated and practiced so that we awaken to true reality. The 4 noble truths, then, are also the voice of true reality.

**1.3.2.3** In such an interpretation, we must take care not to impose any modern category onto what the passage entails. One way to avoid such an inauthentic interpretation of early Buddhism is to examine where the term is already in use in the suttas. From such passages, we should be able to tease out the sense that is applicable in our present Saṅkāsana Sutta context.

In the well-known *nimitta, vyañjana pericope* on the Buddha’s admonition that we should “grasp neither the signs nor the details” (*na nimitta-g, gāhī nānuyañjana-g, gāhī hoti*) of any sense-experience,<sup>11</sup> the word *nimitta* means “signs,” that is, first impressions of a sense-object, while *vyañjana* means its “details.”

Based on this understanding, we can rightly surmise *vaṇṇa* as the statement of the 4 truths on a word level: our first impression of them. Then, *vyañjana* refers to the details we need to work out and understand. *Saṅkāsana* refers to the explanations of their details in a variety of ways, such as by way of commentaries, metaphors, parables and stories.

**1.3.3** The Commentarial glossing *saṅkāsana* as “grammar” (*vibhatti*) is quite narrow. *Vibhatti*, other than its grammatical senses [1.3.1], has the following senses: “division, distinction, classification, detail, variety” which seem to apply better to the Sutta context here. It is unlikely that the Sutta or any sutta is

<sup>8</sup> Technically, *vibhatti* means “inflection (of nouns or verbs), declension (of nouns, pronouns and adjectives), conjugation (of verbs).” [1.3.2]

<sup>9</sup> *Navame aparimāṇā vaṇṇāni appamāṇāni akkharāni. Byañjanāti tesam yeva vevacanaṃ, vaṇṇānaṃ vā ekadesā yad’idaṃ byañjanā nāma. Saṅkāsanaṃti vibhattiyo. Ekam-ekasmiṃ hi sacce sabb’ākārena vitthāriyamāne vaṇṇ’ādīnam anto nāma n’atthi. Tasmā evam āha. (SA 3:298,23-26)*

<sup>10</sup> See *Dhamma, niyāma S* (A 3.134) SD 26.8; also SD 1.2 (2); SD 18.2 (2.2)..

<sup>11</sup> Such as in *Sāmañña, phala S* (D 2,64/1:70), SD 8.10; see SD 19.14.

likely to have the grammatical sense on account of their earliness. Anyway, the commentarial glosses seem to be too narrow and technical.

The dictionary meaning of *saṅkāsana* (derived from *saṃ*, “combining,” + √काś, to sound) is simply “explanations, illustration.”<sup>12</sup> These senses clearly fit the Sutta context best.

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## Saṅkāsana Sutta

### The Discourse on Explaining

S 56.19

**1** “This is **the noble truth that is suffering**,’ thus, bhikshus, it is declared by me.<sup>13</sup>  
Therein lie countless vowels, countless consonants [details],<sup>14</sup> countless explanations,<sup>15</sup>  
that is to say, this noble truth that is suffering.<sup>16</sup>

**2** ‘This is **the noble truth that is the arising of suffering**,’ thus, bhikshus, it is declared by me.  
*Therein lie countless vowels, countless consonants, countless explanations,*  
that is to say, this noble truth that is the arising of suffering.

**3** ‘This is **the noble truth that is the ending of suffering**,’ thus, bhikshus, it is declared by me.  
*Therein lie countless vowels, countless consonants, countless explanations,*  
that is to say, this noble truth that is the ending of suffering.

**4** ‘This is **the noble truth that is the path to the ending of suffering**,’ thus, bhikshus, it is declared  
by me.  
*Therein lie countless vowels, countless consonants, countless explanations,*  
that is to say, this noble truth that is the path to the ending of suffering.

**5** Therefore, bhikshus,  
You should devote yourself (to the reflection):<sup>17</sup> “This is suffering.”  
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.”

— evaṃ —

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<sup>12</sup> On *saṅkāsana* as “explaining,” see UA:9 (UA:M 1:22); Nett:Ñ 304 sv. See PED sv.

<sup>13</sup> *Idaṃ dukkhaṃ ariya, saccaṃ ti bhikkhave mayā paññattaṃ*. Alt tr: “The noble truth of suffering, monks, has been made known by me” (Anandajoti).

<sup>14</sup> On the trs “vowels” and “consonants,” see (1.3.2).

<sup>15</sup> *Tattha aparimāṇā vaṇṇā, aparimāṇā vyañjanā, aparimāṇā saṅkāsana*. See (1.3).

<sup>16</sup> *Iti’p’idaṃ dukkhaṃ ariya, saccaṃ ti*.

<sup>17</sup> *Idaṃ dukkhaṃ ti yogo karaṇīyo*.