

Avijjā Pahāna Sutta 2

The Second Discourse on Abandoning Ignorance

[How to let go of “everything”]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 35.80/4:50)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2005

Introduction

1 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

[11a] “In what way, venerable sir, 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

⁴11b “Here, Moggallāna, the monk has learned⁵ that nothing is worth clinging to.⁶ And, Moggallāna, a monk has learned that nothing is worth clinging to, thus: he directly understands⁷ all things [he directly understands the nature of the all].⁸ Having directly understood the nature of all things, he fully understands⁹ all things.

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 [11b] 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 understands,” *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 three 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, unsatisfactoriness, not-self) as its objects, and which arises when attributing a universal characteristic to a physical and

11c Having fully understood all things, he knows whatever feelings there are, whether pleasant, painful or neither painful nor pleasant.

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

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],

he does not cling to anything in the world; not clinging, he is not agitated; being not agitated, he attains nirvana for himself.

He understands. ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done what had to be done, there is no more for this state of being.’¹¹ (A 7.58/4:88) = SD 4.11

Passage 11b of the Pacalā Sutta is very close to that in **the Avijjā Pahāna Sutta 2** (A 35.80) [6ab]. The ensuing passage [6b], however, is different only in wording, but same in spirit, applying the teaching of “the all” (*sabba*).¹²

2 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,¹³ 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).¹⁴

— — —

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 of 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.

¹¹ This para describing the arhat is stock: V 1:14; D 1:84; M 2:39; S 2:82.

¹² 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.

¹³ The 12 links are: (1) ignorance, (2) volitional formations, (3) consciousness, (4) name-and-form, (5) the six 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).

¹⁴ S 12.44/2:71-73 = SD 7.5. On breaking out of the cycle, see **Dependent Arising** = SD 5.16(18).

The Second Discourse on Abandoning Ignorance (S 35.80/4:50)

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:

“Venerable sir, is there the one thing through whose abandoning ignorance is abandoned by a monk, and true knowledge arises?”

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

4 “And what is that one thing, venerable sir?” “Ignorance, monk, is the one thing through whose abandoning ignorance is abandoned by a monk, and true knowledge arises.”¹⁵

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

Seeing signs differently

6 (1) “Here, bhikshu, the monk has learned [heard] that *nothing is worth clinging to*. And a monk has learned that nothing is worth clinging to, thus: *he directly knows all things*. Having directly understood all things, *he fully understands*¹⁶ *all things*.

¹⁷Having fully understood everything, he sees all signs differently.¹⁸

He sees **the eye** differently; he sees forms differently; he sees eye-consciousness differently; he sees eye-contact differently. Whatever that is pleasant, or painful, or neutral, that arises on account of eye-contact as condition, that, too, he sees differently.

(2) “Here, bhikshu, the monk has learned [heard] that *nothing is worth clinging to*. And a monk has learned that nothing is worth clinging to, thus: *he directly knows all things*. Having directly understood all things, *he fully understands all things*.

Having fully understood everything, he sees all signs differently:

He sees **the ear** differently; he sees sounds differently; he sees ear-consciousness differently; he sees ear-contact differently. Whatever that is pleasant, or painful, or neutral, that arises on account of ear-contact as condition, that, too, he sees differently.

(3) “Here, bhikshu, the monk has learned [heard] that *nothing is worth clinging to*. And a monk has learned that nothing is worth clinging to, thus: *he directly knows all things*. Having directly understood all things, *he fully understands all things*.

Having fully understood everything, he sees all signs differently:

¹⁵ “Though it may sound redundant to say 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 other bonds.” (Bodhi, S:B 1405 n42). Another explanation is that the certain monk has put the question wrong, and the Buddha is merely giving the proper answer.

¹⁶ “He fully understands,” *parijānāti*, meaning “he comprehends, knows fully for certain.” See Intro 1 (text) 11b n for details.

¹⁷ *Sabbam dhammam pariññāya sabba, nimittāni aññato passati; cakkhum aññato passati, rūpe aññato passati, cakkhu, viññānam aññato passati; ...yam p’idaṃ mano samphassa, paccayā uppajjati vedayitaṃ sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkham asukhaṃ vā. Tam pi annato passato.*

¹⁸ Comy: “He sees all signs differently” (*sabba, nimittāni aññato passati*) means that he sees the signs of formations (*saṅkhāra, nimittāni*) differently from those who have not fully understood the worldly inclinations (*abhinive-sā*). For such people see all signs as self, but one who has fully understood the worldly inclinations, sees them as not-self, not as a self. Thus is the characteristic of not-self discussed in this sutta. (SA 2:370).

He sees **the nose** differently; he sees smells differently; he sees nose-consciousness differently; he sees nose-contact differently. Whatever that is pleasant, or painful, or neutral, that arises on account of nose-contact as condition, that, too, he sees differently.

(4) “Here, bhikshu, the monk has learned [heard] that *nothing is worth clinging to*. And a monk has learned that nothing is worth clinging to, thus: *he directly knows all things*. Having directly understood all things, *he fully understands all things*.

Having fully understood everything, he sees all signs differently:

He sees **the tongue** differently; he sees tastes differently; he sees tongue-consciousness differently; he sees tongue-contact differently. Whatever that is pleasant, or painful, or neutral, that arises on account of tongue-contact as condition, that, too, he sees differently.

(5) “Here, bhikshu, the monk has learned [heard] that *nothing is worth clinging to*. And a monk has learned that nothing is worth clinging to, thus: *he directly knows all things*. Having directly understood all things, *he fully understands all things*.

Having fully understood everything, he sees all signs differently:

He sees **the body** differently; he sees touches differently; he sees body-consciousness differently; he sees body-contact differently. Whatever that is pleasant, or painful, or neutral, that arises on account of body-contact as condition, that, too, he sees differently.

(6) “Here, bhikshu, the monk has learned [heard] that *nothing is worth clinging to*. And a monk has learned that nothing is worth clinging to, thus: *he directly knows all things*. Having directly understood all things, *he fully understands all things*.

Having fully understood everything, he sees all signs differently:

He sees **the mind** differently; he sees mind-objects differently; he sees mind-consciousness differently; he sees mind-contact differently. Whatever that is pleasant, or painful, or neutral, that arises on account of mind-contact as condition, that, too, he sees differently.

7 Monk, when a monk knows and sees thus, ignorance is abandoned by him and true knowledge (*vijjā*) arises.”

— evaṃ —

050821; 060810; 070828a