

Upāya Sutta

The Discourse on Engagement

[Letting go of the five aggregates]
(Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.53/3:53 f)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2006

1 How consciousness evolves

The short **Upāya Sutta** (S 22.53) is about the five aggregates and how consciousness is unestablished, that is, finds no footing, and so ending suffering and rebirth. The discourse opens with the Buddha saying,

Bhikshus, *consciousness*, while active [standing], would be actively engaged with (form | feeling | perception | formations);
based on (form | feeling | perception | formations), established on (form | feeling | perception | formations), with a sprinkling¹ of delight, it (consciousness) would come to grow, to increase, to being abundant. (S 22.53.4-5/3:53) = SD 29.4

This opening passage is alluded to in **Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33), where the first four aggregates are referred to as

the four stations of consciousness (*viññāṇa-ṭṭhiti*). Consciousness gains a footing either

- (1) in relation of form, with form as object and basis, as a place of enjoyment, or similarly in regard to
- (2) feelings,
- (3) perception, or
- (4) formations, and there it grows, increases, becomes abundant. (D 33.1.11(18)/3:228; Nc 1)

Why is consciousness not “engaged” with itself? The Commentary to **the Hālidakāni Sutta 1** (S 22.3)² explains as follows. An earlier karmic consciousness is a condition for both a later karmic consciousness and a resultant consciousness, and a resultant consciousness for both a (later) resultant consciousness and a (later) karmic consciousness. Therefore, the confusion could arise, “Which [what kind of] consciousness is meant here?” To avoid this, consciousness is not included, and the teaching expressed without breach. Furthermore, the other four aggregates, as objects (*ārammaṇa, vasena*), are said to be “stations for the karmically generative consciousness” (*abhisankhāra, viññāṇa-ṭṭhitiyo*). As such, consciousness is not mentioned here.³ (SA 2:259)

2 Related discourses

Here we see how consciousness evolves depending on the other four aggregates. As such, this discourse should be studied with the following discourses:

Cetanā Sutta 1	S 12.38	Karma still works without intention.
Cetanā Sutta 2	S 12.39	Latent tendencies lead to rebirth.
Cetanā Sutta 3	S 12.40	Our inclinations are conditioned by latent tendencies.

¹ *Upasecana*, see text [§4] n below.

² See S 22.34.7/3:10 = SD 10.12.

³ *Kasmā pan’ettha “viññāṇa, dhātu kho, gahapatī ti na vuttanti? Sammoha, vighāt’attham. “Oko” ti hi atthato paccayo vuccati, purejātañ ca kamma, viññāṇam pacchājātassa kamma, viññāṇassa pi vipāka, viññāṇassa pi vipāka, viññāṇañ ca vipāka, viññāṇassa pi kamma, viññāṇassa pi paccayo hoti. Tasmā “kataram nu kho idha viññāṇan?” ti sammoho bhaveyya, tassā vighāt’attham tam agahetvā asambhinnā va desanā katā. Api ca ārammaṇa, vasena cataso abhisankhāra, viññāṇa-ṭṭhitiyo vuttā ti tā dassetum pi idha viññāṇam na gahitam.* (SA 2:259)

Atthi,rāga Sutta	S 12.64	Craving as the basis for consciousness.
(Pacchā,bhūmaka,gāmikā)		
Deva,daha Sutta	S 22.2	How to teach the Dharma.

3 The discourse's key teaching

The **Upāya Sutta** (S 22.53) has this key teaching:

If, bhikshus, a monk has abandoned lust for (the form element, | the feeling element, | the perception element, | for the formations element, | the consciousness element,) with the abandoning of lust, the basis [condition] is cut off (*vocchijjat'ārammaṇa*). There is no establishing of consciousness.

And when that consciousness is unestablished, not growing, not generative [not fabricative], it is liberated... (S 22.53.6-11/3:63 f) = SD 29.4

The Sāmyutta Commentary explains “**the basis is cut off**” (*vocchijjat'ārammaṇam*) as meaning that the basis or condition is cut off through the lack of any ability to bring about rebirth (SA 2:271). The Ṭīkā adds that the basis is *the condition for rebirth* by way of the karmic sign, etc, is “cut off” by way of the cutting off of karma that produces rebirth (SAṬ:VRI 2:198). **Bodhi** notes that

SAṬ [the Porāṇa Ṭīkā] thus takes *ārammaṇa* here in the sense dominant in the Abhidhamma, ie, as the object of rebirth-consciousness [see Abhs:BRS 3.17]. However, I understand the word in the older sense of “basis,” elsewhere glossed simply as *paccaya*; [see S:B 759 n112]. SA's explanation need not entail the interpretation proposed by SAṬ. (S:B 1060 n71; refs normalized)

The term **non-generative** (*anābhisankhāra*) refers to the consciousness that does not generate formations (*sankhāra*). The Commentary says that it is “liberated” because it does not generate rebirth (SA 2:271). The discourse closes by declaring that such a person has attained nirvana.

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The Discourse on Engagement

(S 22.53/3:53 f)

- 1 Originating at Sāvattḥī.
- 2 There the Blessed One said this:

Disengaging with the aggregates

3 “Bhikshus, the engaged is unliberated; the disengaged is liberated.⁴

4 Bhikshus, *consciousness*,⁵ while active [standing], would be actively engaged with form; based on form, established on form, with a sprinkling⁶ of delight, it (consciousness) would come to grow, to increase, to being abundant.⁷

⁸Or, *consciousness*, while active [standing], would be actively engaged with feeling; based on feeling, established on feeling, with a sprinkling of delight, it would come to grow, to increase, to being abundant.

Or, *consciousness*, while active [standing], would be actively engaged with perception; based on perception, established on perception, with a sprinkling of delight, it would come to grow, to increase, to being abundant.

Or, *consciousness*, while active [standing], would be actively engaged with formations; based on formations, established on formations, with a sprinkling of delight, it would come to grow, to increase, to being abundant.

5 Bhikshus, if someone were to say thus:

‘Apart from form, apart from feeling, apart from perception, apart from formations, I will make known the coming and going of consciousness, or its passing away and re-arising, or its growth, increase and abundance’—this is not possible.

Abandoning lust for the aggregates

6 Bhikshus, if a monk’s lust for the *form* element has been abandoned, with the abandoning of lust, the basis [condition] is cut off.⁹ There is no support for consciousness.¹⁰

7 Bhikshus, if a monk’s lust for the *feeling* element has been abandoned, with the abandoning of lust, the basis [condition] is cut off. There is no support for consciousness.

8 Bhikshus, if a monk’s lust for the *perception* element has been abandoned,

⁴ Ee Se *upāyo* [Be Ce *upayo*] *bhikkhave avimutto, anupayo vimutto*. Bodhi prefers *upaya*: “Here it seems the noun is being used as a virtual present participle/” (S:B 1059 n 69). Comy explains *upāya* as “one who has gone up close (*upagato*) to the five aggregates on account of craving, conceit and views” (SA 2:271).

⁵ *Viññāna*, which Comy glosses as “karmic consciousness” (*kamma, viññāna*), which apparently refers to “re-birth consciousness” because it explains “would come to” (*āpajjeyya*) thus: “by *āpajjeyya* is meant that having allowed karma to reach impulsion (*javana*), one would come to growth, etc, that allows one to be sucked into rebirth (*paṭisandhi*)” (*āpajjeyyāti kammaṃ javāpetvā paṭisandhi, ākaḍḍhana, samatthatāya vuddhi, ādīni āpajjeyya*, SA 2:271). As such, evidently “existential consciousness” (ie rebirth consciousness) is meant; but the rest of the discourse explains the process of “cognitive consciousness”: see *Viññāna* = SD 17.8a (6).

⁶ Ee *upasevana* (“serving; cultivating”); Be Ce Se *upasecana* (“a sprinkling”). Comy is silent. Our reading is supported by “the underlying metaphor of vegetation, which is made explicit in the simile in the next sutta [Bīja S, S 22.54]. In the simile *nandirāga* is compared to the water element, and it is thus appropriate that it be ‘sprinkled’.” (S:B 1059 n70).

⁷ *Rūp’upāyam* [Ce Ke Se *rūpūpāyam*; Ee Ka *rūp’upāyam*] *vā, bhikkhave, viññānam tiṭṭhamānam tiṭṭheyya, rūp’ārammaṇam rūpa-p, patiṭṭham nandūpasecanaṃ* [Ee *nand’upasevanaṃ*] *vuddhiṃ virūḷhiṃ vepullaṃ āpajjeyya*. See Intro (1).

⁸ Be Ee omits the passages on *vedanā* and *saññā*, apparently an old scribal error.

⁹ “The basis [condition] is cut off” (*vocchijjat’ārammaṇa*): see Intro (3).

¹⁰ *Rāgassa pahānā vocchijjat’ārammaṇam patiṭṭhā viññānassa na hoti*.

with the abandoning of lust, the basis [condition] is cut off. There is no support for consciousness.

9 Bhikshus, if a monk's lust for the *formation* element has been abandoned, with the abandoning of lust, the basis [condition] is cut off. There is no support for consciousness.

10 Bhikshus, if a monk's lust for the *consciousness* element has been abandoned, with the abandoning of lust, the basis [condition] is cut off. There is no support for consciousness.

Consciousness is unestablished

11 When that consciousness is unestablished, not growing, [54] not generative [not fabricative], it is liberated.¹¹

On account of being liberated, it is steady.

On account of being steady, it is contented.

On account of being contented, it is not agitated.

On account of being unagitated, he himself attains nirvana.¹²

He understands,

‘Destroyed is birth. The holy life has been lived. Done what needs to be done. There is no more of this state of being.’”

— evaṃ —

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¹¹ *Tad appatīṭṭhitam viññānam avirūlham anabhisāṅkhacca* [Be Ce Se so; Ee *anabhisāṅkhāraṇ ca*] *vimuttam*. The ungenerative (*anabhisāṅkhicca*) consciousness is the consciousness that does not generate formations (*sāṅkhāra*). Comy says that it is “liberated” (*vimutta*) because it does not produce rebirth (SA 2:271)..

¹² *Aparitassam paccattaṇ ñeva parinibbāyati*.