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(Khandha) Sakkāya Sutta

The Discourse on Self-identity | S 22.105

Theme: The 4 truths of self-identity

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2013

1 Self-identity

1.1 THE SAKKĀYA SUTTA (S 22.105) uses the same structure as **the (Khandha) Dukkha Sutta** (S 22.-104), which gives the “basic set” of the 4 truths of true reality, well known as “the 4 noble truths.”¹ In both these ancient suttas, however, the qualifier “noble” (*ariya*) is not used.²

The Sakkāya Sutta defines “self-identity” (*sakkāya*) as the first truth of true reality itself, that is, the 5 aggregates [§3]. In other words, self-identity is treated as being synonymous with “suffering” (*dukkha*).

1.2 THE 4 TRUTHS OF SELF-IDENTITY. In fact, there is a sutta that actually defines “self-identity” (*sakkāya*) in this way—as the first truth itself, that is, the 5 aggregates [§3], that is, **the Sakkāya Pañha Sutta** (S 38.15):

SD 41.21(1.2)

Sakkāya Pañhā Sutta

The Discourse on the Self-identity Question | S 38.15/4:259 f

S 4.4.1.15 Sāmyutta Nikāya 4, Catuttha Paṇṇāsaka 4, Jambu,khadaka Saṃy 1, Jambu,khadaka Vg 15

Theme: The 4 truths of self-identity

What is self-identity?

- 1 “‘Self-identity! Self-identity!’ so it is said, avuso Sāriputta.
- 2 What now, avuso Sāriputta, is self-identity?”

The 5 aggregates

3 “These 5 aggregates of clinging, avuso, are spoken of by the Blessed One to be self-identity, namely:

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|--|--|
| (1) the aggregate of clinging that is <u>form</u> ; | <i>rūp’upādāna-k,khandha</i> |
| (2) the aggregate of clinging that is <u>feeling</u> ; | <i>vedan’upādāna-k,khandha</i> |
| (3) the aggregate of clinging that is <u>perception</u> ; | <i>saññ’upādāna-k,khandha</i> |
| (4) the aggregate of clinging that is <u>formations</u> ; | <i>saṅkhār’upādāna-k,khandha</i> [260] |
| (5) the aggregate of clinging that is <u>consciousness</u> . | <i>viññāṇ’upādāna-k,khandha</i> |

These, avuso, are the 5 aggregates of clinging that are spoken of by the Blessed One to be self-identity.”

Fully knowing self-identity

- 4.1 “But, avuso, is there a way, is there a path, for the fully knowing of this self-identity?”³
- 4.2 “There is, avuso, a way, there is a path, for the fully knowing of this self-identity.
But what, avuso, is that way, that path, for the fully knowing of this self-identity?”

¹ S 22.104/3:158 f (SD 42.20).

² See S 22.104 (SD 42.20 (1)).

³ *Atthi pan’āvuso maggo, atthi paṭipadā etassa sakkāyassa pariññāyāti.*

- 5 It is this very noble eightfold path, that is to say,
- | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| (1) right view, | <i>sammā,diṭṭhi</i> |
| (2) right thought [right intention], | <i>sammā,saṅkappa</i> |
| (3) right speech, | <i>sammā,vācā</i> |
| (4) right action, | <i>sammā,kamm'antā</i> |
| (5) right livelihood, | <i>sammā,ājīva</i> |
| (6) right effort, | <i>sammā,vāyāma</i> |
| (7) right mindfulness, | <i>sammā,sati</i> |
| (8) right concentration. | <i>sammā,samādhi</i> |
- This, avuso, is that way, that path, for the fully knowing of this self-identity.”

The path is auspicious

- 6 “Auspicious, avuso, is the way, auspicious is the path, for the fully knowing of this self-identity.⁴ And it is sufficient, avuso Sāriputta, for diligence.”⁵

— evaṃ —

1.3 SELF-IDENTITY AS A FETTER. “Self-identity” is a view—the self-identity “view” (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*)—a false notion that our body, physically or mentally, is or has an abiding entity (an unchanging, eternal self or soul). Those who entertain this false view might even speculate that if this purported abiding entity is not found within the body or the 5 aggregates, it might be found *outside* of them.

Such a view is invariably connected with eternalist views, such as those of an eternal creator God. Such a view is negative for various reasons. It tends to promote fixed notions of personality, that we do not need to make any effort in personal development, but only need to show “faith” in some imagined eternal, all-powerful deity. Such a view sees man as “originally evil” and in need of salvation, and only some external deity or belief system is purported to “save” us. In such a system, we are also likely to blame some external agency for our evil nature or bad acts.⁶

2 The arising of self-identity

2.1 Early Buddhist teachings however point to **ignorance**, stretching back into the timeless past until our present, that has brought suffering upon us and stunt our spiritual growth. On account of this ignorance, we have **craving** (a perceived sense of lack) in the present moment, conditioning our future lives, too. Craving is fed by ignorance, which in turn feed craving, like a blind man (craving) being carried piggy-back by a lame man (ignorance) who directs the way.

Our human parents, in bringing us life, have given us a physical body. Our minds, however, need to be separately nurtured, first by our parents or care-givers, our family and relatives, our schooling and peers, our religions or some kind of beliefs. Such influences and our various experiences since day one will mould our self-based view or simply “self-view” (*attā'nudiṭṭhi*), which invariably leads to self-identity view (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*), unless we are touched by the Dharma.⁷

Through ignorance, too, we regard (*samanupassati*) the 5 aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness) as being the self or a permanent soul or entity, or such as self as possessing the aggregate, or the aggregate as being in the self, or the self as being in the aggregate. These 4 kinds of

⁴ *Bhaddako āvuso maggo, bhaddikā paṭipadā etassa sakkāyassa pariññāya,*

⁵ *Alañ ca paṇ'āvuso sāriputta appamādāyāti.*

⁶ On self-identity view, see **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8 (3).

⁷ See Piya Tan’s Reflection on “Breaking free,” R286, 2013.

wrong views are called **the 4 self-based views** or “self-views” (*attā’nudiṭṭhi*) that bring about a false idea of self-identity (*sakkāya*).⁸

2.2 We are conditioned by our sense-experiences, what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think. Those experiences that we recognize as pleasurable, that is, as affirming “I” (our self-view),⁹ “me” (or conceit),¹⁰ and “mine” (our craving).¹¹

Since the lack is only a perceived one, our wanting is filling a non-existent hole in our being, a hole that never fills up. This is called “**craving for sensual pleasures**” (*kāma, taṇhā*), expressed through the notions of “I,” “me” and “mine” through of world of the 6 senses.¹² We might even feel an attraction for this world, and wish to have better rebirths here, fettered by the *doubt* that we can ever attain awakening in this life itself.¹³

2.3 Such craving can also manifest itself in a subtle mental level, especially in meditators who are able to attain the form dhyanas and the formless dhyanas. Failing to understand and reflect on the nature of impermanence, they think that these states are eternal or desirable, and wish to be reborn there: this is the “**craving for existence.**” Such realms are still part of samsara,¹⁴ where suffering and pleasure await one like in a snakes-and-ladders game.

2.4 When we harbour the notions of “I,” “me,” and “mine”—of some kind of abiding self—we have become the “permanent” actors on the stage of sufferings and unsatisfactoriness. We “own” our pains, thinking as if we are the only ones who suffer so, and so on. Hence, we might view that it is better to end our lives so that suffering cannot touch us—this is the **craving for non-existence**. But we keep returning to the same stage of rebirth, to the very things we dislike, since we keep thinking of them.

2.5 The self-identity view then is a lightning-rod in life’s storm, if we are ungrounded in wisdom, the lightning hurts us painfully and destructively.¹⁵ We are like **the king Sisyphus**, punished by the gods to keep pushing a huge round boulder up a steep hill, and when it reaches the top, it rolls down again. He runs after it, to push it up the hill ever and again. He probably thinks that it is fun while doing it: a sense of achievement whenever he reaches the hill-top.¹⁶

3 The ending of self-identity

3.1 Our ignorance, rooted in the past, blinds us with greed, hate and delusion,¹⁷ right up to the present moment; craving then takes over from this moment goading us on the same cyclic rut right into the future. Ignorance is overcome by clear eye of wisdom, that is, a direct vision of true reality. This wisdom, on account of its clear insight, lets us see things as they really are, so that we are no more deluded and deceived by them. Craving is then uprooted, so that we are free from suffering. This blissful state is called nirvana.

⁸ On the 4 self-views (*annā’nudiṭṭhi*), see SD 2.16 (15).

⁹ See “**I**”: **The nature of identity**, SD 19.1.

¹⁰ See “**Me**”: **The nature of conceit**, SD 2a.

¹¹ See “**Mine**”: **The nature of craving**, SD 19.3.

¹² See **Sāra S** (S 48.55) @ SD 42.19 (1.1).

¹³ On attaining streamwinning in this life itself, see (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1/2:225), SD 16.7.

¹⁴ On these different realms, see SD 1.7 (1.7).

¹⁵ See the myth of Prometheus: **Yodh’ājīva S** (S 42.3) @ SD 23.3 (2); SD 36.2 (8).

¹⁶ On the Sisyphus myth, see **Yodh’ājīva S** (S 42.3) @ SD 23.3 (1).

¹⁷ Greed, hate and delusion are the 3 unwholesome roots (*akusala mūla*) of all our actions: see (**Akusala Mūla**) **Añña Titthiyā S** (A 3.68/1:199-201), SD 16.4 & SID: akusala mūla.

3.2 The Sakkāya, diṭṭhi Pahāna Sutta (S 35.166) is a short discourse centering around the ending of self-identity view. In fact, it prescribes only one way to do this, that is, *to know and see all our senses and the feelings that arise therefrom as being impermanent*.¹⁸ This is also the message of the 10 suttas of **the Okkanta Saṃyutta** (S 25), which also guarantee our attaining streamwinning, if we regularly and properly practise the perception of impermanence.¹⁹

4 The way to the ending of self-identity

4.1 The way to overcome self-identity is to walk the eightfold path [§5]. In practice, these 8 path-factors is the 3 sets of

- (1) moral training: right speech, right action, and right livelihood;
- (2) mental training: right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration;
- (3) wisdom training: right view and right thought.

It should be noted that “self-identity” (*sakkāya*) is not a reality that exists in itself, but is a conditioned reaction to what we really are, that is, the 5 aggregates. In other words, it an abridgement, hence, a synonym, of “self-identity view” (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*) [1.3]. It is said to be a “view” (*diṭṭhi*) to remind us that it is mind-made. Hence, it should be properly understood with right view, and discarded so that we see things rightly, leading of mental freedom.

4.2 Moral training (*sīla sikkhā*) is the training of our body and speech, which is basically a fundamental respect we must show to life, property, the body, speech and the mind—which are the fundamentals of the 5 precepts. On a basic level, this entails that we must take good care of our physical health and that of others, so that we become physically and economically independent as lay practitioners in keeping with the precepts. As monastics, we should be morally virtuous, living in accordance to the Vinaya, fully dependent on the laity for our basic living supports (almsfood, robes, shelter and medical care).²⁰

4.3 Moral training is also about wholesome communication, as this is a very vital aspect of our humanizing and socializing processes.²¹ In other words, moral training is the foundation of a wholesome society and of mental health (which is the second training of the 3 trainings).²²

4.4 Mental training (*samādhi sikkhā*) in the Buddhist life essentially comprises 2 aspects: calming and clearing the mind.²³ Calming the mind (*samatha*) refers to learning how to overcome and prevent physical and mental distractions,²⁴ so that the mind becomes peaceful and blissful, which is energizing in a spiritual way. The goal here is the constant and proper cultivation of joy in our daily lives, so that we remain above the vicissitudes of the world, and able to inspire others to be similarly joyful to be wholesome individuals.²⁵

4.5 Wisdom training (*paññā sikkhā*) begins with a theoretical understanding of the essential nature of all existence, that it is all impermanent (*anicca*), and that whatever is impermanent is necessarily unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) (hence, it brings suffering to the unwise and unprepared). What is impermanent and unsatis-

¹⁸ S 35.166/4:147), SD 53.12.

¹⁹ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1/2:225), SD 16.7.

²⁰ See **Right livelihood**, SD 37.8(1.4.3) A renunciant is not for hire.

²¹ On the humanization process, see **Love**, SD 38.4 (4.4). On Buddhist developmental psychology, see **Karaṇiya Metta S** (Sn 1.8) @ SD 38.3 (7.2).

²² On the 3 trainings, see **Sīla samādhi paññā**, SD 21.6.

²³ For details, see **Samatha and vipassana**, SD 41.1.

²⁴ On the 5 mental hindrances, see **Nīvaraṇa**, SD 32.1.

²⁵ On joy as essential food, see Piya Tan, “Not by food alone,” R262, 2012.

factory are beyond our control so that we cannot meaningfully apply any real sense of such conceptions as “I,” “me” or “mine.” This is the universal characteristic of non-self (*anattā*).²⁶ This is said to benefit us in clearing the mind (*vipassanā*).

4.6 On a more personal or experiential level, wisdom means mentally rising above the limitations of the body, of our physical being, and enjoying the bliss and clarity of a mental being. Emerging from such calm and clarity, we are able to see more directly into true reality beyond the delusory surfaces of persons, and worldly events and things. Ultimately, such experiences are awakening and liberating.

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The (Aggregate) Discourse on Self-identity

S 22.105

1 Originating at Sāvattihī

The 4 truths of self-identity

2 “Now, bhikshus, I will teach you

- (1) self-identity,
- (2) the arising of self-identity,
- (3) the ending of self-identity, and
- (4) the way to the ending of self-identity.

sakkāya
sakkāya.samudaya
sakkāya,,nirodha
sakkāya,nirodha,gāminī,paṭipadā

3 Listen!²⁷

The 1st truth: Self-identity

4 And what, bhikshus, is **self-identity**?

It should be said: The 5 aggregates of clinging.

5 And what, bhikshus, are the five? (They are:)

- (1) the aggregate of clinging that is form;
- (2) the aggregate of clinging that is feeling;
- (3) the aggregate of clinging that is perception;
- (4) the aggregate of clinging that is formations;
- (5) the aggregate of clinging that is consciousness.

rūp ’upādāna-k,khandha
vedan ’upādāna-k,khandha
saññ ’upādāna-k,khandha
saṅkhār ’upādāna-k,khandha
viññāṇ ’upādāna-k,khandha

This, bhikshus, is suffering.

The 2nd truth: The arising of self-identity

6 And what, bhikshus, is **the arising of self-identity**?

7 It is this craving that leads to renewed existence [rebirth], accompanied by pleasure and lust, seeking pleasure here and there; that is to say,²⁸

²⁶ On the 3 characteristics, see M 64.10/1:435,26 f = SD 21.10. On all dharmas as being “non-self” (*sabbe dhammā anattā*), see **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.134/1:285), SD 26.8.

²⁷ *Tam suṇātha*, lit “you listen!” which is the imperative mood.

²⁸ Comy to **Bhāra S** (S 22.22 @ SD 17.14): “Seeking delight here and there” (*tatra,tatrābhinandini*) means having the habit of seeking delight in the place of rebirth or among the various objects, such as forms. “**Craving for**

- | | |
|---|----------------------|
| (1) the craving for sensual pleasures, | <i>kāma,taṇhā</i> |
| (2) the craving for existence, | <i>bhava,taṇhā</i> |
| (3) the craving for non-existence [for extinction]. | <i>vibhava,taṇhā</i> |
- This, bhikshus, is called the arising of self-identity.

The 3rd truth: The ending of self-identity

8 And what, bhikshus, is **the ending of self-identity**?

9 It is the utter fading away and ending of that very craving, giving it up, letting it go, being free from it, being detached from it.²⁹

This, bhikshus, is called the ending of self-identity.

The 4th truth: The way to the ending of self-identity

10 And what, bhikshus, is the way leading to the ending of self-identity?

11 It is this very noble eightfold path, that is to say,

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| (1) right view, | <i>sammā,dīṭṭhi</i> |
| (2) right thought [right intention], | <i>sammā,saṅkappa</i> |
| (3) right speech, | <i>sammā,vācā</i> |
| (4) right action, | <i>sammā,kamm'antā</i> |
| (5) right livelihood, | <i>sammā,ājīva</i> |
| (6) right effort, | <i>sammā,vāyāma</i> |
| (7) right mindfulness, | <i>sammā,sati</i> |
| (8) right concentration. | <i>sammā,samādhi</i> |

This, bhikshus, is called the way leading to the ending of self-identity.

— evaṃ —

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sense-pleasures” (*kāma,taṇhā*) means lust for the five cords of sense-pleasures. Lust for form-sphere existence or formless-sphere existence, attachment to dhyana, and lust accompanied by the eternalist view: this is called “**craving for existence**” (*bhava,taṇhā*). Lust accompanied by the annihilationist view is “craving for annihilation [extermination]” (*vibhava,taṇhā*). (SA 2:264). **Bodhi**: “This explanation of the last two kinds of craving seems to me too narrow. More likely, craving for existence should be understood as the principal desire to continue in existence (whether supported by a view or not), craving for extermination as the desire for a complete end to existence, based on an underlying assumption (not necessarily formulated as a view) that such extermination brings an end to a real ‘I.’” (S:B 1052 n38)

²⁹ *Yo tassā,y'eva [or tassa-y-eva] taṇhāya asesā,virāga,nirodho cāgo paṭinissaggo mutti anālayo.*