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(Sacca) Ajjhaticāyatana Sutta

= (Sacca) Ajjhaticāyatana Sutta The (Truth) Discourse on the Internal Sense-bases | S 56.14
Ce Āyatana Sutta The Sense-bases Discourse

Theme: The noble truths are ultimately about the 6 sense-bases
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1 Sutta Significance

1.1 The (Sacca) Ajjhaticāyatana Sutta (S 56.14), “the (truth) discourse on the internal sense-bases” (S 56.14) presents the 4 noble truths, beginning with **the 1st truth** [§1], in the light of the 6 sense-bases: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind [§2]. The other remaining 3 truths are defined in the same way as in the teaching of **the (Sacca) Khandha Sutta** (S 56.13), SD 53.26.

The 2nd noble truth is that our sufferings arise from the 3 cravings: those for sensual pleasures, for existence and for non-existence [§3]. **The 3rd noble truth** is the uprooting of craving (that is, nirvana) [§4]. And **the 4th noble truth** is our moving along the path of awakening itself towards liberation [§5]. The Sutta closes with the Buddha exhorting us to reflect on the 4 noble truths [§6].¹

1.2 THE 4 NOBLE TRUTHS AS A SET. Traditionally, the 4 noble truths are listed as follows:

- (1) The 1st noble truth: suffering;
- (2) The 2nd noble truth: the arising of suffering: craving;
- (3) The 3rd noble truth: the ending of suffering: nirvana;
- (4) The 4th noble truth: the path leading to the ending of suffering: the noble eightfold path.

1.3 THE INTRODUCTORY NOTES. For an overview of the Sutta context and related teachings on the 4 noble truths, read **SD 53.25 (2) on the Sacca Saṃyutta**.

2 The 4 noble truths and the 6 sense-bases

2.1 DEFINITION OF THE 1ST NOBLE TRUTH

2.1.1 Body and mind

2.1.1.1 The (Sacca) Ajjhaticāyatana Sutta (S 56.14) defines the 1st noble truth as “the 6 internal sense-bases,” that is, the eye, ear nose, tongue, body and mind. These are our 5 physical senses (*pañc-’indriya*) and the mind. While this Sutta defines these sense-bases as the 1st noble truth, **the (Sacca) Khandha Sutta** (S 56.13) defines it as the 5 aggregates (*pañca-k,khandha*): form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness (SD 53.26).

2.1.1.2 While **the 5 aggregates** focus on the mental (*cetasika*) aspects of our being (our *mind* as comprising *feeling, perception, formations and consciousness*), the **6 sense-bases** focus on the bodily (*kāyika*) aspects, that is, **the 5 physical senses** (the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body). Both these Suttas

¹ On the first 2 truths as constituting the meaning of life, and the last 2 truths as the purpose of life, see SD 1.1 (4.0.1).

refer to the same truth: the nature of our “body with its consciousness” (*sa,viññānaka kāya*) or the “consciousness-based body.”²

2.1.2 Pain and suffering

2.1.2.1 The only difference between the two Suttas is in their emphasis: **S 36.13** focuses on the mind, while **S 56.14** on the conscious body. We may, as a start, say that while S 56.14 focuses on the 1st truth as pain, S 56.13 starts with suffering. **Pain** (*dukkha,dukkha*) is best understood—according to **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11)—as “birth, decay, disease, death.”³

Here, pain simply refers to **bodily pains**, that is, afflictions: we are born, decay, fall sick, and in the end, die. These are natural conditions, some of which we be rid of *completely* (like small pox and malaria); or be rid of some of them *some of the time*; but we can never be rid of all of them *all of the time*. With proper care, medicine and procedures, we may be able to overcome their effects. However, they will always be around as long as we have bodies.

2.1.2.2 However, the European (Pali Text Society) and the Siamese editions of **S 56.11** [2.1.2.1] include this list of suffering amongst the “8 sufferings” of S 56.11, that is to say: “Grief, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair” (*soka,parideva,dukkha,domanass’upāyāsa*) (S 56.11,5). This is a familiar list that forms the last or 12th of the 12 links of dependent arising (*paṭicca,samuppāda*).⁴ Understandably, this phrase collectively represents all the forms of suffering as defined by the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta, as stated above. They include both sense-based and mind-created sufferings.

2.1.2.3 However, **mental pain** (*domanassa*) is also mentioned in the same phrase. This word is then followed by “despair” (*upāyāsa*), the last term. This seems to suggest that mental pain is somehow connected with *despair*. Anyway, in real life, we know that when we think too much of the negative effects of physical pain, we invariably despair in some way. This is important to notice and understand.

On a deeper level, we are taught—such as in **the Sall’atthana Sutta** (S 36.6)—to understand the difference between pain and suffering: *pain is natural and inevitable* because we have a body but *suffering* is “optional.” **Suffering** arises from our unwholesome *mental* reaction and emotional attitude towards pain.⁵

2.2 ENDING SUFFERING

2.2.1 Mind-made. Both pain and suffering arise in the mind. Essentially, this “irritability” is simply our response to what is “wrong” (like a wrong posture) or “bad” (being hurt by someone) with the world—here “world” means the world of beings.⁶ In this sense, it is *unnatural* to do wrong and bad, since this brings pain to self and others. Pain brings sufferings to those who do not understand their nature: that **pain is natural, suffering optional.**⁷

² See SD 17.8a (12.3).

³ The discussion in this section is based on the list of sufferings given in **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,5), SD 1.1; see also SD 53.26 (3.1.1.1) + (3.1.3).

⁴ SD 5.16 (4.1).

⁵ S 36.6,7-10/4:208 f (SD 5.5). On body and mind in terms of pain, see SD 42.16 (1).

⁶ On the 3 worlds: those of space, of beings and of formations, see SD 15.7 (3.5 (2)).

⁷ See SD 53.26 (3.1.3.5).

2.2.2 Overcoming suffering

2.2.2.1 When the mind reacts unwisely or unwholesomely—that is, with greed, hate or delusion—to *pain*, then, it degrades and spreads as suffering. We must regard pain with **wisdom**. Simply and always see pain as being *mind-made and hence impermanent*. In an important sense, **suffering** is the result of not seeing that pain is mind-made and impermanent.

2.2.2.2 We need to go down into the root of suffering: *how we see pain*. Pain is greatest and most persistent when we “own” it: “I am suffering!” “This is *my* pain!” “What was *mine* is no more!” This **self-centred** attitude turns pain into suffering. Hence, it is wise never to “own” the pain but to see it for what it really is—mind-made and impermanent (rising and falling).

2.2.2.3 The suffering intensifies and persists when we see it as arising from outside of us (that it is *not* mind-made), and “blaming” or attributing it to some outside agency: other people and circumstances, bad luck (even bad “karma,” when it is misunderstood), or to some powerful beings, like demons, gods or God. In short, this is **superstition**.

2.2.2.4 Thirdly, we *think* or *believe* that we can do nothing about our pains. We do not think we are strong enough, wise enough or good enough to deal with the pains; hence, we suffer the worst effects of our pains. Our threshold of pain, then, becomes like that of a helpless child. We **doubt** that we can overcome suffering, which may arise from the fact that we are fatalistic (“it’s my luck”), religious (entrusting “everything to God”); or we are simply foolish or terribly unhappy.

2.2.3 The divine abodes

2.2.3.1 The last point, “**being unhappy**,” is important: it is a mental state that invites and worsens suffering. Hence, it helps to cultivate its opposite: joy. Since it is difficult to invoke joy when we are in pain, we must have habitually cultivated it. The best way to do this is the cultivation of **the 4 divine abodes** (*brahma, vihāra*): lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity.

2.2.3.2 Lovingkindness (*mettā*) or unconditional love starts with our accepting ourself just the way we are: this is to recognize and understand the 1st noble truth, that is, suffering in our own being. Only when we accept this reality can we actually deal with it. It is also a positive and courageous attitude towards our pain.

We understand it to be some imbalance or disharmony amongst **the 4 “elements”** that we are—earth (our flesh, bones and solid parts), water (the liquids of our body), fire (the metabolism and decay process in our body) and wind (our bodily movements and internal gases, including the breath). Such indisposition may be the result of past karma (this is hard to know) and present conditions (which we should investigate and correct).⁸

2.2.3.3 Compassion (*karuṇā*) is loving regard we show to our body even when it does not seem to deserve it. We “welcome” the pains, as it were, understanding that this is the nature of the body to fall sick, to deteriorate, to decay. We accept this as the true nature of our physical being. However, we do not hold on to such notions: we regard it all—both body and pain—as being impermanent.

⁸ See **Sīvaka S** (A 4.157), SD 42.16.

2.2.3.4 Gladness (*muditā*) is the joyful comfort that we know that we are in pain, that we are sick, or even that we are dying. We have tried our best to remove the pain, heal the sickness; we can try to postpone death, but it must eventually come. Hence, we know and accept the fact that we do not have much time left. With these precious lingering moments, we arrange whatever needs to be done for ourself, our loved ones and others, should the last moment arrive. We must properly and wisely leave our instructions and admonitions to posterity. Like **Citta the householder**, we empower our loved ones and the living with the Dhamma so that they learn something valuable from their impending loss.⁹ All this is done with the gladness of our life well lived.

2.2.3.5 Equanimity (*upekkhā*) is our peacefully looking on at the world that we are renouncing, and doing so with love, ruth, gladness and peace. We radiate our final moments with unconditional love to all we know and to all beings, especially to those present around us. We forgive all shortcomings done or undone to us, or unforeseen to come, and we also seek forgiveness from others for our own faults and failures. We rejoice in the goodness of the moment when others are attending to us and we are exiting this karmic stage, leaving them behind in our final renunciation.

Finally, we accept all this with profound peace in affirming the final truth of the Buddha’s peerless wisdom—that **all conditioned states are impermanent**. When it has been our practice to reflect on the truth of impermanence,¹⁰ we readily prepare ourself to welcome the 1st stage of the path, streamwinning, or even higher. We are fully at peace, ready for a greater peace. Even at worst, we will welcome a new karmic stage wherein to continue our Dhamma-life, moving ever closer to nirvana.

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(Sacca) Ajjhatika Āyatana Sutta

The (Truth) Discourse on the Internal Sense-bases

S 56.14

1 Bhikshus, there are these **4 noble truths**. What are the four?

- | | |
|---|---|
| (1) The noble truth that is <u>suffering</u> . | <i>dukkhaṃ ariya, saccaṃ</i> |
| (2) The noble truth that is <u>the arising</u> of suffering. | <i>dukkha, samudayaṃ ariya, saccaṃ</i> |
| (3) The noble truth that is <u>the ending</u> of suffering. | <i>dukkha, nirodhaṃ ariya, saccaṃ</i> |
| (4) The noble truth that is <u>the path</u> leading to the ending of suffering. | <i>dukkha, nirodha, gāminī paṭipadā ariya, saccaṃ</i> |

2 What, bhikshus, is **the noble truth that is suffering**? It should be said to be the 6 internal sense-bases.¹¹

⁹ See **Gilāna Dassana S** (S 41.10), SD 16.16.

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

¹¹ *Cha ajjhattikāni āyatanānīti’ssa vacanīyaṃ.*

2.2 What are the six? (They are as follows:)

(1) The eye-base;	<i>cakkh'āyatanaṃ</i>
(2) the ear-base;	<i>sot'āyatanaṃ</i>
(3) the nose-base;	<i>ghān'āyatanaṃ</i>
(4) the tongue-base;	<i>jivhāyatanaṃ</i>
(5) the body-base;	<i>kāy'āyatanaṃ</i>
(6) the mind-base.	<i>man'āyatanaṃ</i>

This, bhikshus, is the noble truth that is suffering.

3 And what, bhikshus, is **the noble truth that is the arising of suffering**?¹²

It is this craving that leads to renewed existence [rebirth], accompanied by pleasure and lust, seeking pleasure here and there; that is to say,¹³

(1) craving for sensual pleasures,	<i>kāma,taṇhā</i>
(2) craving for existence,	<i>bhava,taṇhā</i>
(3) craving for non-existence [for extinction].	<i>vibhava,taṇhā</i>

This, bhikshus, is called the noble truth that is the arising of suffering.

4 And what, bhikshus, is **the noble truth that is the ending of suffering**?¹⁴

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.¹⁵

This, bhikshus, is called the noble truth that is called the ending of suffering.

5 And what, bhikshus, is **the noble truth that is the path leading to the ending of suffering**?

It is this very noble eightfold path,¹⁶ that is to say, right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

This, bhikshus, is called the noble truth that is the path leading to the ending of suffering. [426]

¹² On the translation of this term, see SD 1.1 (4.3).

¹³ Comy to **Bhāra S** (S 22.22), SD 17.14: "Seeking delight here and there" (*tatra,tatrābhinandinī*) means having the habit of seeking delight in the place of rebirth or among the various objects, such as forms. "**Craving for sense-pleasures**" (*kāma,taṇhā*) means lust for the 5 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). There is actually a simpler explanation: they are also unconscious cravings; hence, we are unlikely to even know that we have such views; see SD 49.2 (3.2.2.3). On craving for sensual pleasures, see **Kāma-c-chanda**, SD 32.2.

¹⁴ On the tr of this term, see SD 1.1 (4.3).

¹⁵ *Yo tassā,y'eva [or tassa-y-eva] taṇhāya asesā,virāga,nirodho cāgo paṭinissaggo mutti anālayo.*

¹⁶ For a def and details of the 8 limbs that is the eightfold path, see **Sacca Vibhaṅga S** (M 141,23-31/3:250-252), SD 11.11; **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22,21/2:311-313), SD 13.2; also **Mahā Cattārisaka S** (M 117/3:71-78), SD 6.10. See also Gethin 2001:190-226 (ch 6) for an insightful study.

5.2 These, bhikshus, are the 4 noble truths.

5.3 Therefore, bhikshus,

You should devote yourself (to the reflection):¹⁷ “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.”

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¹⁷ *Idaṃ dukkhaṇ'ti yogo karaṇīyo.*