

Word means

[Previously published as fb190916 piya]

A good place to start

The 3rd sutta collection is known as the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the collection of “increasing parts,” or simply, “**The Numerical Collection.**” In important ways, this is the simplest of the 4 Nikayas: its teachings are based on numerical sets. It comprises the Book of Ones, of Two, of Threes, up to the Book of Elevens. Of course, there are teaching-sets of more than 11 items, such as the 12 links, 32 parts of the body, the 108 feelings and so on. Understandably, these sets are more complex and need closer study.

As the simplest of the 4 Nikayas, in terms of teaching arrangements, the Aṅguttara is most accessible to the layperson, the beginner. Many of the Aṅguttara suttas—one of the best known is the Kesa,puttiya Sutta (A 3.65), popularly known as the Kālāma Sutta (SD 35.4a)—are quite comprehensive for the layman. Indeed, the Aṅguttara Nikāya (in translation) is an easy start for the layman interested in suttas.

Dhamma words are rich

However, when we, the beginners, have understood the basic ideas behind such numbered sets, we will see that they refer to many other suttas where the teachings are given in some useful detail. Another important point to remember is that the same term can have different (but related) senses.

For example, the 7 “stations of consciousness” (*viññāṇa-ṭṭhiti*), listed in **the (Satta) Viññāṇa-ṭṭhiti Sutta** (A 7.41), refer to the 7 “abodes of beings” (*satt’āvāsa*), the kinds of existence defined in terms of consciousness. Here *satta* means “beings,” but in the term *satta-ṭṭhāna*, *satta* means the number 7.

Words with meanings

The same term *viññāṇa-ṭṭhiti* is used in **the Upāya Sutta** (Saṃyutta 53.4-5), SD 29.4, where the term refers to the first 4 of the 5 aggregates, that is, form, feelings, perceptions and formations. In other words, the context here is different. Hence, it is vital to know the **context** of the teaching and its terms.

Thus, we should remember the basic meanings and **senses** of such common and important words. This is learning the language of true freedom.

Simple but profound

The Aṅguttara Nikāya may be the simplest of the 4 Nikayas, but its first 2 books—the Book of Ones and the Book of Twos—simply state the Dhamma item with only a short remark or none at all. For example, its very first “sutta” simply says:

“Bhikshus, I do not see any other form that so obsesses the mind of a man as the form of a woman. The form of a woman obsesses the mind of a man.” That’s it. A beginner may jump to the conclusion that the Buddha is simply addressing the nature or danger of “straight” sex. However, on closer analysis of the word “form,” we see that the Pali term is *eka,rūpaṃ*, “the one form.”

The one form

The closest we can put this into English is perhaps “**The** form”; that is, to say, “**the form**” of a man and **the form** of a woman. The Sutta is not talking about a man or a woman in the normal (social) sense, but in a psychological sense of what we are attracted to in a person, whether a man or a woman.

For example, we see femininity in another (man or woman) and is attracted to it; or we see masculinity in another and is drawn to it. Hence, this is a succinct statement in the nature of human sexuality, and has profound implications on the psychology of sexuality.

2 kinds of quest

Here’s another example. **The (Dve) Pariyesanā Sutta** (A 2.14.4), the 154th sutta of the Book of Twos, merely says:

“Bhikshus, there are these 2 kinds of quests. What are the two?

The quest for material things (*āmisa,pariyesanā*) and the quest for the Dhamma (*dhamma,-pariyesanā*).

These are the 2 kinds of quest.

Of these 2 kinds of quest, the quest for the Dhamma is foremost.” (A 1.14.4/93)

If we know some simple Pali (just key words, even), we will know that *āmisa* (material) is a synonym for *lokiya* (worldly), which is often seen to be “ignoble” (*anariya*), while the path out of samsara is said to be “noble” (*ariya*). If we love suttas and spend time with them, we will surely know that there is a Majjhima sutta that centres on just these twin themes of the “material/worldly/ignoble” and the “spiritual/non-worldly/noble.” It is called **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), the discourse on the noble quest (SD 1.11). The two should thus be studied together.

From meaning to purpose

The point of this reflection is that of beginning our sutta study and Dhamma practice with what we can understand or work with first—even when this understanding is shaky. It often starts that way — that’s how we all learned to walk as toddlers. Although we can **simplify** or **shorten** the suttas, or use some “engaging” idiomatic language to translate the suttas, this is at best, still the **word** level.

Our task is to **experience** or **live** these words: to look into them until we see their meaning as close to what the Buddha teaches as possible. This is easier, indeed, only possible, with some mindfulness (like the perception of impermanence). The suttas are unlike any other

literature: they teach us **renunciation**: letting go of bad habits of the body and speech; cultivating a growing understanding of our mind, and then seeing the true meaning and purpose of our being: to directly see true reality of things. In simple terms, this is self-awakening.

Teachers, even the Buddha, are at best exemplars (Dh 276b).
Only the Dhamma awakens us (S 6.2), SD12.3.

R648 Inspiration 394
Piya Tan ©2020