

# 1b

## Abhijāna Sutta

The Discourse on Directly Knowing | S 22.24

Also called **Parijāna Sutta** = The Discourse on Fully Understanding

Theme: The 5 aggregates have to be directly known

by Piya Tan ©2006

### 1 Levels of understanding

#### 1.1 KEY WORDS FOR THE TRUTHS

**1.1.1** This short but important Sutta is a succinct statement on **the 4 noble truths**. The 1<sup>st</sup> noble truth—that of suffering (*dukkha,sacca*)—is implicit in the first section [§§3-7], where the focus is on the 2<sup>nd</sup> noble truth: the arising of suffering (*samudaya,sacca*), namely, craving (and ignorance). The last 2 noble truths—that of the ending of suffering (*nirodha,sacca*) and that of the path (*magga,sacca*)—are found in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and closing section [§§8-12], by way of **direct knowing** (*abhijāna*) or **full understanding** (*parijāna*), which is the noble eightfold path, that leads to the goal, nirvana.

**1.1.2** The key words of the Sutta are as follows, along with their commentarial glosses:

		<u>Commentarial gloss</u>
“without directly knowing”	<i>anābhijānaṃ</i>	<i>anabhijānanto</i>
“without fully understanding”	<i>aparijānaṃ</i>	<i>aparijānanto</i>
“directly knowing”	<i>abhijānaṃ</i>	<i>abhijānanto</i>
“fully understanding”	<i>parijānaṃ</i>	<i>parijānanto</i>

They are all present participles, that is, they are on-going processes and permanent results. The Commentary lists the 3 levels of full understanding (*pariññā*) here (SA 2:264) as follows, but without further comment:

“directly knowing”	<i>abhijānaṃ</i>	full understanding of <u>the known</u>	<i>ñāta,pariññā</i>
“fully understanding”	<i>parijānaṃ</i>	full understanding by <u>scrutinizing</u>	<i>tīraṇa,pariññā</i>
“becoming dispassionate”	<i>virājayaṃ</i>	full understanding as <u>abandoning</u>	<i>pahāna,pariññā</i>
“letting go of”	<i>pajahaṃ</i>		

**Table. The 3 levels of understanding and their implications**

**1.2 LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING.** The 3 levels of full understanding are also mentioned in the Niddesa and Visuddhi,magga.<sup>1</sup> They are explained in the commentary to stanza 47 of **the Samiddhi Sutta**, that says:

<sup>1</sup> Respectively, Nm 53; Vism 606.

<p><i>akkheyyaṅ ca pariññāya akkhātāraṃ na maññati taṃ hi tassa na hotī ti yena naṃ vajjā na tassa atthi</i></p>	<p><u>Having fully understood what can be expressed,</u> one does not conceive of “one who expresses” (<i>akkhātāra</i>). For, there is nothing <i>about</i> him with which there is to speak of him. (S 47/1.20/1:11), SD 21.4</p>
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“Having fully understood what can be expressed,” explains the Commentary, is by way of the 3 kinds of full understanding, that is,

1. By “**full understanding of the known**” (*ñāta, pariññā*), one understands the 5 aggregates, “This is the form aggregate, etc,” in terms of their individual characteristics, etc.
2. By “**full understanding by scrutiny**” (*tīraṇa, pariññā*), one scrutinizes them in 42 modes, as impermanent, suffering, as disease, etc.
3. By “**full understanding as abandoning**” (*pahāna, pariññā*), one abandons lustful desire for the aggregates by means of the foremost path. (SA 1:45)<sup>2</sup>

### 1.3 WORDS FOR “TO KNOW”

**1.3.1** In the suttas, the basic and general word for “**to know**” is *jānāti*, the noun of which is “knowledge” (*ñāṇa*). There are two common words related to mundane knowing, that is, “to know, sense, cognize.” On a simple sense-base level, this is *vijānāti*, the noun of which is “consciousness” (*viññāṇa*).

Then, there is “to perceive” (*sañjānāti*) and its noun, “perception” (*saññā*). In terms of spiritual practice, such as in breath meditation, the basic verb is “to understand” (*pajānāti*), the noun of which is “wisdom” (*paññā*).

**1.3.2** The suttas make a clearer distinction between *abhijānāti* and *parijānāti* than the Commentaries do. The verb *abhijānāti* and its various forms (such as its noun, *abhiññā*) indicate higher or direct knowledge of phenomena in terms of the 4 noble truths. This knowledge is common to both the learner (*sekha*) and the adept (*asekha*), that is, the arhat.

**1.3.3** *Parijānāti* and its various forms (such as *pariññā*), however, are usually used only for the arhat, signifying the consummation of the knowledge initiated by *abhijānāti*. The specific term for an arhat’s knowledge is simply *aññā*, which often refers to arhatood itself.<sup>3</sup>

**1.3.4** The Mūla,pariyāya Sutta (M 1), for example, stresses that the learner “has directly known” (*abhiññāya*) all the 24 bases of conceiving, but he still needs to continue his training to fully understand them (*pariñeyyaṃ tassa*).<sup>4</sup> Only the Buddha or an arhat “has fully understood them” (*pariññātāṃ tassa*).<sup>5</sup> Here is a summary of the words for “knowing” that are listed above, all derived from the roots √VID (for the first 2) and √JÑĀ (for the rest), both with the root-sense, “to know”:

<sup>2</sup> These terms are more fully discussed as Vism 30.3 f/606 f & 20.18 f/611-613, based on Pm 2:238-242, where, however, only 40 modes are listed under 2. The 42 modes, however, are mentioned at Vism 21.59/655 in connection with “discerning formations as void.” See (**Devatā**) **Samiddhi S** (S 1.20/1:8-12), SD 21.4.

<sup>3</sup> **Aññā** (BHS *āññā*) is perhaps the oldest and shortest of the Pali words for “knowledge,” and its closest English cognate. It means “knowledge in general, philosophic insight; or, full or perfect knowledge, viz, arhatood.” It 104,16\*; Sn p104,14 ~ M 1:62,36, 63,6 ¶ S 5:129,19, 181,17, 236,`23, 285,6 ¶ A 3:82,10, 143,11, 5:108,15 ¶ It 39,17. Cf opp *añña* (mfn, Skt *a-jñā*), “ignorant,” UA 436,29, rare.

<sup>4</sup> M 1,27-50/1:4 (SD 11.8).

<sup>5</sup> M 1,51-170/1:4-6 (SD 11.8).

<u>Pali verb</u>	<u>Sanskrit</u>	<u>Basic English meaning</u>	<u>Pali noun</u>	<u>Sanskrit</u>
<i>vedeti</i>	<i>vedayati</i>	to know, experience, “feel”	<i>vedanā</i>	ts <sup>6</sup>
<i>vindati</i>	ts	to know; to find	<i>vijjā</i>	<i>vidyā</i>
<i>jānāti = ñāti</i>	ts	to know (about, how)	<i>ñāṇa</i>	<i>jñāna</i>
<i>vi-jānāti</i>	ts	to cognize (via the senses)	<i>viññāṇa</i>	<i>vijñāna</i>
<i>sañ-jānāti</i>	<i>saṃjānāti</i>	to perceive (recognize)	<i>saññā</i>	<i>saṃjñā</i>
<i>pa-jānāti</i>	<i>prajānāti</i>	to understand (mindfully)	<i>paññā</i>	<i>prajñā</i>
<i>pari-jānāti</i>	ts	to comprehend, fully know	<i>pariññā</i>	<i>parijñāna</i>
<i>abhi-jānāti</i>	ts	to intuitively know	<i>abhiññā</i>	<i>abhiññā</i>
<i>ā-jānāti</i>	ts	to realize, directly know	<i>āññā</i>	<i>ājñā</i> ; cf <i>āṇā</i>

## 2 The integrated nature of the aggregates

**2.1** Just as the 4 elements do not exist as separate entities, but are merely *phases* of matter,<sup>7</sup> so too **the 5 aggregates** are not separate entities, but are interdependent aspects of the mental process. They all arise and pass away together. Just as a scientific diagram of the atom is but a false and frozen model for learning the processes that constitute atoms, so too the 5 aggregates are a model for understanding how the mind works, that is, how we become conscious of things (or cognize them), how we experience them, how we name and recognize them, and what we make of them.<sup>8</sup>

**2.2** The working of the aggregates may be examined by way of two complementary methods of investigation: the methods of unity and diversity.<sup>9</sup> **The method of unity** (*ekatta,naya*) discloses the coherence of the 5 aggregates working together with the mental aspects flowing in a succession of discrete conscious moments making up appearance of a continuum (*santana*).<sup>10</sup> It shows them as being connected in a single series, “participants in a process of transmission and development, interconnected members unified through a law of conditional dependence.”<sup>11</sup>

**2.3 The method of diversity** (*nānatta,naya*) balances this approach by highlighting the difference. Though unified, the current of conscious moments are analyzable into **the 5 aggregates**: form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness, all flowing in a chain of discrete links, some of which function as causes, other as effects, or working as effects and then as causes. Sometimes, the continuum is interrupted, especially when the death-moment and the rebirth-linking break it up into separate life-terms which show marked differences despite being part of the same series. They are the same, yet not the same.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> ts = tatsama (“same as that”), meaning, both Pali and Skt have the same word.

<sup>7</sup> SD 17.2a.

<sup>8</sup> On how this happens with “name-and-form” (*nāma,rūpa*) in the aggregates (*khandha*), see SD 17.2a (12). On this process as part of dependent arising, see **(Paṭicca,samuppāda) Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2,11) n, SD 5.15.

<sup>9</sup> For their application to views, see **Brahma,jāla S** (D 1), SD 25.3 (49.2).

<sup>10</sup> A “continuum” (*santāna*) means a single beginningless series of life-processes extending into the indefinite future, and contains within itself a number of individual life-terms. The word “continuity” (*santati*) is used here for this individual life-term, with its distinct birth, life and death. Each continuity, in turn, comprises of a rapid succession of dharmas or momentary mental and physical factors, held together by the laws of causal relationship. How the methods of diversity and unity, when misapplied, gives rise to the wrong view of annihilation is explained in Bodhi 1978:20. (Summarized from Bodhi 1978:192 n1.)

<sup>11</sup> Bodhi 1978:20.

<sup>12</sup> There is the sandy beach simile: When seen from afar, a sandy beach appears to be smooth and flat, but on careful examination (especially with a magnifying glass), the beach is seen to be made of discrete particles of sand, which on a microscopic level actually do not touch each other at all.

**2.4** When the method of **unity** is misunderstood or misapplied, it generally leads to the view of an identical self, leading on to a view of eternalism. A wrong understanding of the method of **diversity** misleads one into viewing the apparently discontinuous process of existence as being absolute, and so leads to annihilationism. A proper understanding of both methods will reveal

the continuum to be a causally connected succession of momentary processes, which continues so long as the causes retain their efficacy, and ceases when the causes are deactivated, in either case without harbouring a persisting core to be grasped as a personal self. This is the middle way which avoids the two extremes. (Bodhi 1978:20)

**2.5** The purpose of understanding the nature of **the 5 aggregates** is not some scientific explanation of the mind or of existence, although these may well be elucidated along the way. They are not even meant to be an exhaustive analysis of a human being. Its true purpose is to understand the mental and perceptual processes, so that we are less hampered by the weaknesses of the system, and learn to strengthen our mental tools to see directly into phenomena as what they really are, leading to insight wisdom and liberation.

More specifically, the aggregates describe the physical and mental aspects of what we, as individuals, really are. They show the inappropriateness of thinking in terms of any permanent selfhood or abiding entity. In other words, a proper understanding of the 5 aggregates is essential for effective mindfulness practice and meditation, the goal of which is spiritual liberation here and now.

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## Abhijāna Sutta

### The Discourse on Directly Knowing

S 22.24

1-2 At Sāvattthī. [26]

#### Ignorance of the aggregates is suffering

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| <b>3</b> | Bhikshus,<br>(1) without directly knowing, without fully understanding<br>without dispassion towards it, without letting go of it,<br>one is incapable of destroying suffering. | <b>form,</b>          | <i>rūpa</i>     |
| <b>4</b> | (2) <i>Without directly knowing, without fully understanding<br/>without dispassion towards it, without letting go of it,<br/>one is incapable of destroying suffering.</i>     | <b>feeling,</b>       | <i>vedanā</i>   |
| <b>5</b> | (3) <i>Without directly knowing, without fully understanding<br/>without dispassion towards it, without letting go of it,<br/>one is incapable of destroying suffering.</i>     | <b>perception,</b>    | <i>saññā</i>    |
| <b>6</b> | (4) <i>Without directly knowing, without fully understanding<br/>without dispassion towards them, without letting go of them,<br/>one is incapable of destroying suffering.</i> | <b>formations,</b>    | <i>saṅkhārā</i> |
| <b>7</b> | (5) <i>Without directly knowing, without fully understanding<br/>without dispassion towards it, without letting go of it,<br/>one is incapable of destroying suffering.</i>     | <b>consciousness,</b> | <i>viññāṇa</i>  |

Understanding the aggregates leads to liberation

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| 8  | And, bhikshus,<br>(1) having directly known, having fully understood,<br>becoming dispassionate towards it, letting go of it,<br>one is able to destroy suffering.       | <b>form,</b>          |
| 9  | (2) <i>Having directly known, having fully understood</i><br>becoming <i>dispassionate towards it, letting go of it,</i><br><i>one is able to destroy suffering.</i>     | <b>feeling,</b>       |
| 10 | (3) <i>Having directly known, having fully understood</i><br>becoming <i>dispassionate towards it, letting go of it,</i><br><i>one is able to destroy suffering.</i>     | <b>perception,</b>    |
| 11 | (4) <i>Having directly known, having fully understood</i><br>becoming <i>dispassionate towards them, letting go of them,</i><br><i>one is able to destroy suffering.</i> | <b>formations,</b>    |
| 12 | (5) <i>Having directly known, having fully understood</i><br>becoming <i>dispassionate towards it, letting go of it,</i><br><i>one is able to destroy suffering.</i>     | <b>consciousness,</b> |

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