

# 1

## Sabba Sutta

The Discourse on the All | S 35.23

Theme: The 12 sense-bases and the Buddhist theory of everything

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003<sup>1</sup>

No idea is conceived in our mind independent of  
our five senses [ie, no idea is divinely inspired].

Quoted in W Hermanns, "A Talk with Einstein,"  
October 1943. *Einstein Archives* 55-285

### 1 Introduction

**1.1** While science is based mainly of 2<sup>nd</sup>- and 3<sup>rd</sup>-hand measurements, the Buddha's teaching is a first-hand personal discourse in a direct vision of true reality. In Western culture, when something is said to be "**subjective**," it means that it is based merely on one's own ideas and opinions (that is, inside of oneself) and, therefore, should not be taken seriously, in that it is unlikely to apply universally or to everyone; whereas, being "**objective**" means that it is based on facts that can be proven, usually referring to something that is outside of oneself.

**1.2** The Buddha, on the other hand, recognizes that there are 2 sides to human experience, that is, the subjective or "internal" (*ajjhatta*) senses, and the objective or "external" (*bahiddhā*) sense-objects. However, he does not regard the "subjective" to be false and the "objective" true. Both the inner world of subjective experience and the outer world of objective experience are equally real (meaning "experiential"). This notion is clearly brought out by **the Sabba Sutta**.

**1.3** Here, I have, for the first time (2003), attempted a comparative study of a Nikāya sutta and its Chinese Āgama version. This dream I had for decades past was rejuvenated through **Bh Sujato** (then-abbot of the Santi Forest Monastery, Bundanoon, NSW, Australia) who had invited me to meet him when he visited Singapore in July 2004.

In his instructive paper, "Just a Little Peace" (2003), Sujato shows remarkable courage and honesty, rare in monastics today, in expressing his views regarding some shadows in Buddhist history and current situation. Even then, such courage often mellow in the face of various challenges.

Reflecting on the Buddha's message passed down to us in **the Araṇa Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 139),<sup>2</sup> Sujato says:

Even such a clear assertion of the pragmatism and relativity of language, however, did not prevent the emergence of linguistic fundamentalism in Buddhist circles. One of the most obvious, not to say embarrassing, examples occurs in the Visuddhimagga, the central treatise of the Theravada school. This states that Pali is the "intrinsic essence language," the root language of all languages, hardwired into the circuitry of reality [Vism 4.25]. If a child were brought up without any external influences they would naturally speak Pali. This is perhaps the most extreme example of a fundamentalist tendency that the Theravada is sometimes guilty of. On the good side, the Theravadins have undoubtedly preserved the most accurate complete recension of an early Buddhist canon available to us and have, at least to some degree, maintained an authenticity of practice in

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Rod Bucknell for his encouragement and very helpful comments on the Chinese in these translations. **Roderick S Bucknell** is Assoc Professor at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.

<sup>2</sup> See SD 7.8.

line with the early teachings. On the other hand, they can be dismissive of other schools of Buddhism, sometimes without very much knowledge. For example, few Theravadins are aware that the Chinese canon contains a greater quantity of early and authentic material of both Suttas and Vinaya from various early schools than are contained in the Pali Canon. The claim that Pali material was all literally the word of the Buddha cannot be sustained, nor that the Buddha himself spoke in Pali. Unless the Buddha did not follow his own advice in the Araṇavibhaṅga Sutta, he would have adapted his speech to suit the dialect of his audience.

(Sujato 2003:9, digital ed)<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Chinese Āgama version<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that the Pāli text has been added where it parallels the Chinese Āgama.

大正新修大藏經 Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō

**SĀ 319 (T 2.91) CBETA CD ed**

(三一九) 319

[91a24] 如是 我 聞  
如是 我 聞  
rú shì wǒ wén  
Thus | this | I | hear  
*Evam me sutam̃.*  
Thus have I heard

[91a24] 一時。佛 住 舍衛國 祇樹 給孤獨園  
一時。佛 住 舍卫国 祇树 给孤独园  
yìshí 。 Fó zhù Shěwèiguó Zhǐshù Jīgūdúyuán  
One time | Buddha | stay | at Śrāvastī | Jeta Forest | Anāthapiṇḍada's park .  
*Ekam samayam̃ Bhagavā Sāvattihyam̃ viharati Jetavane Anāthapiṇḍikassa ārāme.*  
At one time, the Buddha was staying at Anāthapiṇḍika's park in Jeta's grove, near Śrāvastī.

[91a25] 時。有 生聞 婆羅門 往 詣 佛 所。 共相 問訊。 問訊 已。  
时。有 生闻 婆罗门 往 诣 佛 所。 共相 问讯。 问讯 已。  
Shí. yǒu shēngwén pólúómén wǎng yì Fó suǒ. gòngxiāng wèn xùn. wèn xùn yǐ.  
(At that) time || (there) is | famous | brahmin | go | visit | Buddha's | residence || Mutually | greet | greet | already ||  
Now at that time, a famous brahmin<sup>5</sup> approached the Buddha's residence, and having exchanged greetings,

<sup>3</sup> "Just a little peace." [Araṇavibhaṅga Sutta exposition.] 22 Dec 2003.

[http://www.santiforestmonastery.com/writings/Just\\_a\\_Little\\_Peace.pdf](http://www.santiforestmonastery.com/writings/Just_a_Little_Peace.pdf); cf

<http://santifm.org/santipada/2010/just-a-little-peace/>.

<sup>4</sup> Tr into Chinese by Guṇabhadra (求那跋陀/功德) (394-468 CE), who was born in Central India, moved to Sri Lanka, and thence to China during the Period of Disunity (the South and North Dynasties, 317-589 CE). He tr 52 scriptures in 134 fascicles incl: Saṃyukta Āgama; 50 fascicles, 435-443; Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra (楞伽經), 4 fascicles, 443; Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra (相解經), 1 fascicle 420; Śrīmālādevī Sīrhanāda Sūtra, 1 fascicle, 436.

<sup>5</sup> In place of both these verses, Pāli has *Tatra kho bhagavā bhikkhū āmantesi bhikkhave ti. Bhandante ti te bhikkhū bhagavato paccassuram̃*, "Then the Blessed One addressed the monk, "Monks!" "Bhante," the monks replied in assent.

退坐一面。白佛言。瞿曇。所謂一切者。云何名一切。  
退坐一面。白佛言。瞿曇。所謂一切者。云何名一切。

tuì zuò yí miàn 。 bái fó yán 。 Qútán. suǒwèi yíqièzhě 。 yún hé míng yíqiè 。  
retreat| sit | one | side || say | Buddha| say || Gautama || it is said | all" || Said | what | call | "all" ||

he retreated and sat down at one side. Then he said this to the Buddha, “Gautama, it is said, ‘The all’— what is meant by ‘all’?”

[91a27] 佛告婆羅門。一切者。謂十二入處<sup>6</sup>。  
佛告婆羅門：「一切者。謂十二入處。

Fó gào póluómén 。 yíqiè zhě. wèi shí'èr rùchù 。  
Buddha| tell | brahmin || all | (doer) || refer to | twelve | entrances ||

The Buddha told the brahmin, “The ‘all’ refers to the 12 doors, namely:

眼色。耳聲。鼻香。舌味。身觸。意法。

眼色，耳聲，鼻香，舌味，身觸。意法。

yǎnsè, ěrshēng, bíxiāng, shéwèi, shēnchù, yìfǎ.  
eye & forms| ear & sounds | nose & smells| tongue & tastes| body & touches| mind & mind-objects |

*Cakkhuñ c’eva rūpa ca, sotañ ca saddā ca, ghānañ ca gandhā ca, jivhā ca rasā ca, kāyo ca phoṭṭhabbā ca, mano ca dhammā ca.*

the eye and forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and touches, the mind and mind-objects.<sup>7</sup>

是<sup>8</sup>名一切。若復說言此非一切。沙門瞿曇所說一切。我今捨。  
是名一切。若復說言此非一切。沙門瞿曇所說一切。我今捨。

shì míng yíqiè 。 Ruò fù shuōyán cǐ fēi yíqiè 。 shāmén Qútán suǒ shuō yíqiè 。 wǒ jīn shě 。  
this | call | the all || If | again | say | here | reject| all || sramana | Gautama| which| say | all || I | now | abandon||

This is called ‘the all.’ If anyone were to retort, thus: ‘I reject this “all” that the recluse Gautama has proclaimed; I now abandon it.

別立餘一切者<sup>9</sup>。彼<sup>10</sup>但有言說。問已不知。增其疑惑。所以者何。  
別立余一切者。彼但有言說。問已不知。增其疑惑。所以者何。

Bié lì yú yíqiè zhě. Bǐ dàn yǒu yánshuō wèn yǐ bùzhī. zēng qí yíhuò. Suǒyǐ zhěhé 。  
|Other | stand | another | all | (tag) || He | but| there is | word || Ask | already| not know || Increase| his | doubt || Therefore | why ||

I am one who adheres to another all’—that would be merely his word (against another). When asked (further), he would not know the answer. His doubts would increase. And what is the reason for this?

非其境界<sup>11</sup>故

非其境界故。」

Fēi qí jìngjiè gù 。

not| his | domain | because||

Because it would not be within his domain.”

<sup>6</sup>入處 (“entry place”) = āyatana.

<sup>7</sup> “Mind-objects,” dhammā, alt tr “mental phenomena.”

<sup>8</sup> In classical Chinese, 是 means “this” (Rod Bucknell in personal communication).

<sup>9</sup> Here final 者 acts like a correlatives, *yo ... so; yañ...tañ* (Shunyi); sometimes it signifies “-er,” a doer. Bucknell says that it often it acts like *iti*, the Pāli “close quote,” but Shunyi disagrees. See correlative 者 below.

<sup>10</sup> 彼 “that; those; another; the other”; ~岸 bǐ’àn, “the farther shore” = *pāramitā, nirvāṇa*.

<sup>11</sup> 非 ... 境界, “not (his) domain” = *avisaya; Skt aviṣaya*, found in Chin tr of *Lañkāvatāra Sūtra* (T 16.524a) & the Skt in Bunyiu Nanjio (ed), Kyoto: Otani University Press, 1956:49. (Qu by Kalupahana 1969:67n.)

[91b03] 時。生聞 婆羅門 聞佛所說。歡喜 隨喜 奉行。

時。生聞 婆羅門 聞佛所說。歡喜 隨喜 奉行。

shí shēngwén póluómén wén fó suǒ shuō. huānxǐ suíxǐ fèngxíng °

Then | famous | brahmin | hear | Buddha | which | say || happy | rejoice | respectfully practise ||

Then, the famous brahmin, having heard the Buddha’s word, was happy and rejoiced, and practised with respect.

### 3 Comparative analysis of the Sutras

**3.1** In terms of teachings, the Nikāya and the Chinese Āgama versions of the Sabba Sutta are identical. However, there are small variations of the context of the two suttas. Both versions agree in the locations of the sutta, but only the Chinese version gives it in full although both are from the same collection, that is, the Saṃyutta Nikāya and the Saṃyukta Āgama. An important departure is that while the Nikāya version is addressed simply to “bhikshus” (*bhikkhave*), the Chinese Āgama version specifies the interlocutor as 生聞婆羅門 (“a famous brahmin”) [I had originally rendered 生 as “pupil,” but I have followed Rod Bucknell’s advice that it is part of the compound 生聞, which means “famous.”]

**3.2** An interesting difference can be seen in what happens to the one who rejects “the all” the Buddha has taught. In the Nikāya version, such a person “would meet with vexation” (*vighātam āpajjeyya*), but in the Chinese Āgama version, “his doubts would increase” 增其疑惑.

In the Chinese Āgama versions of both sutras, their endings are almost identical, in that both the brahmin of the Attakārī Sutta and the brahmin’s pupil of the Sabba Sutta are 歡喜 隨喜 (“was happy and rejoiced”). However, while the brahmin of the Attakārī Sutta, at the end, simply 从座起去 “rose from his seat and left,” the brahmin’s pupil of the Sabba Sutta 奉行, “practised it [the teaching] with respect.”

**3.3** Let us examine how the Buddha is presented in **the Attakārī Sutta** (A 6.38),<sup>12</sup> and in the Sabba Sutta. In both sutras, the interlocutor addresses the Buddha by name, “Gautama.” In the Attakārī Sutta (Āgama version), the Buddha is presented as 世尊, “world-honoured one” (Skt *bhagavat*), commonly found in the Mahāyāna sutras.

In Pāli, this is *bhagavā*, and is usually rendered as “Blessed One” in the translations of the Nikāya suttas. In the Sabba Sutta (Āgama version), the Buddha is presented by the more traditional 沙门瞿曇, “sramana Gautama,” which I think reflects the more congenial disposition of the “brahmin’s pupil” towards the Buddha.

**3.4** In the Chinese Āgama version of the Sabba Sutta, the teaching given is called 十二入处 “**the 12 doors**,” that is, the 12 sense-bases (*dvādāsa āyatana*), comprising the 6 internal sense-bases and the 6 external sense-bases (that is, the 6 sense-bases and their respective sense-objects), namely:

Internal senses-bases ( <i>ajjhattik’āyatana</i> )			External sense-bases ( <i>bāhir’āyatana</i> )		
<u>Sense-base</u>			<u>Sense-object</u>		
eye	<i>cakkhu</i>	眼 (yǎn)	form	<i>rūpa</i>	色 (sè)
ear	<i>sota</i>	耳 (ěr)	sound	<i>sadda</i>	声 (shēng)
nose	<i>ghāna</i>	鼻 (bí)	smell	<i>gandha</i>	香 (xiāng)
tongue	<i>jivhā</i>	舌 (shé)	taste	<i>rasa</i>	味 (wèi)
body	<i>kāya</i>	身 (shēn)	touch	<i>phoṭṭhabba</i>	触 (chù)
mind	<i>mano</i>	意 (yì)	mind-object	<i>dhamma</i>	法 (fǎ)

(D 3:243; M 3:216; Vbh 70)

<sup>12</sup> A 6.38/3:337 f (SD 7.6).

## 4 The “self,” the aggregates and the sense-bases

**4.1** In several places in the brahmanical texts, “**the all**” or “this all” (Skt *idam sarvaṃ*) is identified with the “eternal self” (*ātman*) or “universal soul” (*brahman*), that is, what were viewed respectively as the human essence and the reality that pervades “everything” (*sarva*),<sup>13</sup> and it is said that he who learns the essence of everything knows everything.<sup>14</sup>

According to scholars, such as Przemysław Szczurek (2003), such statements found in the early Upaniṣads (c500 BCE) were polemical reactions against the Buddha’s teaching on non-self (*anattā*). In a number of places in such texts, we find statements clearly *contradicting* the Buddha’s teachings.<sup>15</sup>

**4.2** The ancient brahmins believed that there was **an eternal soul**, which was, as such indestructible. That being the case, they argued, you could kill someone, but his soul is not destroyed. In other words, it was not wrong to kill, especially when it was your duty to do so, such as when you were a kshatriya! Szczurek goes on to discuss how such ideas are found in the Bhagavad, gītā, especially the (in)famous dialogue between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, justifying killing as a social duty (BhagG 1.35-39).<sup>16</sup>

**4.3** The Buddha’s rejection of **the view of an eternal self or soul** is partly pragmatic, partly spiritual. An eternal self or soul is nowhere to be found, so why construct such a notion? If there were really such an eternal soul, we would have complete control over ourselves: we can, for example, command our body not to suffer pain, not to age, and so on. Moreover, whatever exists has to be impermanent; otherwise, it is meaningless.<sup>17</sup>

**4.4** The Buddha declares “**the all**” (*sabba*) to be our 6 senses and their objects; for, they are our *only* means of knowing, and the *only* things we can know or need to know. In such texts as **the Dvaya Sutta 2** (S 35.93) and **the Cūḷa Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 147 = S 35.121), we find attempts at connecting the aggregates (*khandha*) to the sense-bases (*āyatana*).<sup>18</sup>

However, the Nikāyas do not explicitly correlate the 2 schemes. “Conscious correlation begins only with the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, especially in the opening sections of **the Dhātu, kathā**, which reflects the

<sup>13</sup> See Brhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.4.1-2: *eṣa ta ātmaṃ sarvāntaraḥ*; 4.422: *sa vā eṣa mahān aja ātma yo’yaṃ vijñānamayaḥ praneṣu, ya eṣo’ntar hṛdaya ākāśas tasmiñ chete sarvasya vaśī sarvasyeśānaḥ sarvasyādhipatiḥ san a sadhunā karmaṇā bhuyan no evāsadhunā kanīyān, eṣa sarveśvaraḥ*; 5.6.1: *manmaya’yaṃ puruṣo bhāḥ satyas tasmīn antarhṛdaye yathā vrīhir vā yavo vā, sa eṣa sarvasyeśānaḥ sarvayādhipatiḥ sarvaṃ idam prasāsti yad idam kiṃca*. Chāndogya Upaniṣad 7.26.1: *ātman eva, idam sarvaṃ*; 8.1.4 ... *asmimś cedam brahmapure sarvaṃ samāhitam...* (Quoted in Przemysław Szczurek, 2003:207 n69)

<sup>14</sup> See Brhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.5.1-14 (×14) ... *so yo’yaṃ ātmā, idam amṛtaṃ idam brahm, idam sarvaṃ*; 4.5.7 = 2.4.6: *idam brahma, idam kṣatram, ime lokāḥ, ime devā, ime vedā, imāni bhūtāni, idam sarvaṃ yad ayam ātmā*; 5.3.1: *eṣa prajāpati yaddhṛdayam etad brahma, etad sarvaṃ*. Chāndogya Upaniṣad 3.214.1: *sarvaṃ khalu idam brahma...*; 6.8.7-16 (×9): *sa ya eṣo’nimaitad ātmyam idam sarvaṃ tat satyam sa ātmā tat tvam asi*; 7.25.1: *sa eva, idam sarvaṃ aham eva, idam sarvaṃ*; 7.25.2: *ātmā, eva, idam sarvaṃ*; (7.26.1: *ātmata eva, idam sarvaṃ*). (Quoted in Przemysław Szczurek, 2003: 207 n70)

<sup>15</sup> Eg Brhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.5.6 = 2.4.5: *ātmani khalv are dṛṣṭe śrute mate vijñāta idam sarvaṃ viditvā*; 4.4.-23: *eṣa nityo mahimā brāhmaṇasya...tasmād evaṃ vicchanto dānta uparatashitikṣuḥ samāhito bhūtvātmanv evātmany evātmānaṃ paśyati, sarvaṃ ātmānaṃ paśyati*. (Qu in Przemysław Szczurek, 2003:207 n71)

<sup>16</sup> See Szczurek 2003, for the full discussion. For a different view on *atta* (Skt *ātman*), see A Wynne, “Early evidence for the ‘no self’ doctrine?” 2009a; “Miraculous transformation and personal identity,” 2009b.

<sup>17</sup> Nirvana is the only “state” that can be meaningfully said to be “eternal,” in the sense that it is beyond time and space, where there is no birth or death, no coming or going, etc, beyond dichotomies and constructions.

<sup>18</sup> S 35.93/4:68 f; M 147/3:277-280 = S 35.121/4:105-107.

attempt of the early Buddhist community to merge the more pragmatic schemes of the suttas into a single all-inclusive system that assigned every element a precisely defined place.” (S:B 1123).

In the case of our experience of sight or seeing, we have the following psychological processes:

aggregates ( <i>khandha</i> )	cognition (contact, <i>phassa</i> )	sense-bases ( <i>āyatana</i> )
form	<i>eye</i> (sense-based) <i>form</i> (mind-based)	eye base form base
consciousness	<i>eye-consciousness</i>	mind base <sup>19</sup>
(volition formations)	<i>eye-contact</i> <sup>20</sup>	mental phenomena base <sup>21</sup>
feeling	<i>feeling born of eye-contact</i>	mental phenomena base
perception	<i>perception of form</i>	mental phenomena base
volition formations	<i>volition regarding form</i>	mental phenomena base

**Table 4.4: An occasion of visual cognition in terms of the aggregates and sense-bases**

The relationship between the two schemes above might be seen as roughly analogous to that between horizontal and vertical cross-section of an organ, with the analysis by way of the 6 sense-bases to the vertical slice. Thus, we are told, on an occasion of visual cognition, eye-consciousness arises in dependence on the eye and forms; the meeting of the three is contact, and with contact as condition there arise feeling, perception and volition. Viewing this experience “vertically” by way of the sense-bases, the eye and visible forms each form a separate base, respectively the eye base and the form base; eye-consciousness belongs to the mind base; and eye-contact, feeling, perception and volition are all assigned to the mental phenomena base.

Then, using the scalpel of thought to cut “horizontally” across the occasion of visual cognition, we can ask what is present from the form aggregate? The eye and a visible form (and the body as the physical basis of consciousness). What from the feeling aggregate? A feeling born of eye-contact. What from the perception aggregate? A perception of a visible form. What from the aggregate of volitional formations? A volition regarding a form. And what from the consciousness aggregate? An act of eye-consciousness.

(Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 2000:1122 f)

**4.5** In this connection, it is helpful to remind ourselves why the Buddha is sometimes described as one who “knows all” (*sabba-ññū*). It is not helpful to say that he is “omniscient,” without defining what this means. For example, it is impossible to know everything (in the universe, or even in a single person) at the same time. However, the Buddha declares that he is able to know anything he wants to, *at any one time*.<sup>22</sup>

Here, *sabba-ññū* refers to his understanding of the full context of a word, idea or situation. The “all” (*sabba*) here refers to our 6 senses—the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind—with which we “make sense” of the world. Indeed, we create our own world through these senses. *We are* our senses.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Man’āyatana*.

<sup>20</sup> Note: Contact (*phassa*) is classified in the aggregate of volition formations in the Abhidharma and the Commentaries, though in the Nikayas it is not explicitly assigned a place among the 5 aggregates. (S:B 1123. Pali added.)

<sup>21</sup> *Dhamm’āyatana*.

<sup>22</sup> On the Buddha’s omniscience, see **Kaṇṇaka-t,thala S** (M 90/2:125-133), SD 10.8 (2) & **Sandaka S** (M 76), SD 35.7.

<sup>23</sup> See SD 40a.10 (2.2).

## 5 The Commentaries on the “all”

### 5.1 THE MEANINGS OF SABBA

#### 5.1.1 The 4 meanings of “all”

**5.1.1.1 The Sār’attha-p,pakāsinī** (Saṃyutta Commentary) comments on this sutta in a very peculiar way.<sup>24</sup> Firstly, it gives the following senses of *sabba* (“all”), in addition to the one defined in the sutta:

- (1) The all-inclusive all (*sabba,sabba*), that is, everything knowable, all of which comes into the range of the Buddha’s omniscience.<sup>25</sup> [4.1]
- (2) The all of the sense-bases (*āyatana,sabba*), that is, the phenomena of the 4 planes. [5.1.1.2]
- (3) The all of self-identity (*sakkāya,sabba*), that is, the phenomena of the 3 (mundane) planes.<sup>26</sup>
- (4) The partial all (*padesa,sabba*), that is, the 5 physical sense-objects (the sense-world mind).

(SA 2:357)

**5.1.1.2** Each of these 4 has a successively narrower range than the preceding. In this sutta, the “all” of the sense-bases is intended. **The “4 planes”** are the 3 mundane planes (the sense world, the form world and the formless world) and the supramundane plane (the 4 paths, their fruitions and nirvana). The “all,” then, is the experiences that arise in these 4 planes (*catu,bhūmaka,dhammā*) (SA 2:357,23 f).

**5.1.2** Two things need to be noted here. Firstly, and, most significantly, the “all” here forms the basis of Buddhist epistemology (theory of knowledge), and as such should be studied with **the Kaṇṇaka-t,thala Sutta** (M 90), which discusses omniscience.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the Sabba Sutta makes *one of the most important canonical statements on omniscience*—in the sense of the total knowledge of existence. In other words, whatever that there is that can be known, or the total extent of human and spiritual knowledge, the Buddha declares, is within the range of his 6 senses and knowledge.

### 5.2 NIRVANA AS A DHARMA

**5.2.1** The commentarial interpretation “all” (as *sabba,sabba*) is theoretically larger in scope than that of the Sabba Sutta, namely, the “all” of the Buddha’s omniscience (\**sabbañña*, Skt *sarvājña*, literally, “all-knowledge”). The Commentary says this, despite the fact that the sutta says that the notion of such an all lies beyond anyone’s range.

**5.2.2** The Commentary includes nirvana within this omniscient “all” as a dharma or mind-object (*dhamma*), despite the fact that many suttas in the Canon specifically state that nirvana lies beyond the range of the 6 senses and their objects. **The Upasīva Māṇava Pucchā** (Sn 1076), for example, says that a person who has attained nirvana has removed all phenomena (*sabbesu dhammesu samūhatesu*), and as such is ineffable. Furthermore, **the Brahma Nimantanika Sutta** (M 49) discusses a “featureless [unmanifested]

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<sup>24</sup> This section is partly based on Thanissaro’s notes to his Sabba S tr, <http://www.accesstoinight.org>.

<sup>25</sup> On the Buddha’s omniscience, see **Kaṇṇaka-t,thala S** (M 90/2:125-133) , SD 10.8 (2) & **Sandaka S** (M 76), SD 35.7.

<sup>26</sup> The “4 planes” (*catu bhūmi*) are the sense world, the form world, the formless world and the supramundane (the consciousness of the 4 noble saints, ie, the path). See Abhs:BRS 29-31 & SD 3.7 (1.3.2.1).

<sup>27</sup> See SD 10.8 (2).

consciousness” (*viññāṇam anidassanaṃ*) that “does not partake of the allness of the all” (*sabbassa sabbattena ananubhūtaṃ*).<sup>28</sup>

### 5.3 NIRVANA IS BEYOND THE “ALL”

**5.3.1 The Pahāna Sutta 1** (S 35.24), which follows the Sabba Sutta, says that the “all” is to be abandoned:

The eye is to be abandoned; forms are to be abandoned; eye-consciousness is to be abandoned; eye-contact is to be abandoned; [16] and whatever feeling that arises with eye-contact as a condition—whether pleasant, painful or neutral—that too is to be abandoned.

(S 35.24/4:15), SD 105.12

The same applies to each of the other 5 senses, their objects, consciousnesses and so on. This is a vital spiritual practice strategy: to rein back the mind by stopping at feeling, regarding it just as what it is—as being “mind-made,” hence, *impermanent, subject to change, becoming other*. If we are dragged beyond this point, then we fall into craving and its negative karmic fruits.

The Canon, however, nowhere says that nirvana is to be “abandoned.” With the cessation (*nirodha*) of defilement, nirvana is attained, after which there is no further task to be done.<sup>29</sup>

**5.3.2** Thus, Thanissaro points out,<sup>30</sup> it seems more that this sutta’s discussion of the “all” is meant to limit the use of the term “all” throughout the Buddha’s teachings to the 6 sense spheres and their objects. As **the Pahāna Sutta 1** (S 35.24) shows, this would also include the consciousness, contact and feelings connected with the sense spheres and their objects. Nirvana would lie outside of this “all.” This would fit in with another point made several times in the Canon: that while dispassion is the highest of all dharmas (It 90), the arhat has gone beyond even dispassion (Sn 813, 853).

**5.3.3** This raises the question: if the word “all” does not include nirvana, does that mean that we may infer from the statement, “all phenomena are non-self,” that nirvana itself is self? The answer is clearly *no*. As **the Mahā Koṭṭhita Sutta**<sup>31</sup> states, to even ask if there is anything remaining or not remaining, or both, or neither, after the cessation of the 6 sense-spheres is to differentiate what is by nature undifferentiated.<sup>32</sup> The range of *differentiation* goes only as far as the “all.” Perceptions of either self or non-self, which would count as differentiation, would not apply beyond the “all.” When the cessation of the “all” is experienced, all differentiation is allayed.<sup>33</sup>

## 6 “Nothing is worth clinging to”

**6.1** The Sabba Sutta should be reflected on in connection with the (Moggallāna) Pacalā Sutta (A 7.58) and the Avijjā Pahāna Sutta 2 (S 35.80). In the conclusion of **the Pacalā Sutta**,<sup>34</sup> Moggallāna asks the Buddha how one is awakened (§11.1). The Buddha begins by answering that the awakened one has learned that

<sup>28</sup> M 49,25/1:329 + SD 11.7(9).

<sup>29</sup> See SD 51.19 (2.1.1.8).

<sup>30</sup> See prev n.

<sup>31</sup> A 4.174/2:161-163.

<sup>32</sup> See Thanissaro’s intro to his tr of **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18), <http://www.accesstoinsight.org>.

<sup>33</sup> See also **Brahmajāla S** (D 1), SD 25.3 (28.2).

<sup>34</sup> A 7.58/4:85-88 (SD 4.11).



“nothing is worth clinging to” (§11.2). The whole section (§11) is well known as “the brief advice on liberation through the destruction of craving,”<sup>35</sup> and runs thus:<sup>36</sup>

Here, the monk has learned [heard] that nothing is worth clinging to. And a monk has learned that nothing is worth clinging to, thus: he directly understands all things [he directly understands the nature of the all].<sup>37</sup> Having directly understood all things, he fully understands<sup>38</sup> of all things.

Having fully understood all things, he knows whatever feelings there are, whether pleasant, painful or neither painful nor pleasant.

As regards to those feelings, he dwells contemplating impermanence in them; he dwells contemplating dispassion [fading away of lust] in them; he dwells contemplating ending [of suffering] in them; he dwells contemplating letting go [of defilements].

When he dwells contemplating impermanence in them, contemplating dispassion [fading away of lust] in them, contemplating ending [of suffering] in them, contemplating letting go [of defilements], he does not cling to anything in the world; not clinging, he is not agitated; not agitated, he attains nirvana for himself.

He understands. ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done what is to be done, there is no more for this state of being.’ (M 37,3/1:251 = A 7.58,11/4:88)

**6.2 The Avijjā Pahāna Sutta 2** (S 35.80)<sup>39</sup> shares passage 11b above and then continues with an important spiritual exercise [6b], which, in terms of the teaching of “the all” (*sabba*), is only different in wording but same in spirit:

**6** Here, the monk has learned [heard] that nothing is worth clinging to. And a monk has learned that nothing is worth clinging to, thus: he directly knows all things. Having directly understood all things, he fully understands<sup>40</sup> all things.

6.2 <sup>41</sup>Having fully understood everything, he sees all signs differently.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Saṅkhittena taṇhā,saṅkhaya,vimutto (ovādo)*.

<sup>36</sup> M 37,3/1:251 = A 7.58.11/4:88. The vocatives have been omitted. For nn on key terms & discussion, see **Pacalā S** (A 7.58), SD 4.11 §11. This whole famous “brief advice on liberation through the destruction of craving” forms the main theme of **Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 37): see SD 4.11(4).

<sup>37</sup> “He directly understands all things,” *so sabbaṃ dhammaṃ abhijānāti*, alt tr, “he directly understands the nature of the all.” Here the “all” (*sabba*) refers to the 6 senses and their respective sense-objects (**Sabba S**, S 35.23/4:15), SD 7.1.

<sup>38</sup> “He fully understands,” *parijānāti*, here meaning “he comprehends, knows fully for certain.” This spiritual knowledge is called “**full understanding**” (*pariññā*), of which there are 3 kinds: (1) Full understanding of the known (*ñāta,pariññā*), ie the discernment of the specific characteristics of a phenomena (“Form as the characteristic of being oppressed’ feeling has the characteristic of being felt, etc”); (2) Full understanding by investigating (*tīraṇa,pariññā*), ie insight wisdom (*vipassanā,paññā*) which as the 3 universal characteristics (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, non-self) as its objects, and which arises when attributing a universal characteristic to a physical and mental state, eg “Form is impermanent; feeling is impermanent, etc”; (3) Full understanding as overcoming (or abandoning) (*pahāna,pariññā*), ie the insight-wisdom that has the universal characteristics as its objects, and arises after one has overcome the idea of permanence, etc.” (Nm 52; Vism 20.3/606 f). Comy says that “full understanding” here refers to *tīraṇa,pariññā* (AA 4:43). The contemplation of impermanence (*aniccānupassanā*), etc, are given in the final tetrad (*Dhammānupassanā*, contemplation of mind-objects) of the breath meditation of the **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118,21/3:83).

<sup>39</sup> S 35.80/4:50 (SD 16.9).

<sup>40</sup> “He fully understands,” *parijānāti*, here meaning “to comprehend, know fully for certain.” For details, see n above at M 37,3 quote.

He sees the eye differently; he sees forms differently; he sees eye-consciousness differently. Whatever feeling—whether pleasant, or painful, or neutral—that arises with eye-contact as condition, that, too, he sees differently.

He sees the ear differently; he sees sounds differently; he sees ear-consciousness differently. Whatever feeling—whether pleasant, or painful, or neutral—that arises with ear-contact as condition, that, too, he sees differently.

He sees the nose differently; he sees smells differently; he sees nose-consciousness differently. Whatever feeling—whether pleasant, or painful, or neutral—that arises with nose-contact as condition, that, too, he sees differently.

He sees the tongue differently; he sees tastes differently; he sees tongue-consciousness differently. Whatever feeling—whether pleasant, or painful, or neutral—that arises with tongue-contact as condition, that, too, he sees differently.

He sees the body differently; he sees touches differently; he sees body-consciousness differently. Whatever feeling—whether pleasant, or painful, or neutral—that arises with body-contact as condition, that, too, he sees differently.

He sees the mind differently; he sees mind-objects differently; he sees mind-consciousness differently. Whatever feeling—whether pleasant, or painful, or neutral—that arises with mind-contact as condition, that, too, he sees differently.

7 Monk, when a monk knows and sees thus, ignorance is abandoned by him and true knowledge (*vijjā*) arises. (S 35.80/4:50), SD 16.9

## 7 Connected suttas

### 7.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SENSES

In early Buddhism, the sense-bases (*āyatana*) are critically important because it is through them that suffering arises, as in **the (Samuday’atthaṅgama) Dukkha Sutta** (S 12.43).<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, it is said that the holy life is lived for the full understanding of suffering, and if others were to ask, “What is the suffering that should be fully understood?” the correct answer is that the eye and form, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and touches, the mind and mind-objects, and all phenomena derived from them, are the suffering that should be fully understood, as in **the Sambhula Bhikkhu Sutta** (S 35.81)<sup>44</sup> and **the (Sa]-āyatana) Kim Atthiya Sutta** (S 35.152).<sup>45</sup> Another treatment of the *all* is given in **the Catuttha Samiddhi Sutta** (S 35.68).<sup>46</sup>

7.2 There are a number of the “world” (*loka*) suttas<sup>47</sup> that should be studied with the Sabba Sutta. **The Lok’anta Gamana Sutta** (S 35.11/4:93-97),<sup>48</sup> elaborating on the Sabba Sutta, explains that the world is

<sup>41</sup> *Sabbaṃ dhammaṃ pariññāya sabba, nimittāni aññato passati; cakkhum aññato passati, rūpe aññato passati, cakkhu, viññānam aññato passati; ...yam p’idaṃ mano samphassa, paccaṃyā uppajjati vedayitaṃ sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkhaṃ asukhaṃ vā. Tam pi annato passato.*

<sup>42</sup> Comy: “He sees all signs differently” (*sabba, nimittāni aññato passati*) means that he sees the signs of formations (*saṅkhāra, nimittāni*) differently from those who have not fully understood the worldly inclinations (*abhinivesā*). For such people see all signs as self, but one who has fully understood the worldly inclinations, sees them as non-self, not as a self. This is the characteristic of non-self discussed in this sutta. (SA 2:370).

<sup>43</sup> S 12.43/2:72 f (SD 108.14) = 35.106/4:87 (SD 108.15).

<sup>44</sup> S 35.81/4:50-52 (SD 108.16).

<sup>45</sup> S 35.152/4:138 (SD 85.8). See S:B 1121-1128.

<sup>46</sup> S 35.68/4:39 f (SD 20.11).

<sup>47</sup> Five of such suttas are found in this volume: SD 7.1-5.

our own senses and sense-experience. In **the Rohitassa Sutta** (S 2.26/1:61 f),<sup>49</sup> two senses of the world “world” (*loka*) are used, one physical and the other existential. **The Loka Sutta** (S 35.83/4:52)<sup>50</sup> gives an existential and spiritual definition of the world as “breaking up,” that is, as impermanent and a dynamic process.

**7.3** Besides **the Dvaya Sutta 2** (S 35.93) and **the Rāhuḷ’ovāda Sutta** (M 147 = S 35.121) mentioned above<sup>51</sup> [4], the Sabba Sutta should be studied with other suttas like **the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta** (M 18)<sup>52</sup> and **the Pariññā Sutta** (S 35.60).<sup>53</sup> **The Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** presents the earliest canonical theory of perception, explaining how, for example, visual consciousness leads to sensory impression, to feeling, to perception and to mental proliferation. (M 18/1:108-118)

**7.4 The Pariññā Sutta** explains that the learned noble disciple becomes disillusioned (*nibbindati*) with the contact arising from sense-organ, sense-object and sense-consciousness, and as such “becomes dispassionate (*virajjati*); through dispassion, he is freed (*vimuccati*); through liberation, he understands, ‘Clinging has been fully understood by me.’” (S 35.60/4:32 f).

According to the Buddha, all that we can know are what we experience through our senses. In this sense, the world is our own creation. This is not an “agnostic” stand that there are other things lying beyond the 6 senses that we are unable to know (like “God”, etc). At least, these extra-sensory possibilities are beyond the ken of the unenlightened. And yet, with these 6 senses themselves, one could work out one’s own salvation, and so transcend the world of the senses.<sup>54</sup>

## Sabba Sutta

S 35.23

### The Pāli text

1 Evam me sutam.

Ekam samayaṃ bhagavā sāvatthiyaṃ viharati jeta,vane anātha,piṇḍikassa ārāme.

2 Tatra kho bhagavā bhikkhū āmantesi bhikkhave ti.

Bhadante ti te bhikkhū bhagavato paccassosum.

Bhagavā etad avoca.

3 Sabbam vo bhikkhave desissāmi, tam suṇātha.

Kiñ ca bhikkhave sabbam.

Cakkhuñ c’eva rūpā, ca sotañ ca saddā, ca ghānañ ca gandhā, ca jivhā ca rasā ca, kāyo ca phoṭṭhabbā ca, mano ca dhammā ca.

Idam vuccati bhikkhave sabbam.

<sup>48</sup> See SD 7.4.

<sup>49</sup> See SD 7.1.

<sup>50</sup> See SD 7.3.

<sup>51</sup> S 35.93/4:68 f; M 147/3:277-280 = S 35.121/4:105-107.

<sup>52</sup> See **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18), SD 6.14.

<sup>53</sup> See **Pariññā S** (S 35.6), SD 6.17.

<sup>54</sup> Further on *sabba*, see SD 56.17 (1.2.2).

4 Yo bhikkhave evaṃ vadeyya, aham etaṃ sabbaṃ paccakkhāya aññaṃ sabbaṃ paññāpessāmi ti, tassa vācāvatthu-r eva’ssa, puṭṭho ca na sampāpeyya, uttariṃ ca vighātam āpajjeyya. Taṃ kissa hetu. Yathā taṃ bhikkhave avisayasmin ti.

— — —

## Sabba Sutta

### The Discourse on the All

S 35.23

1 Thus have I heard.

Once the Blessed One was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika’s park in Jeta’s grove near Sāvattḥī.

2 Then the Blessed One addressed the monk, “Bhikshus!”

“Bhante,” the monks replied in assent.

The Blessed One said this:

3 “Bhikshus, I will teach you **the all**.<sup>55</sup> Listen to it.

And what, bhikshus, is the all?

(1) <b>The eye</b>	and	forms,	<i>cakkhuñ c’eva</i>	<i>rūpā ca</i>
(2) <b>the ear</b>	and	sounds,	<i>sotañ ca</i>	<i>saddā ca</i>
(3) <b>the nose</b>	and	smells,	<i>ghānañ ca</i>	<i>gandhā ca</i>
(4) <b>the tongue</b>	and	tastes,	<i>jivhā ca</i>	<i>rasā ca</i>
(5) <b>the body</b>	and	touches,	<i>kāyo ca</i>	<i>phoṭṭhabbā ca</i>
(6) <b>the mind</b>	and	mind-objects. <sup>56</sup>	<i>mano ca</i>	<i>dhammā ca</i>

This, bhikshus, is called the all.

4 Bhikshus, if anyone were to say thus:

‘Rejecting<sup>57</sup> this all, I shall make known another all’—that would be empty talk on his part.

When questioned, he would not be able to reply and, moreover, he would meet with vexation.

And what is the reason for this?

Because, bhikshus, it is not within his domain.”<sup>58</sup>

— evaṃ —

<sup>55</sup> On the all (*sabba*), see (1+5).

<sup>56</sup> “Mind-objects,” *dhammā*, alt tr “mental phenomena.”

<sup>57</sup> “Rejecting,” *paccakkhāya*, lit, “having rejected.”

<sup>58</sup> *Yathā taṃ bhikkhave avisayasmim*. Comy: Beings are vexed when it is not within their domain. Just as it is not within one’s domain to cross over a deep body of water while carrying a stone palace on one’s head, or to drag the sun and the moon off their courses, so that one would only meet with vexation in attempting so; even so, it is not one would be vexed when one attempts what is not within one’s domain. (SA 2:358,9-14)

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