

## SD 62.19

## Saññā Sutta 1

**Paṭhama Saññā Sutta** The First Discourse on Perceptions | **A 5.61**

Theme: The 5 perceptions for awakening to the path

Translated by Piya Tan ©2017, 2025

### 1 Sutta summary and significance

#### 1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

##### 1.1.1 The 5 perceptions

**1.1.1.1 Paṭhama Saññā Sutta** or the First Discourse on the Perceptions lists 5 perceptions—those *on the foul, on death, on danger, on the repulsiveness of food, and on non-delight in all the world*—that is, meditative perceptions recommended for monastics, but which the laity may do when they feel right and ready.

**1.1.1.2 Saññā** (fem), “perception(s),” here means memory-based meditation. *Saññā* is both singular and plural; when used as singular, it usually refers to perception or experience itself [2.1]; as plural, it refers to various forms of memory-based meditations [2.2].

**1.1.2** These 5 perceptions are also efficacious in overcoming strong lust, especially for lay practitioners, in which case they should be guided by an experienced meditation teacher, that is, a spiritual friend.

#### 1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

**The Paṭhama Saññā Sutta** or the First Discourse on the Perceptions (A 5.61) is the first of 2 suttas on 5 perceptions listed consecutively as the first 2 suttas of **the Saññā Vagga**, “the chapter on meditative perception,” of the Saṃyutta Nikāya. The Burmese Tipiṭaka calls this pair of suttas **the Saññā, sutta, dvaya** (the 2 suttas on perceptions), since structurally they are very similar, that is:

SD 62.19	<b>Saññā Sutta 1</b>	A 5.61/3:79
SD 62.20	<b>Saññā Sutta 2</b>	A 5.62/3:79

### 2 Saññā as meditative perception

#### 2.1 SAÑÑĀ MEANING “MEDITATIVE PERCEPTION”

##### 2.1.1 Saññā as meditation practice

When the term **saññā** is used to mean “meditative perception” or simply “perception,” it refers to using an idea or memory as meditation object. In other words, the meaning of *saññā* remains as “perception,” that is, of the 5 aggregates, but it is used in the sense of meditation-object, that is, a “theme,”<sup>1</sup> “idea,”<sup>2</sup> or “perceptual object.”

<sup>1</sup> Nyanaponika & Bodhi 1999:303 VII n1.

<sup>2</sup> BDict: *saññā* (3).

Perception exercises may be used as preliminary work for calm (*samatha*) or for access concentration (*upacāra samādhi*).<sup>3</sup> One of the most common and effective perception practices is **the perception of impermanence** (*anicca,saññā*). Properly done, it is even guaranteed by the Buddha to bring us to the attainment of streamwinning.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.1.2 Verbs for perception practice

A perception practice is useful in normalizing or settling an idea so that it is cleared away, or the perception directs us into some deeper aspect of Dharma experience. Hence, the suttas also use other active verbs to describe how the meditation-object is otherwise perceived, thus:

	<u>Perception in</u>	<u>the foul</u>	<u>death</u>	<u>danger</u>	<u>repulsiveness</u> <u>of food</u>	<u>non-delight in the world</u>
<i>paṭisañcikkhati</i>	“reflects”		√	√		(perception only)
<i>anupassati</i>	“contemplates”			√		
<i>paccavekkhati</i>	“reviews”	√			√	

[For a **Table** on the remaining perceptions found in **the Saññā Sutta 2** (A 5.62), see SD 62.20 (2.1.2). For a longer list, see **SD 19.16** (Table 3.3).]

## 2.2 LISTS OF SAÑÑĀ AS MEDITATIVE PERCEPTIONS

Here is a list of other meditative perceptions given in a number of Aṅguttara suttas. Please compare the lists to see which perceptions are the most common, and the different kinds of perceptions introduced into the list for a broad view of insight experiences.

### 2.2.1 Vijjā,bhāgiya Dhamma Sutta (A 6.35)<sup>5</sup>

The 6 conditions that pertain to true knowledge (*cha dhammā vijjā,bhāgiyā*):

- |   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| (1) the perception of impermanence;                 | <i>anicca,saññā</i> [2.1.1] |
| (2) the perception of suffering in the impermanent; | <i>anicce dukkha,saññā</i>  |
| (3) the perception of the nonself in suffering;     | <i>dukkhe anatta,saññā</i>  |
| (4) the perception of abandoning;                   | <i>pahāna,saññā</i>         |
| (5) the perception of dispassion;                   | <i>virāga,saññā</i>         |
| (6) the perception of cessation.                    | <i>nirodha,saññā</i>        |

### 2.2.2 (Saṅkhitta) Satta Saññā Sutta (A 7.45)<sup>6</sup>

The 7 perceptions cultivated and developed are of great fruit, of great benefit, culminating in the death-free, with the death-free as their goal (*satta saññā bhāvitā bahulikatā maha-p,phalā honti mahānisaṃsā amat’ogadhā amata’pariyosānā*)

- |                                 |                     |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| (1) the perception of the foul; | <i>asubha,saññā</i> |
| (2) the perception of death;    | <i>maraṇa,saññā</i> |

<sup>3</sup> SA 2:292

<sup>4</sup> See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1) & SD 16.7 (5).

<sup>5</sup> A 6.35/3:334 (SD 23.16(1.2)): see also (1) for details.

<sup>6</sup> A 7.45/4:46.

- |   |                                    |
|---|------------------------------------|
| (3) the perception of the repulsiveness of food;    | <i>āhāre paṭikūla,saññā</i>        |
| (4) the perception of non-delight in all the world; | <i>sabba,loke anabhirata,saññā</i> |
| (5) the perception of impermanence;                 | <i>anicca,saññā</i> [2.1.1]        |
| (6) the perception of suffering in the impermanent; | <i>anicce dukkha,saññā</i>         |
| (7) the perception of nonself in suffering.         | <i>dukkhe anatta,saññā</i>         |

[A longer version of the same sutta follows.]

### 2.2.3 Paṭhama (Dasama) Saññā Sutta (A 10.56)<sup>7</sup>

These 10 perceptions, when cultivated and developed, are of great fruit and benefit, culminating in the death-free, having the death-free as their goal.

- |   |                                    |
|---|------------------------------------|
| (1) the perception of the foul;                     | <i>asubha,saññā</i>                |
| (2) the perception of death;                        | <i>maraṇa,saññā</i>                |
| (3) the perception of the repulsiveness of food;    | <i>āhāre paṭikūla,saññā</i>        |
| (4) the perception of non-delight in all the world  | <i>sabba,loke anabhirata,saññā</i> |
| (5) the perception of impermanence;                 | <i>anicca,saññā</i> [2.1.1]        |
| (6) the perception of suffering in the impermanent; | <i>anicce dukkha,saññā</i>         |
| (7) the perception of nonself in suffering;         | <i>dukkhe anatta,saññā</i>         |
| (8) the perception of abandoning;                   | <i>pahāna,saññā</i>                |
| (9) the perception of dispassion;                   | <i>virāga,saññā</i>                |
| (10) the perception of cessation.                   | <i>nirodha,saññā</i>               |

### 2.2.4 Dutiya (Dasama) Saññā Sutta (A 10.57)<sup>8</sup>

These 10 perceptions, when cultivated and developed, are of great fruit and benefit, culminating in the death-free, having the death-free as their goal.

- |   |                                    |
|---|------------------------------------|
| (1) the perception of impermanence;                 | <i>anicca,saññā</i> [2.1.1]        |
| (2) the perception of nonself;                      | <i>anatta,saññā</i>                |
| (3) the perception of death;                        | <i>maraṇa,saññā</i>                |
| (4) the perception of the repulsiveness of food;    | <i>āhāre paṭikūla,saññā</i>        |
| (5) the perception of non-delight in all the world; | <i>sabba,loke anabhirata,saññā</i> |
| (6) the perception of a skeleton; <sup>9</sup>      | <i>aṭṭhika,saññā</i>               |
| (7) the perception of a worm-infested corpse;       | <i>puḷavaka,saññā</i>              |
| (8) the perception of a livid corpse;               | <i>vinīlaka,saññā</i>              |
| (9) the perception of a fissured corpse;            | <i>vicchiddaka,saññā</i>           |
| (10) the perception of a bloated corpse.            | <i>uddhumātaka,saññā</i>           |

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<sup>7</sup> A 10.56/5:105.

<sup>8</sup> A 10.57/5:105 f.

<sup>9</sup> These last 5 kinds of perceptions are those of corpses from the 10 foulness meditation-subjects listed in **Kāya,-gata,sati S** (M 119,9-17/3:91 f), SD 12.21, and described in detail in **Vism** ch 6.

# Saññā Sutta 1

## The First Discourse on Perceptions

A 5.61

**1** Bhikshus, these 5 perceptions, when cultivated and developed, are of great fruit and benefit, culminating in the death-free, having the death-free as their goal.

What are the five?

- |   |                                    |
|---|------------------------------------|
| (1) The perception of the foul,                                   | <i>asubha,saññā</i>                |
| (2) the perception of death,                                      | <i>maraṇa,saññā</i>                |
| (3) the perception of danger,                                     | <i>ādīnava,saññā</i>               |
| (4) the perception of the repulsiveness of food, and              | <i>āhāre paṭikkūla,saññā</i>       |
| (5) the perception of non-delight in all the world. <sup>10</sup> | <i>sabba,loke anabhirata,saññā</i> |

These 5 perceptions, bhikshus, when cultivated and developed, are of great fruit and benefit, culminating in the death-free, having the death-free as their consummation.

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<sup>10</sup> The perception of the foul (*asubha,saññā*) is explained at A 10.60,6 (SD 19.16 (3.2.4)); the perception of death (*maraṇa,saññā*) or mindfulness of death (*maraṇa,sati*) at A 6.19+20 SD 48.11+12) and 8.73+74 (SD 48.5+6); the perception of danger (*ādīnava,saññā*) at A 10.60,4-7 (SD 19.16); the perception of the repulsiveness of food (*āhāre paṭikkūla,saññā*) at Vism 11.1-26/341-347; and the perception of non-delight in all the world (*sabba,loke anabhirata,saññā*) at A 10.60 (8) (SD 19.16).