

SD 62.7 (Saḷāyatana) Upavāṇa Sutta

The (Saḷāyatana) Discourse to Upavāṇa | S 35.70

Be **Upavāṇa Sandiṭṭhika Sutta** The Sandiṭṭhika Upavāṇa Discourse

Theme: The Dharma is personally experienced by the wise

Translated by Piya Tan ©2014, 2024

1 Sutta summary and overview

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

The **(Saḷāyatana) Upavāṇa Sutta** (S 35.70) describes how the path saints deal with experiences of the 6 sense-bases, that is, with sense-experiences and thoughts. The experiences of the streamwinner, the once-returner and the non-returner are described first, followed by those of the arhat. [1.2.1]

1.2 SUTTA OVERVIEW

1.2.1 Learners and adepts

The Commentary says that this Sutta is given to reflect the difference between the learner (*sekha*) and the adept (*asekha*) (*imasmiṃ sutte sekhāsekhānaṃ paccavekkhaṇā kathitā*, SA 2:369,3 f). How the learner—the streamwinner, once-returner or nonreturner—deals with sense-experiences and thoughts is listed in the first part [§§2-7], and the mastery of the adept (*asekha*) or arhat, in the second part [§§8-13].

1.2.2 We are our senses

1.2.2.1 We are our senses—we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think—or, technically, we are the activities of the 6 sense-bases (*saḷāyatana*). According to **the (Saḷāyatana) Upavāṇa Sutta** (S 35.70), only the arhat is able to experience *forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts* without any lust (*rāga*). A learner must be mindful, attending, “There is in me lust for *forms* etc internally.” In this way, the learner is directly experiencing true reality (*dhamma*). [§§2-7]

The arhat, too, mindfully experiences by way of the sense-bases but directly knows, “There is in me *no* lust for forms etc internally.” In this way, the adept or arhat, too, directly experiences true reality. [§8-13]. Thus by the Dharma here is meant the practical application of Dharma (the path) as directly seeing (or minding) true reality (*dhamma*).

1.2.2.2 The Dharma as practical teaching (*dhamma*) has the following virtues (*guṇa*):

- (1) it is well taught (*svākkhāto*) by the Buddha; [2.1.1.1]
- (2) one “sees for oneself” (*sandiṭṭhika*) the here and now, right here in the present, free from the past, free from the future; [2.1.1.2]
- (3) in this sense “it has nothing to do with time” (*akālika*). One is a learner here and now; one is an arhat here and now; or one is still unawakened here and now. [2.1.1.3]
- (4) The Dharma thus “invites” us, as unawakened beings, “to come and see for ourselves” (*ehi,passika*), to personally verify this true reality by personal experience. [2.1.1.4]
- (5) When we are mindful of this vision of true reality, the Dharma “leads us onward” (*opanayika*) to the path of awakening and therefrom we head for awakening. [2.2]
- (6) We begin this self-transformation with faith, which empowers us with effort; harmonizing all the other 4 faculties (*indriya*) with mindfulness, we apply these faculties, cultivating concentration

which brings about liberating wisdom. We thus do not need to rely on any external agency but on self-effort—this is an important sense of “**internally**” (*ajjhatta*) [§2-13]—meaning that (6) this is “to be personally known by the wise” (*paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*) [1.2.2.3].

2 Key words

2.1 VIRTUES OF THE DHARMA

2.1.0 The 6 virtues

The (**Saḷ-āyatana**) **Upavāṇa Sutta** only mentions the last 5 of the 6 virtues of the Dharma [below], that is, with the omission of the 1st virtue—it is “well taught” (*svākkhāto*). The reason for this omission is probably because this Sutta speaks of the Dharma in terms of practice; whereas, *svākkhāto* only describes the Dharma as theory and teaching [2.1.2.1], while the other 5 virtues point to its practical qualities.

The Buddha Dharma is said to have these 6 virtues or qualities (*guṇa*):¹ [1.2.2.2]

(1) it is well taught	<i>svākkhāta,</i>	[2.1.2.1]
(2) it is to be seen for oneself (here and now)	<i>sandiṭṭhika,</i>	[2.1.2.2]
(3) it has nothing to do with time	<i>akālika,</i>	[2.1.2.3]
(4) it invites us to come and see for oneself	<i>ehi,passika,</i>	[2.1.2.4]
(5) it is onward leading	<i>opanayika,</i>	[2.2]
(6) it is to be personally known by the wise	<i>paccattam veditabbo viññūhi.</i>	[2.1.2.6]

(M 1:37; A 3:285; Vism 7.68-88/213-218)

2.1.1 Descriptions of the Dharma virtues

These virtues or qualities of the Buddha Dharma have been explained in some detail in **Dhammānussati** (SD 15.9), and we will here only briefly explain their key ideas.

2.1.1.1 The Dharma is **well taught** (*svākkhāta*) because it records the life and teachings of the Buddha, the self-awakened one, and the early arhats as *the path of self-awakening* that can be learned by anyone. It is also “beautiful and good” in the beginning (moral virtue), in the middle (mental cultivation) and in the end (insight wisdom). Historically, it contains the most essential teachings (the unconditioned nirvana) and practices (lovingkindness and breath meditations) that actually define the human-centred and life-affirming aspects of religion.

2.1.1.2 The Dharma is **to be seen for oneself here and now** (*sandiṭṭhika*), that is right here in the present, as it rises and falls away. “To be seen” here means “to be directly experienced,” in which “directly” (*sam* = *san* before d-) refers to “the self” (that is, to self-effort). When the Dharma (true reality) is seen for oneself, it transforms us by removing our defilements, and helps us to cultivate wholesome qualities in their place.

The sense “here and now” is inherent in the word *sandiṭṭhika* and refers to insight, that is, *in-sight*, “seeing into the self (the mind).” This is the knowledge that frees us from the past (which is dead), from the future (which does not come), and from the present which is fleeting; it is just here for the moment, and then is but a memory. In this sense, the Dharma has nothing to do with time. [2.1.1.3]

¹ D 2:92 (Vism 216); A 1:156 (see AA), 227 (AA); Sn 567 (SnA) = M 92 (MA), Sn 1137 (Nc, NdA, SnA); S 2:58 = 4:328.

2.1.1.3 The Dharma **has nothing to do with time** (*akālika*) since its core teaching is not some ancient history of a favoured race or some prophecy or some faith that brings after-death salvation; it is about mindfully engaging with *the present* here and now. One of its key teachings is that the past is gone; the future never comes; only the present is true and real.

Or, in the words of the wise old turtle, Oogway, in the movie “Kung Fu Panda” (2008): ““The past is history, the future is a mystery, but the present is a gift.” The source of this quote is **the Bhadd’eka,ratta Sutta** (M 131).²

2.1.1.4 The Dharma **invites and entails personal verification** (*ehi,passika*). In most other religions, the follower is told about the past, rightly or wrongly; the follower is commanded to believe in it because it cannot be verified. To “come and see” (literal translation of *ehi,passika*) means that it is true reality, present here and now; we only need to direct our mind into the present moment to see it.

Such a seeing is a personal verification of true reality; we empirically know it for ourselves. It is a self-realization leading to self-awakening and true freedom from blind faith and ignorance. **Nirvana** is sometimes called “freedom” (*vimutti*), that is, the fruition of freedom (*phala,vimutti*) (UA 69). Hence, the Dharma is also called the path of freedom (*vimutti,magga*).³

2.1.1.5 The Dharma is **onward leading** (*opanayika*). [2.2]

2.1.1.6 The Dharma is **to be personally known by the wise** (*paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*). This 6th virtue of the Dharma encompasses 3 aspects: (1) “(to be) personally ...” (*ajjhatta*), (2) “known” (*veditabba*) and (3) “by the wise” (*viññūhi*). These together entail self-effort which brings knowledge that makes us wise and free from suffering.

(1) “(To be) personally” (*ajjhatta*) refers to **self-effort**, which means as follows:

(a) We are our own master (Dh 160, 380). We must understand and accept that we are free and capable of changing and freeing ourselves from our present state of suffering (because of lack and want). When we listen to or accept any teaching that labels us as “sinners” or “evil” by nature, we are disempowered from doing good for ourselves and for others. We also need to remind others of their own “inner” (*ajjhatta*) goodness, empowering and awakening them with their self-knowledge of personal effort.

(b) We are accountable for our own actions (thought, word and deed). By ourself is evil done; by ourself are we defiled. By ourself is evil not done; by ourself are we purified. Purity and impurity [good and bad] depend on ourself. No one purifies another. (Dh 165)

(c) Our “self” is our own mind, our intentions (*cetanā*). To know ourself is to know our own mind (*att’aññū*) (D 3:252; S 4:113). Thus by the self we know the self (*attanā va attānam sañjānāmi*, M 1:8).⁴

(2) “Known” (*veditabba*) means “**to be personally experienced.**” Here, it means to know (*vijānāti*) in the sense of *perceiving, learning* and *understanding* true reality. To **perceive** means to remember or recognize what we have experienced and to know what we are experiencing *now*. We perceive each moment only as a form, a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch or a thought. We may give them names, but that’s all they each really are: *a form, a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, or a thought*.

² M 131,3/3:187 (SD 8.9); cf S 1.10/1:5); Sn 949; Dh 348, 421.

³ Nm 1:138; Nett 43; Pm 2:85, 140 *virāgo maggom vimutti phalaṃ*; passim; Peṭk 18, 19, 114; DhsA 121.

⁴ See **Self and selves**, SD 26.9 (esp 2.1.2).

(3) “By the wise” (*viññūhi*) refers to those who recall or recognize the right and true fact about something, that it is always *changing* and never exactly the same as before and that it will end the moment we experience it. To **learn** (*sikkhati*) means to remind ourselves of this difficult but true fact, so that we remember this—that all experiences rise and fall, begin and end; they are impermanent. When we do not forget this truth and see it in each and every moment of experience, then, we are **wise** (*viññū*).

2.2 AN ANALYSIS OF OPANAYIKA

2.2.1 Word root

2.2.1.1 The term *opanayika*, “leading onward,” needs some explanation. CPD explains it as “worthy of pursuit, deserving of pursuit,” and remarks that “the context in which [*opanayika*] occurs shows clearly that it cannot have the active sense of ‘leading to’ or ‘conducive to,’ but must rather be interpreted in a passive sense (gerundive)⁵ in accordance with the commentaries.”

2.2.1.2 DP, on the other hand, gives a broader sense of *opanayika*: “fit for bringing near, for taking to oneself; fit for making use of; deserving to be used.” We see here both the passive and active senses of *opanayika*.

PED gives its active sense, deriving *opanayika* from the verb *upaneti* (*upa*, “near to, up to”) + *nī*, “to lead, guide”; from *naya*, “leading,” and the verb *neti* (*nayati*), “to lead, guide,” (both usages literal and figurative), that is, “leading to (nibbāna).”

2.2.2 Visuddhi, magga

The **Visuddhi, magga** gives both the passive and active senses of *opanayika*. In its passive sense, it is glossed by the gerundive *upanetabba*, “to be brought near, to be applied, to be aroused,” thus:

[This Dharma] is worth arousing (*upanayanam arahatī*) in one’s own mind (subjectively) by means of meditative cultivation But the unconditioned (nirvana) is worth arousing with one’s own mind (as the mind’s object). Thus, it is onward leading; meaning that it is worth taking as one’s shelter by way of realization.

Bhāvanā, vasena attano citte upanayanam arahatī ti opanayiko ... asankhate pana attano cittena upanayanam arahatī ti opanayiko [opaneyyiko]; sacchikiriyā, vasena allīyanam arahatī ti attho.
(Vism 7.83/217,3-9)

Clearly from this explanation, we see *opanayika* is to be self-asserted, that is, practised as meditation: this is the *active* sense. When practised fully and correctly we realize nirvana (as a result or fruition): this is the *passive* sense.

2.2.3 “Passive” and “active senses”

2.2.3.1 In its “active” sense, *opanāyika* reflects its root derivation (*nī*, as explained above) [2.2.1.2]: “it leads on to nirvana, thus the noble path is onward-leading ... so it is leading onwards” (*nibbānam upaneti ti ariya, maggo upaneyyo ... opanayiko*, Vism 7.84/217,10-12). The path “leads” us in the sense

⁵ That is, *opanayika* is something which, if we follow, leads us to a wholesome object; it is not something which takes a hold of us and pulls us to that object. [2.2.1.2, 2.2.2]

that it is always there, but the path actually does nothing! We are the active one, loving on that path. Ultimately, *our practice is the path*. This refers to our *active* practice of the Dharma, arousing wholesomeness within us.

Opanayika is not used in any other context to help us to infer its meaning. However, there is the cognate expression *attūpanāyika*,⁶ “concerning oneself, applied to or belonging to oneself” (CPD). Simply, this means one needs to apply self-effort by which one is led onward along the path of awakening. This is also an active sense of *opānāyika*; but again we are the one exerting ourselves.

2.2.3.2 On the other hand, to indicate that the Dharma conduces to nirvana the texts use another expression, *niyyānika upasama, samvattanika*, “conducive to leading to (inner) peace.”⁷ Although the context is different here, we see *niyyānika*, “leading out (of samsara),” which is derived from √NĪ, “to lead.” This is the “**passive**” sense: we are led to nirvana (as a result of our right effort). In a sense, by doing “nothing,” we overcome the view that there is “something” (*kiñcana*) to achieve.

The grammar and language seem to complicate things; the practice simplifies it with the silence of experience.

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(Saḷāyatana) Upavāṇa Sutta

The (Saḷāyatana) Discourse to Upavāṇa

S 35.70

1 Then the venerable **Upavāṇa**⁸ approached the Blessed One. Having approached, he saluted the Blessed One and sat down at one side.

Sitting at one side, the venerable Upavāṇa said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, it is said, **‘the Dharma is to be seen for oneself, the Dharma is the directly visible.’**⁹

In what way, bhante, is the Dharma seen for oneself [directly visible], immediate, inviting one to come and see, leading onward, to be personally known by the wise?”

The learner’s reflection

2 (1) “Here, Upavāṇa, having seen a form with the eye, *cakkhunā rūpaṃ disvā*
a monk, Upavāṇa, experiences the form as well as lust for the form.¹⁰

He understands that lust for forms exists internally thus:¹¹

‘There is in me lust for forms internally.’ (*santañ ca ajjhataṃ rūpesu rāgaṃ*)

Since that is so, Upavāṇa, *the Dharma is to be seen for oneself [directly visible], immediate, inviting one to come and see, leading onward, to be personally known by the wise. [42]*

⁶ Sn 799; S 55:7/5:353,21, 26; V 3:90,33, 91,19.

⁷ See, eg, M 1:67,13; S 55:25/5:380,11.

⁸ Upavāṇa was the Buddha’s attendant when he was suffering from a wind ailment; see **Deva,hita S** (S 7.13/-1:174 f), SD 44.17.

⁹ *Sanditthiko dhammo* for both phrases. What follows is the standard formula for reflection on the Dharma, minus only the first term, *svākkhāto*. On *opānāyika*, see [2.2].

¹⁰ In this sentence, wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) is applied. See next sentence n.

¹¹ In this sentence, mindfulness (*sati*) is applied with clear awareness (*sampajañña*). On the difference between attention and mindfulness, see SD 62.10a (3.3.2.2).

3 (2) Further, Upavāṇa, having heard a sound with the ear, *sotena saddaṃ sutvā*
a monk, Upavāṇa, experiences the sound as well as lust for the sound.

He understands that lust for sounds exists internally thus:

‘There is in me lust for *sounds* internally.’ (*santañ ca ajjhataṃ saddesu rāgaṃ*)

Since that is so, Upavāṇa, *the Dharma is to be seen for oneself [directly visible], immediate, inviting one to come and see, leading onward, to be personally known by the wise.*

4 (3) Further, Upavāṇa, having smelled a smell with the nose, *ghānena gandhaṃ ghāyitvā*
a monk, Upavāṇa, experiences the smell as well as lust for the smell.

He understands that lust for smells exists internally thus:

‘There is in me lust for *smells* internally.’ (*santañ ca ajjhataṃ gandhesu rāgaṃ*)

Since that is so, Upavāṇa, *the Dharma is to be seen for oneself [directly visible], immediate, inviting one to come and see, leading onward, to be personally known by the wise.*

5 (4) Further, Upavāṇa, having tasted a taste with the tongue, *jivhāya rasaṃ sāyitvā*
a monk, Upavāṇa, experiences the taste as well as lust for the taste.

He understands that lust for tastes exists internally thus:

‘There is in me lust for *tastes* internally.’ (*santañ ca ajjhataṃ rasesu rāgaṃ*)

Since that is so, Upavāṇa, *the Dharma is to be seen for oneself [directly visible], immediate, inviting one to come and see, leading onward, to be personally known by the wise.*

6 (5) Further, Upavāṇa, having felt a touch with the body,¹² *kāyena phoṭṭhabbaṃ phusitvā*
a monk, Upavāṇa, experiences the touch as well as lust for the touch.

He understands that lust for touches exists internally thus:

‘There is in me lust for *touches* internally.’ (*santañ ca ajjhataṃ phoṭṭabbesu rāgaṃ*)

Since that is so, Upavāṇa, *the Dharma is to be seen for oneself [directly visible], immediate, inviting one to come and see, leading onward, to be personally known by the wise.*

7 (6) Further, Upavāṇa, having cognized a thought with the mind,¹³ *manasā dhammaṃ viññāya*
a monk, Upavāṇa, experiences the thought, as well as lust for the thought.¹⁴

He understands that lust for thoughts exists internally thus:

‘There is in me lust for *thoughts* internally.’ (*santañ ca ajjhataṃ dhammesu rāgaṃ*)

Since that is so, Upavāṇa, *the Dharma is to be seen for oneself [directly visible], immediate, inviting one to come and see, leading onward, to be personally known by the wise.*

The arhat’s reflection

8 (1) But here, Upavāṇa, having seen a **form** with the eye,
a monk, Upavāṇa, experiences the form without experiencing lust for the form.

He understands that lust for forms does *not* exist internally thus:

¹² “Having felt” is a figurative (*pariyāyena*) tr; the Pali is *phusitva*, lit, “having touched.” See §12.

¹³ “Thought” is a broad term for *dhamma*, literally “mental states, phenomena,” and can refer to any “mental event,” such as thinking, imagining, dreaming, and also emotions (lust, hatred, joy, sadness, etc). Hence, here it is not a technical term. This helps us to see mental activities as a group by itself distinct from sense-experiences, for the purpose of Dharma practice, ie, not reacting with lust, hatred or ignoring these experiences, but seeing them as being impermanent.

¹⁴ *Yan taṃ upavāna bhikkhu manasā dhammaṃ viññāya dhamma, paṭisaṃvedī ca hoti dhamma, raga, paṭisaṃvedī ca.*

'There is in me *no* lust for forms internally.'

Since that is so, Upavāṇa, *the Dharma is to be seen for oneself [directly visible], immediate, inviting one to come and see, leading onward, to be personally known by the wise.*

9 (2) Further, Upavāṇa, having heard a **sound** with the ear, a monk, Upavāṇa, experiences the sound without experiencing lust for the sound.

He understands that lust for sounds does *not* exist internally thus:

'There is in me *no* lust for sounds internally.'

Since that is so, Upavāṇa, *the Dharma is to be seen for oneself [directly visible], immediate, inviting one to come and see, leading onward, to be personally known by the wise.*

10 (3) Further, Upavāṇa, having smelled a **smell** with the nose, a monk, Upavāṇa, experiences the smell without experiencing lust for the smell.

He understands that lust for smells does *not* exist internally thus:

'There is in me *no* lust for smells internally.'

Since that is so, Upavāṇa, *the Dharma is to be seen for oneself [directly visible], immediate, inviting one to come and see, leading onward, to be personally known by the wise.*

11 (4) Further, Upavāṇa, having tasted a **taste** with the tongue, a monk, Upavāṇa, experiences the taste without experiencing lust for the taste.

He understands that lust for tastes does *not* exist internally thus:

'There is in me *no* lust for tastes internally.'

Since that is so, Upavāṇa, *the Dharma is to be seen for oneself [directly visible], immediate, inviting one to come and see, leading onward, to be personally known by the wise.*

12 (5) Further, Upavāṇa, having felt¹⁵ a **touch** with the body, a monk, Upavāṇa, feels the touch without experiencing lust for the touch.

He understands that lust for touches does *not* exist internally thus:

'There is in me *no* lust for touches internally.'

Since that is so, Upavāṇa, *the Dharma is to be seen for oneself [directly visible], immediate, inviting one to come and see, leading onward, to be personally known by the wise.*

13 [43] (6) Further, Upavāṇa, having cognized a **thought** with the mind, a monk, Upavāṇa, experiences the thought without experiencing lust for the thought.¹⁶

He understands that lust for thoughts does not exist internally thus:

'There is in me *no* lust for thoughts internally.'

Since that is so, Upavāṇa, *the Dharma is to be seen for oneself [directly visible], immediate, inviting one to come and see, leading onward, to be personally known by the wise."*

—evaṃ—

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¹⁵ "Having felt" is a figurative (*pariyāyena*) tr; the Pali is *phusitva*, lit, "having touched." See §6.

¹⁶ *Yan taṃ upavāna bhikkhu manasā dhammaṃ viññāya dhamma,paṭisaṃvedī hi kho hoti no ca dhamma,raga,-paṭisaṃvedī.*