

Nothing is worth clinging to

Source: Pacalā Sutta (A 7.58, SD 4.11)¹, 8 ways of overcoming drowsiness and nature of true discipleship © Piya Tan, 2003, 2025.

5.1 BRIEF ADVICE ON LIBERATION THROUGH THE DESTRUCTION OF CRAVING

5.1.2 In the conclusion of the Pacalā Sutta, Moggallāna asks the Buddha how one is awakened [§11.1]. The Buddha begins by answering that the awakened is one who has learned that “nothing is worth clinging to” (*sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāyā*) [§11.2]. The whole section [§11] is well known as “**the brief advice on liberation through the destruction of craving**,”² and runs thus:³

11.2 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].⁴ Having directly understood all things, he fully understands⁵ all things.

11.3 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), SD 54.9 (= A 7.58,11/4:88), SD 4.11

¹ <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/4.11-Pacala-S-a7.58-piya.pdf>

² *Saṅkhittena taṇhā,saṅkhaya,vimutto (ovādo)*.

³ M 37,3/1:251 = A 7.58,11/4:88. The vocatives have been omitted. For nn on key terms, see sutta §11 below.

⁴ “He directly understands all things,” *so sabbam dhammam 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.

⁵ “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 has 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 has 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 **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118,21/3:83), SD 7.13 .

5.1.2 This whole famous “brief advice on liberation through the destruction of craving” forms the main theme of **the Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 37), where the Buddha gives this teaching to Sakra, leader of the devas, in the presence of Moggallāna.⁶ To find out whether that Sakra remembered and understood the Buddha’s admonition, Moggallāna then visits the heaven of the 33, where by a skillful means, Moggallāna reminds Sakra and the celestial king Vessavaṇa of the Buddha’s “brief advice” that nothing is worth clinging to.⁷ Moggallāna then returns to the Buddha to recount the incident to him.⁸ At that time, Sakra is already a streamwinner.⁹

5.2 THE ALL

Passage 11.3 of the Pacalā Sutta is very close to that in **the Avijjā Pahāna Sutta 2** (S 35.80).¹⁰ The ensuing passage [S 35.80.6b], however, is very different only in wording, but same in spirit, applying the teaching of “the all” (*sabba*):¹¹

“Here, bhikshu, the monk has **learned** [heard] that *nothing is worth clinging to*.¹² And a monk, having thus learned that nothing is worth clinging to, *he directly knows all things*.¹³

Having directly known all things, *he fully understands all things*.¹⁴

Having fully understood everything, he **sees** all signs as other (*aññato*):¹⁵

He sees **the eye** as *other*.

He sees forms as *other*.

He sees eye-consciousness as *other*.

He sees eye-contact as *other*.

Whatever is pleasant, or painful, or neutral,

that arises on account of eye-contact as condition—that, too, he sees as other.

[*The same applies to “the ear ... ,” “the nose ... ,” “the tongue ... ,” “the body, ... ,” “the mind, ... ” (in the 5th line onwards) with the appropriate changes.*]

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

5.3.2.4 The phrase, “**nothing is worth clinging to**” or “all things are not worth clinging to,” refers to the basic attitude we should cultivate as true Buddhists, that is, if we are to enjoy the

⁶ Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S (M 37,2-3/1:251), SD 54.9.

⁷ Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S (M 37,11-13/1:254 f), SD 54.9.

⁸ Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S (M 37,15/1:255), SD 54.9.

⁹ Sakka,pañha S (D 21,2.10/2:289), SD 54.8.

¹⁰ Avijjā Pahāna S 2 (S 35.80,6/4:50), SD 16.9.

¹¹ Here the “all” (*sabba*) refers to the 6 senses and their respective sense-objects (**Sabba S**, S 35.23/4:15, SD 7.1), here the respective consciousnesses are also included.

¹² *Idha bhikkhu bhikkhuno sutam hoti, “Dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāyāti.*

¹³ *Evañ ce taṃ bhikkhu bhikkhuno sutam hoti, “Sabbe dhamme nālaṃ abhinivesāyāti, so sabbam dhanmmam abhijānāti.*

¹⁴ This and the next 2 sentences: *sabbam dhammam abhiññāya sabbam dhammam pariājānāti, sabbam dhammam pariññāya sabba,nimittāni aññato passati.* “He fully understands,” *pariājānāti*, meaning “he comprehends, knows fully for certain.” See Intro 1 (text) 11.2 n for details.

¹⁵ *Sabbam dhammam pariññāya sabba,nimittāni aññato passati; cakkhum aññato passati, rūpe aññato passati, cakkhu,viññānam aññato passati; ... yam p’idaṃ mano samphassa,paccayā uppajjati vedayitam sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkham asukhaṃ vā. Tam pi annato passato.* See Intro (2).

fruiting and benefits of the path of awakening. It is the spirit of true renunciation (*nekkhamma*) for both monastics and the laity. Monastics, as a rule, are those who have taken the vow to “leave the world,” meaning to eschew sensual pleasures and socializing with people. They train themselves to let go of their negative emotions, cultivate a wholesome mind and work for liberation here and now. In this way, they also become exemplars of the Buddha Dharma for others.

Lay Buddhists, too, should understand the spirit of renunciation and practise it in progressive stages. A lay person should practise renunciation in 2 ways: the “horizontal” and the “vertical.” **The horizontal practice of renunciation** begins with a proper understanding of the 5 precepts and diligently keeping them.¹⁶ Then, whenever they can, they should practise meditation, especially the breath meditation¹⁷ and the cultivation of lovingkindness.¹⁸

The vertical practice is when moral conduct conduces us to have a calm and clear mind that becomes joyful; it is then able to see directly into true reality, and free itself from the gravity and darkness of worldliness. In other words, moral conduct frees the mind from guilt and restlessness, and raises the mind to higher levels of concentration. The mind is then ready for the cultivation of wisdom.

While breath meditation generates inner peace, lovingkindness inspires them to accept themselves and others unconditionally, and helps them keep the precepts more easily and fully, as well as enhance their good karma and weaken the effects of the bad ones.¹⁹ Lovingkindness is also a good background for them to practise the perception of impermanence (*anicca,saññā*), which brings them streamwinning in this life itself.²⁰

5.3.2.5 Our basic on-going practice as lay Buddhists—especially when we need to empower oneself to practice the above [5.3.2.4]—is that of giving (*dāna*) and charity (*cāga*). **Dāna** is basically happily giving to others, especially worthy monastics, any or all of their requisites of almsfood, robes, shelter and health care. Given in the right spirit, such giving to the laity—especially to full-time lay Dharma workers and the needy—also empower us with the joy to seek higher spiritual goals in the Dharma.

Cāga or charity—or better, “letting go” begins with clearing away whatever we don’t need to remove or at least cut down clutter in our lives. Then, we should share or give away what surplus we have that are beneficial to others. A great way to practise charity is to encourage others to make offerings to the worthy and the needy, and to have a share of such giving.²¹ The greatest charity is to sacrifice our time for Dharma and sutta study so that we can educate, heal and inspire others in bettering themselves—this is the gift of the Dharma.

5.3.2.6 Finally, we should constantly reflect on what it means by “**nothing is worth clinging to.**” We should reflect on how our views—even the most cherished or experienced ones—change as our understanding grows, and as we age, we learn to let go of such views; we replace them with understanding and love.

A **view** is simply a perception of something bigger (like looking at one side of a huge mountain); there are other views of it, depending on where we stand. Then, when we are on the mountain or its peak, we have a broader view of things. Hence, there is no single right

¹⁶ On the 5 precepts, see SD 1.5 (1); **Dīgha,jānu S** (A 8.54,13,) SD 5.10; **Silānussati**, SD 15.11 (2.2); SD 21.6 (1.2); SD 37.8 (2.2).

¹⁷ On the breath meditation, see **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118,5-7+15-22), SD 7.13.; **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62,24-30), SD 3.11.

¹⁸ On the cultivation of lovingkindness, see **Karaṇīya Metta S** (Khp 9 = Sn 1.8) & SD 38.3 (6).

¹⁹ On how lovingkindness limits karma, see SD 2.10 (2).

²⁰ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

²¹ **Dīgha,janu S** (A 8.54,14), SD 5.10; SD 42.7 (3.2).

“view”; there is only a “vision” of the whole mountain, that is, the wisdom of our understanding of the nature of mountains and of seeing it so.

We reflect right here and now—that peacefully and blissfully reading this will end in a moment—how time flies. Often, we have read this passage or word before; now we have a new and better understanding of it. We have cast off an old empty shell; we become more mature, even wiser.

Time is the value and priority we give to things in our life. If we love people, we always have time for them; if we love the Dharma, we always have time for it—time for Dharma is the best time for our spiritual growth. When such time is spent with others, it is called **spiritual friendship**.

The truth is that when we leave this life, we cannot take anything with us except our karma, the good and bad we have done, along with our views. We cannot take with us anything we have, not even our body. Even our breath—what we take in, we have to give back.²² We cannot bring with us anything we have gotten or received—only the good that we have and have happily given away.²³ No matter how much good we give away, we always get better and more of it.

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²² On meditation as renunciation, see **Hālidakāni S 1** (S 22.3/3:9-12), SD 10.12; **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (14.7); **Sexuality**, SD 31.7 (1.6.2).

²³ On the arhat’s charity (*cāga*), see **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140,27), SD 4.17.