

Anicca,saññā Sutta

The Discourse on the Perception of Impermanence

Also called Aniccata Sutta (The Discourse on Impermanence)

[The primacy of reflecting on impermanence]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.102/3:155-157)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2004

1 Perception of impermanence

1.1 This series of three suttas on impermanence—the **Anicca,saññā Sutta** (S 22.102), the **Kiñci Saṅkhāra Sutta** (A 6.93),¹ and the **Aniccā Sutta** (A 6.98)²—show their vital significance in the attainment of sainthood (spiritual liberation), for which the contemplation of impermanence has to be complete. In other words, the perception of impermanence should be applied to all the five aggregates, as admonished in the Anicca,saññā Sutta. **The Aniccā Sutta** (A 6.98) declares: one who sees *permanence* in any phenomenon will never be able to realize sainthood. This is a distinctive feature is that of the streamwinner—as stated in **the Kiñci Saṅkhāra Sutta** (A 6.93)³—that he is said to be incapable of believing any phenomenon to be permanent.

1.2 More specifically, **the Anicca,saññā Sutta** explains, using similes, how the perception of impermanence can effectively destroy sensual lust, lust for form (that is, desire form-existence), lust for existence, ignorance, and the conceit of ‘I am.’

Bhikkhus, the perception of impermanence,
when cultivated, when well developed,
all sensual lust is exhausted,
all lust for form is exhausted,
all lust for existence is exhausted,
all ignorance is exhausted;
all conceit of ‘I am’ is exhausted—
they are (all) removed

*Anicca,saññā bhikkhave
bhavitā bahuli,katā
sabbam kāma,rāgaṃ pariyādipati
sabbam bhava,rāgaṃ pariyādipati
sabbam rūpa,rāgaṃ pariyādipati
sabbam avijjam pariyādipati
sabbam asmi,mānaṃ pariyādipati—
samuhanti* [§3]

The operative words here are “cultivated” (*bhavitā*) and “well developed” (*bahuli,katā*), that is, if we have developed these perceptions, they form the basis for destroying all the ten mental fetters,⁴ and that “perception of impermanence” (*anicca,saññā*) is taken in a broad sense to cover a whole range of practices. In fact, **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33) lists *anicca,saññā*, *anicce dukkha,saññā*, *dukkhe anatta,saññā*, *pahāna,saññā* and *virāga,saññā* as the five “perceptions that conduce to the ripening of freedom” (***vimutti,paripācāniya saññā***).⁵ Furthermore, with the addition of *nirodha,saññā* to the same set, the same Sutta calls the six “perceptions that constitutes penetration (into reality)” (***nibbedha.bhāgiyā saññā***), that is, the practices that conduce to directly seeing through all mundane existence into true reality.⁶

¹ A 6.93/3:439 = SD 12.14.

² A 6.98/3:441 f = SD 12.13.

³ A 6.93/3:439.

⁴ **Mental fetters** (*saṃyojanā*). There are 10 of them: (1) self-identity view (*sakkāya,ditṭhi*), (2) persistent doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rules and rites (*sīla-b,bata,parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma,rāga*), (5) repulsion (*paṭigha*), (6) greed for form existence (*rūpa,rāga*), (7) greed for formless existence (*arūpa,rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61, A 5:13, Vbh 377). In some places, no. 5 (*paṭigha*) is replaced by illwill (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are the lower fetters (*oram,bhāgiya*) that bind one to the “lower” realm, ie the sense world, and the rest, the higher fetters (*uddham,bhāgiya*) that bind one to the “higher” realms, ie the form and formless worlds.

⁵ D 33.2.1(26)/3:243.

⁶ D 33.2.2(22)/3:251. Furthermore, in **Das’uttara S** (D 34), the 9 perceptions (*nava saññā*) of (1) foulness (*asubha,saññā*), (2) death (*maraṇa,saññā*), (3) the loathsomeness of food (*āhāre paṭikkūla,saññā*), (4) non-delight-

This qualification is important, as the perception of impermanence itself is only a preliminary practice, but forms the foundation of further practice of eliminating all the fetters. Sensual lust is destroyed by the path of non-return, lust for existence, ignorance and the “I am” conceit by the path of arhathood.

A simile helps here. It is like a doctor, giving him the medicines, tells his athlete patient, “You will get well and play tennis again.” However, the patient has first to take the medicine at the right time, in the proper doses, rest properly, eat properly, and in due course, he recovers, and then goes on to play tennis. He would not recover immediately on merely taking the first dose of medicine, or even after a few doses, but he has to complete his prescription.

1.3 The Vijjā,bhāgiya Dhamma Sutta (A 6.35) elaborates on how the perception of impermanence (*anicca,saññā*) should be done, that is,

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| (1) contemplating the impermanence in all formations | (<i>anicca,saññā</i>), |
| (2) perceiving suffering in impermanence | (<i>anicce dukkha,saññā</i>), |
| (3) perceiving not-self in suffering | (<i>dukkhe anatta,saññā</i>), |
| (4) perceiving the abandoning of defilements | (<i>pahāna,saññā</i>), |
| (5) perceiving the fading away of lust | (<i>virāga,saññā</i>), and |
| (6) perceiving the cessation of suffering | (<i>nirodha,saññā</i>). ⁷ |

The Ceto,vimutti,phala Suttas 1 and 2 (A 5.71-72) states that the first five practices are conducive to the fruition and the benefits of both liberation of mind and of liberation through wisdom.⁸ Here, we can take the experience of **(6) nirodha,saññā** as referring to the two liberations (*vimutti*) mentioned.

The Okkanti Saṃyutta (S 25) gives ten ways of practising “the perception of impermanent,” that is, in connection with *the six sense-faculties, the six sense-objects, the six sense-consciousnesses, the six sense-contacts, the six feelings, the six perceptions, the six volitions, the six cravings and the six elements*.⁹

2 The ten similes

The Anicca,saññā Sutta makes use of the following ten similes to show the primacy of the perception of impermanence:

1. the ploughman (cutting through buried roots);

ing in all the world (*sabba,loke anabhirati,saññā*), (5) impermanence (*anicca,saññā*), (6) suffering in impermanence (*anicce dukkha,saññā*), (7) not-self in suffering (*dukkhe anatta,saññā*); (8) abandonment (*pahāna,saññā*), and (9) fading away (*virāga*) are stated as the “nine states to brought into being” (**nava dhamma uppādetabba**) (D 34.2.2-(8)/3:289 f). With the addition of (10) perception of cessation (*nirodha,saññā*), the set is called “the 10 states to be brought into being” (**dasa dhamma uppādetabba**) (D 34.2.3(8)/3:291). These 10 perceptions are listed in **(Dasa) Saññā S 1** (A 10.6) as being of “great fruit and great benefit for immersing and culminating in nirvana” (*amat’ogadhā amata,pariyosāna*, S 10.6/5:105; cf **(Dasa) Saññā S 2**, S 10.7/5:106). The first 9 perceptions are listed in **(Nava) Saññā S** (A 9.16) for the same reason (A 9.16/4:387); as also the first 7 perceptions in **(Satta) Saññā S 1 & 2** (S 7.45+46/4:46-53).

⁷ A 6.35/3:34 = SD 23.16(1.2).

⁸ *Ceto,vimutti,phalā ca honti ceto,vimutti,phal’ānisamsā ca, paññā,vimutti,phalā ca honti paññā,vimutti,phal’ānisamsā ca* (A 3.71-72/3:84-86; cf A 4:464). One who is “liberated by wisdom” “may not have reached the 8 liberations (*vimokkha*) in his own body, but through seeing with wisdom, his mental cankers are destroyed” (M 70.16/1:478). All arhats are perfectly liberated in the same way from ignorance and suffering, but are distinguished into 2 types on the basis of their proficiency in concentration. Those who can attain the 8 liberations (*aṭṭha,vimokkha*), which include the 4 formless attainments and the attainment of cessation, are called “liberated both ways,” ie, liberated from the physical body by means of the formless dhyanas, and from all defilements by the path of arhathood. Arhats like Sāriputta and Moggallāna are “liberated both ways” (*ubhato,bhāga,vimutta*). The differences between the two types of liberation are given in **Mahā,nidāna S** (D 2:70 f) and **Kīṭāgiri S** (M 1:477 f). For full list of the 8 deliverances, see **Mahā Nidāna S** (D 15.35/ 2:70 f) = SD 5.17.35. See also D 3:262, 228; **Vimokkha S**, A 8.66/4:306; also M 120.37/3:103 = SD 3.4.37.

⁹ For the sutta names, etc, see **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1/3:225) = SD 16.7. The perception of impermanence is briefly def in **Giri-m-ānanda S** (A 10.60.5/5:109) = SD 19.16.

2. the reed-cutter (cutting down reed);
3. the bunch of mangoes cut off at the stalk;
4. the ridgepole (to which all the rafters are attached);
5. black orris (*kalanusari*) as the foremost of fragrant roots;
6. red sandalwood as the foremost of fragrant heartwoods;
7. jasmine as the foremost of fragrant flowers;
8. the emperor (wheel-turning monarch) as foremost amongst petty princes who are his vassals;
9. moonlight far outshine all the star-light; and
10. the sun blazing through the autumn Indian sky.

Outside of the *Anicca,sañña Sutta*, its similes are mostly used to illustrate the primacy of being heedful. The last seven similes (4-10) appear separately as short suttas in the *Magga Saṃyutta* (S 45), respectively as

the Kūṭa Sutta	(S 45.141),	the simile of the ridgepole;
the Mūla Sutta	(S 45.142),	the simile of the black orris;
the Sāra Sutta	(S 45.143),	the simile of the red sandalwood;
the Vassika Sutta	(S 45.144),	the simile of jasmine;
the Rājā Sutta	(S 45.145),	the simile of the wheel-turning monarch;
the Canda Sutta	(S 45.146),	the simile of moonlight; and
the Suriya Sutta	(S 45.147), ¹⁰	the simile of the autumn sun.

All these suttas highlight the same theme: the primacy of heedfulness (*appamāda*).

Furthermore, five of the *Anicca,sañña Sutta*'s ten similes—numbers 5, 2, 3, 8 and 9 (in that order)—appear in **the (Chakka) Appamāda Sutta** (A 6.53),¹¹ and again, seven of the *Sutta*'s similes, in the sequence 4-10, appear in **the (Dasaka) Appamāda Sutta** (A 10.53):¹² both dealing with the importance of heedfulness.

The mango simile (3) is quite well known, and is found in a well known context at the end of **the Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1), where the simile famously describes the Tathagata's nature:

Bhikshus, just as when the stalk of a bunch of mangoes has been cut all the mangoes joined by the stalk go together with it, even so, the Tathagata's body remains cut from the leash of existence. So long as the Tathagata's body stands, gods and humans will see him.

After the breaking up of the body and the exhaustion of the life-faculty, gods and humans do not see him. (D 1.147/1:46)

The Kūṭa Sutta (S 20.1) uses the ridgepole simile (4) to show the primacy of practising heedfulness,¹³ for which these similes are most often used in the *Nikāyas*. The ridgepole (*gopānasi*) simile is very common in the *Suttas*, especially as a figure for old age, since it looks like Λ , that is, bent (*vaṅka*) with age.¹⁴

The Dhammapada, too, alludes to the ridge-pole as *gaha,kūṭa* (roof-tree, literally “house-crest”) in one of its most famous verses, the first vocal statement of the newly awakened Buddha:

<i>aneka,jāti,samsāraṃ</i>	Through the countless births of samsara
<i>sandhāvissam anibbisam</i>	I ran, not finding,
<i>gaha,kāraṃ gavesanto</i>	Though seeking for the house-maker:
<i>dukkhā jāti punappunam</i>	Painful is birth again and again.

¹⁰ S 45.141-148/5:43 f.

¹¹ A 6.53.3/3:365. Cf the simile at **Kūṭāgāra S** (S 46.7/5:75 f).

¹² A 10.15/5:21.

¹³ S 20.1/2:263.

¹⁴ V 3:65, 81; D 2:22, 25 (both as *gopānasi,vaṅka*); M 1:80, 81, 2:93, 212; S 1:117, 118 (both as *gopānasi,-vaṅka*); 2:263, 3:156; 5:43, 75, 228; A 1:261; 3:264; 5:21; Ap 389.72/1:321.

<i>gaha,kāraka diṭṭho'si</i>	House-builder, you are seen!	
<i>puna gehaṃ na kāhasi</i>	No more shall you build a house!	
<i>sabbā te phāsuka bhaggā</i>	All your rafters are broken!	
<i>gaha,kūṭaṃ visaṅkhatam</i>	Your <u>roof</u> tree destroyed!	
<i>visaṅkhāra,gataṃ cittaṃ</i>	The mind is free from formations:	
<i>taṇhānaṃ khayam ajjhagā</i>	It has come to the end of craving.	(Dh 153-154)

The Commentary explains *gaha,kūṭaṃ visaṅkhatam* as follows: Destroyed by me, too, is the roof-plate (*kaṇṇika,maṇḍala*)¹⁵ of this house of selfhood built by you, formed of ignorance.¹⁶ Here obviously the Commentary is using “roof-plate” as a synonym for rooftree and ridge-pole (which represents spiritual ignorance).

The Gaṇaka Moggallāna Sutta (M 107) contains the Anicca,saññā Sutta’s botanical or plant similes—namely, numbers 5-7—where the accountant (*gaṇaka*) Moggallāna declares of the primacy of the Buddha’s teaching:

Master Gotama, just as amongst fragrant roots, black orris [kalanusari] is declared the foremost; amongst fragrant heartwood, red sandalwood is declared the foremost; amongst fragrant flowers, jasmine is the foremost—even so, Master Gotama’s advice is supreme amongst today’s teachings.¹⁷ (M 107.16/3:6 f)

The autumn sun simile (10) is also found in **the Susīma Sutta** (S 2.29), but in a more mundane context:

Just as in autumn, when the sky is clear, free of rain clouds, the sun, going through space, dispelling darkness, shines and burns and beams; even so, the young devas in Susīma’s host—beautiful, radiant, happy-minded, glad, full of zest and joy—displayed various lustrous colours.¹⁸ (S 2.29.11/1:65)

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¹⁵ A roof-plate is a horizontal timber laid on a wall or supported on posts or corbels to carry the trusses of a roof or the rafters directly.

¹⁶ *Imassa tayā katassa atta,bhāva,gehasa avijjā,saṅkhātāṃ kaṇṇika,maṇḍalam pi mayā viddhamsitaṃ* (DhA 3:129)

¹⁷ *Seyyathāpi, bho Gotama, ye keci mūla,gandha kālānusārikaṃ tesaṃ aggam akkhāyati, ye keci sāra,gandham lohita,candanam tesaṃ aggam akkhāyati, ye keci puppha,gandhā vassikaṃ tesaṃ aggam akkhāyati: evam eva bhoto Gotamassa ovādo param’ajja,dhammesu.* On the jasmine, see §10n below.

¹⁸ *Seyyathāpi nāma sarada,samaye viddhe vigata,valāhake deve ādicco nabham abhussukkamāno sabbam ākāsa,gataṃ tamaṃ abhivihacca bhāsate ca tapate ca virocate ca: evam evam Susīmassa deva,puttassa deva,putta.-parisā āyasmato Sāriputtassa vaṇṇe bhaññamāne atta,manā pamuditā pīti,somanassa,jātā uccā,vacā vaṇṇa,nibhā upadaṃseti.* Comy says the colours are blue, yellow, red, and white (Comy (SA 1:125): these colours are mentioned in connection with the Licchavī youths in **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16.2.15/2:96) = SD 9.

The Discourse on the Perception of Impermanence (S 22.102/3:155-157)

1-2 At Sāvattthī. It was spoken there.

3 “Bhikshus, the perception of impermanence, when cultivated, when well developed,¹⁹

all sensual lust	is exhausted,
all lust for form	is exhausted,
all lust for existence	is exhausted,
all ignorance	is exhausted;
all conceit of ‘I am’	is exhausted—they are (all) removed.

4 (1) Bhikshus, just as in autumn, a **ploughman** ploughing with a great ploughshare cuts through all the roots that are spread out as he ploughs;

even so, bhikshus, when the perception of impermanence is cultivated and well developed, all sensual lust is exhausted, all lust for form is exhausted, all lust for existence is exhausted, all ignorance is exhausted; all conceit of ‘I am’ is exhausted—they are (all) removed.

5 (2) Bhikshus, just as a **reed-cutter** would cut down a reed plant, grab it by the top, shake it down, shake it out, thresh it about;

even so, bhikshus, when the perception of impermanence is cultivated and well developed, all sensual lust is exhausted, all lust for form is exhausted, all lust for existence is exhausted, all ignorance is exhausted; all conceit of ‘I am’ is exhausted—they are (all) removed.

6 (3) Bhikshus, just as when a **stalk of a bunch of mangoes** has been cut, [156] all the mangoes attached to the stalk would follow it;²⁰

even so, bhikshus, when the perception of impermanence is cultivated and well developed, all sensual lust is exhausted, all lust for form is exhausted, all lust for existence is exhausted, all ignorance is exhausted; all conceit of ‘I am’ is exhausted—they are (all) removed.

7 (4) Bhikshus, just as all the rafters of a house with a peaked roof lead to **the ridgepole**, slope towards the ridgepole, converge at the ridgepole, and the ridgepole is said to be their peak;²¹

even so, bhikshus, when the perception of impermanence is cultivated and well developed, all sensual lust is exhausted, all lust for form is exhausted, all lust for existence is exhausted, all ignorance is exhausted; all conceit of ‘I am’ is exhausted—they are (all) removed.²²

8 (5) Bhikshus, just as amongst fragrant roots, **kalanusari [black orris]**²³ is said to be the foremost; even so, bhikshus, when the perception of impermanence is cultivated and well developed, all sensual lust is exhausted, all lust for form is exhausted, all lust for existence is exhausted, all ignorance is exhausted; all conceit of ‘I am’ is exhausted—they are (all) removed.

9 (6) Bhikshus, just as amongst fragrant heartwoods, **red sandalwood**²⁴ is said to be the foremost;

¹⁹ “Well developed,” *bahulī, katā*, lit “made much.” This qualification is important, as the perception of impermanence itself is only a preliminary practice, but forms the foundation of further practice. Sensual lust is destroyed by the path of non-return, lust for existence, ignorance and the “I am” conceit by the path of arhathood. See Intro (1.2).

²⁰ *Seyyathāpi bhikkhave amba, piṇḍiya vaṇṭa-c, chinnāya yāni tatra ambāni vaṇṭa, paṭibaddhāni sabbāni tāni tad-anyyāni bhavanti.* Also at **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1.147/1:46) = SD 25.2 & **Appamāda S** (A 6.53.3/3:365).

²¹ *Seyyathāpi bhikkhave kūṭāgārassa yā kāci gopānasiyo sabbā tā kūṭāngamā kūṭa, ninnā kūṭa, samosaraṇā kūṭāni tāsam aggam akkhāyati.*

²² The similes of para 7-13 are found elsewhere. See Introd (2).

²³ *Kālānusārī*, “a dark fragrant sandal wood” (DPL; *Vinaya Texts* 2:51), or the “black orris” (S:B 962). This probably *Trigonella foenum graecum*. See Introd (2).

even so, bhikshus, when the perception of impermanence is cultivated and well developed, all sensual lust is exhausted, all lust for form is exhausted, all lust for existence is exhausted, all ignorance is exhausted; all conceit of ‘I am’ is exhausted—they are (all) removed.



Jasmine (Thailand)



Jasmine garland (Thailand)

10 (7) Bhikshus, just as amongst fragrant flowers, **jasmine**²⁵ is said to be the foremost;

even so, bhikshus, when the perception of impermanence is cultivated and well developed, all sensual lust is exhausted, all lust for form is exhausted, all lust for existence is exhausted, all ignorance is exhausted; all conceit of ‘I am’ is exhausted—they are (all) removed.

11 (8) Bhikshus, just as petty princes are all the vassals of **the wheel-turning monarch**, and the wheel-turning monarch is said to be the foremost,²⁶

so, bhikshus, when the perception of impermanence is cultivated and well developed, all sensual lust is exhausted, all lust for form is exhausted, all lust for existence is exhausted, all ignorance is exhausted; all conceit of ‘I am’ is exhausted—they are (all) removed.

12 (9) Bhikshus, just as the light of all the stars do not amount to a sixteenth [an iota] of **moonlight**,²⁷

even so, bhikshus, when the perception of impermanence is cultivated and well developed, all sensual lust is exhausted, all lust for form is exhausted, all lust for existence is exhausted, all ignorance is exhausted; all conceit of ‘I am’ is exhausted—they are (all) removed.

13 (10) Bhikshus, just as in autumn, when the sky is clear, free of rain clouds, **the sun**, going through space, dispelling darkness, shines and burns and beams;

even so, bhikshus, when the perception of impermanence is cultivated and well developed, all sensual lust is exhausted, all lust for form is exhausted, all lust for existence is exhausted, all ignorance is exhausted; all conceit of ‘I am’ is exhausted—they are (all) removed.

14 And how, bhikshus, is **the perception of impermanence** cultivated, how is it developed, so that all sensual lust is exhausted; all lust for form is exhausted; all lust for existence is exhausted; all ignorance is exhausted; all conceit of ‘I am’ is exhausted—they are (all) removed?

15 ‘Such is form; such is the arising of form; such is the ending of form.

Such is feeling; such is the arising of feeling; such is the ending of feeling.

Such is perception; such is the arising of perception; such is the ending of perception.

Such are formations; such is the arising of formations; such is the ending of formations.

Such is consciousness; such is the arising of consciousness; such is the ending of consciousness.’

²⁴ *Lohita, candanam*, ie *Pterocarpus santalinus*, also called *Pterocarpi lignum*, *Santalum rubrum*, *Santalum ligni*, *Lignum rubrum*, or more commonly, red sandalwood, rubywood, rasura, red santal wood, sappan. Malay: cendana. Even today, red sandalwood is a prized commodity in India and southeast Asia. See Introd (2) for illus.

²⁵ *Vassikā*, also *vassikā* (BHS *varṣika*), the “Arabian jasmine” (from Iranian *yasmīn*), *Jasminum sambac*; comy at Dh 377 glosses it as *sumanā* (DhA 4:112). There are some 150 species of jasmine, forming a genus of the olive (Oleaceae) family. In Thailand, it is one of the most popular flowers, called ma’li’. Another flower, the *mallikā* (Dh 54), is often tr as “jasmine,” is really not a jasmine, but only resembling it in colour and shape. Palihawadana identifies it as *idda*, *sinidda*, or *bōlidda* in Sinhalese (Dh:CP 444 n25). The bolidda (also a Malayalam flower) is *Jasminum auriculatum*. See Introd (2) for illus.

²⁶ *Seyyathāpi bhikkhave ye keci kuḍḍa, rājāno* [vī khuḍḍa, rājāno] *sabbe te raññō cakkavattissa anuyāntā bhavanti*.

²⁷ *Seyyathāpi bhikkhave yā kāci tārika, rūpānam pabhā sabbā tā candīma, pabhāya kalam nāgghanti solasiṃ canda-p, pabhā tāsam akkhāyati*.



Red sandalwood

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- 16 Bhikshus, this is how the perception of impermanence, when cultivated, when well developed,
all sensual lust is exhausted,
all lust for form is exhausted,
all lust for existence is exhausted,
all ignorance is exhausted;
all conceit of 'I am' is exhausted—they are (all) removed.”

— evaṃ —

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