

Aniccā Sutta

The Discourse on Impermanence

[How to be certain of the right path to liberation]

(Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.98/3:411 f)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2004

1 Introduction

This series of three suttas on impermanence 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 contemplation of impermanence should be applied to all the five aggregates, as admonished in **the Anicca,saññā Sutta**.¹ **The Aniccā Sutta** (A 6.98) declares: one who sees permanence in any phenomenon will never be able to realize sainthood. Such a distinctive feature is this of the stream-winner, that—as stated in **the Kiñci Saṅkhāra Sutta** (A 6.93)²—he is said to be incapable of believing any phenomenon to be permanent.

The Aniccā Sutta, although very short, presents a very effective teaching on a very profound level. It gives, in simple terms, how when one fails to see impermanence as the true reality, one would lack the receptivity for spiritual wisdom that leads to liberation. Conversely, seeing impermanence as the true reality, one becomes receptive to spiritual wisdom leading to liberation. This sutta is included in the Book of Sixes (*chakka nipāta*) because it speaks of these six things: conforming receptivity (*anulomika khanti*) [2], the certainty of rightness (*sammatta,niyāma*) [3], the fruition of stream-winning, the fruition of once-return, the fruition of non-return, and the fruition of arhathood. (“Fruition” here means full attainment.)

2 *Anulomika khanti*

2.1 TERMINOLOGY. The interesting phrase, “mental receptivity that goes with the grain [true reality]” (*anulomika khanti*) appears four times in the Aniccā Sutta [1ab, 2ab]. *Anuloma*, literally means “following the hair (how one’s hair naturally sets),” that is, the natural course of things. As such, *anuloma khanti* (“mental receptivity that goes with the grain”), can also be freely rendered as “conforming receptivity”

“Mental receptivity,” *khanti*, usually means “patience”; but here it means “choice, receptivity, preference, acceptance.” The BHSD defines *kṣānti* as “intellectual receptivity; the being ready in advance to accept knowledge.” *Khanti* is often used in the Canon in this latter sense.³ The phrase can also be freely rendered as “a receptivity in harmony with true reality.”

The Vibhaṅga Commentary⁴ says this is “the insight conforming with the truth” (*saccānulomika ñāṇa*), which it defines as “insight knowledge.” This is synonymous with “wisdom” (*paññā*). It is said to “conform with the truth” (*saccānulomika*) because it conforms with the four noble truths. This wisdom occurs in such understanding that “Form is impermanent” (*rūpaṃ aniccan ti*) and so on.

It should also be understood as “suffering” (*dukkha*) and as “not self” (*anattā*), as stated in **the Ajjhatta Anicca Sutta 1** (S 35.1).⁵ Similarly each of the other aggregates (feeling, perception, formations, consciousness), and all the six internal senses (sense-organs) and six external senses (sense-experi-

¹ S 22.102/3:155-157 = SD 12.12.

² A 6.93/3:439.

³ V 2:206,3 (*diṭṭhiṃ avinidhāya khantiṃ avinidhāya ruciṃ avinidhāya...*); M 1:180,7 (*dhamma,nijjhānaṃ khamati, dhamma,nijjhāna,khantiyā sati chando jayati*) = SD 11.1; A 3:427,14 (*ananulomikāya khantiyā samannāgato*); Sn 897 (*diṭṭhe sute khantiṃ akkubbamāno*), 944 (*purānaṃ nābhinandeyya, nave khantiṃ na kubbaye*); Tha 1029a (*khantiyā chandikato hoti*); Thī 521 (*satthu sāsane khanti*), and as a verb, PmA 450: *tassa yogissa khamati rucati* (“that meditator chooses, prefers”). See Pm:Ñ 355 n1 & Tha:N 265 n1029.

⁴ VbhA 411, paraphrased.

⁵ “Monks, the eye <ear, nose, tongue, body, mind, etc> is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering is not self; what is not self should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self’.” (S 35.1/4:1)

ences) should be regarded so, too. The way to regard the aggregates as impermanent is given in **the Anicca,saññā Sutta** (S 22.102), thus:

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.
 (S 22.102.15/3:156 = SD 12.12)

2.2 INSIGHT KNOWLEDGE. **The Paṭisambhidā,magga** quotes the sutta is full, followed by a set of questions and answers. The Paṭisambhidā,magga Commentary explains:

The “conformity” (*anuloma*) is that of **insight knowledge** (*vipassanā,ñāṇa*) with the supra-mundane path (*lok’uttara.magga*). The conformity refers to receptivity [acceptance] (*khanti*) of just that. To accept that all formations are impermanent, suffering and not self—this is receptivity [acceptance] (*khanti*). **The “conforming receptivity”** (*anulomika khanti*) is threefold:

- (1) Weak receptivity (*mudukānulomika khanti*), (the insight) beginning with the comprehension by groups and ending with the knowledge of arising and ending (*kalāpa,samma-san’ādikā udaya-b,baya,ñāṇa,pariyosānā*);
- (2) Medium receptivity (*majjhimānulomika khanti*), beginning with the contemplation of dissolution and ending with the knowledge of equanimity about formations (*bhaṅgānupassanādikā saṅkhār’upekkhā,ñāṇa,pariyosānā*);
- (3) Strong receptivity (*tikkhā khanti*) [lit “sharp receptivity”], the knowledge that conforms with truth (*anuloma,ñāṇa*). (Pm 2:236; PmA 3:697)

This commentary is a summary of the nine insight knowledges as given in **the Paṭisambhidā,magga**⁶ and **the Visuddhi,magga**.⁷ **The Abhidhamm’attha Saṅgaha**⁸ adds a tenth insight knowledge—“comprehension knowledge” (*sammasana ñāṇa*)—which heads the list of ten insight knowledges, which describes the practitioner’s progress leading up to the path of sainthood.⁹

- [] Comprehension knowledge (*sammasana ñāṇa*): the knowledge arising from reflecting on name-and-form (*nāma,rūpa*), that is, the five aggregates (*khandha*)—whether past, future, or present; internal or external; gross or subtle; inferior or superior; far or near—or the six internal sense-organs and six external sense-fields (*āyatana*), in terms of the three characteristics (as being impermanent, suffering, and not self). [Only in the Abhidhamm’attha Saṅgaha.]
- (1) Knowledge of arising and ending [of rise and fall] (*udaya-b,baya ñāṇa*), the knowledge of the arising and ending of the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness).
 [This is the same knowledge as that which preceded the imperfections of insights, but when the imperfections have been overcome, it now matures and develops with increased strength and clarity.]
 - (2) Knowledge of dissolution (*bhaṅga ñāṇa*), the knowledge of the breaking up (of the aggregates, etc), which leaving aside the arising, perceives only their ending.
 [When the meditator’s knowledge becomes keen, he no longer extends his mindfulness to the arising or presence of formations, but brings it to bear only on their cessation, destruction, fall, and breakup. This is knowledge of dissolution.]

⁶ Pm 1:1.

⁷ Vism 20.93-136/630-671.

⁸ Abhs §53. See Abhs:BRS 1999:351-354; Abhs:WG 351-355.

⁹ The definitions are based on *Exposition of the Topics of Abhidhamma* (tr Wijeratne & Gethin, 2002:354 f). The additional notes within [square brackets], following the definitions, are from *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* (ed Bodhi, 2nd ed 1999:353 f).

- (3) Knowledge of the fearful (*bhaya ñāṇa*), the knowledge that perceives the presence [of the aggregates]—because of their breaking up—as so many things to be feared, like lions, etc.
[As the meditator contemplates the dissolution of formations in all three periods of time, he recognizes that all such dissolving things in all realms of existence are necessarily fearful.]
- (4) Knowledge of danger (*ādīnava ñāṇa*), the knowledge that perceives what is perceived as fearful as so many kinds of danger, like a burning house.
[By recognizing that all formations are fearful, the meditator sees them as utterly destitute of any core or any satisfaction and as nothing but danger. He also understands that only in the unconditioned, free from arising and destruction, is there any security.]
- (5) Knowledge of disenchantment (*nibbidā ñāṇa*), the knowledge that occurs as disenchantment with what has been seen as dangerous.
[When he sees all formations as fearful, he becomes disenchanted with them, and take no delight in the field of formations belonging to any realm of existence.]
- (6) Knowledge of the desire for liberation (*muñcitu, kamyatā ñāṇa*), the knowledge that occurs by way of desire for release from the things of the three levels, like a fish desiring release from the net.
[This is the desire, arisen in the course of contemplation, of being liberated from the field of formations and escaping from it.]
- (7) Knowledge of reflective consideration (*paṭisaṅkhā ñāṇa*), the knowledge that occurs by way of observing again and again the things seen as dangerous with a view of effecting a means of escape, like an ocean-going bird. [In order to be delivered from the whole field of formations, the meditator again re-examines those same formations, attributing the three characteristics to them in various ways. When he clearly reviews those formations as marked by the three characteristics, this is knowledge of reflective contemplation.]
- (8) Knowledge of equanimity regarding formations (*saṅkhār'upekkhā ñāṇa*), the knowledge that occurs in the manner of looking with equanimity on those formations once their danger has been seen, like a man who has left his wife.
[After he has passed through the reflective contemplation, the meditator see nothing in formations to be taken as “I” and “mine,” so he abandons both terror and delight, and becomes indifferent and neutral towards all formations. Thus there arises in him knowledge of equanimity towards formations.]
- (9) Knowledge of conformity (*anuloma ñāṇa*), the knowledge that conforms to the truths, and in the [consciousness] process that attains the path, occurs prior to change of lineage by way of conforming to, [on the one hand,] the eight insight knowledges that occurred earlier, etc, and, [on the other hand,] the 37 awakening-factors that will be acquired in the subsequent moment of [attaining] the path.
[This (also called “adaptation”) is the knowledge in the sense-sphere citta that arise preceding the change of lineage citta in the cognitive process of the supramundane path.¹⁰ This phase of insight is called conformity because it conforms to the functions of truth both in the preceding eight kinds of insight knowledge and in the path attainment to follow.]

3 Sammatta, niyāma

The second key term of the Aniccā Sutta is *sammatta, niyāma* (“the certainty of rightness”), which is resolved as *sammattā* (“rightness”) and *niyāma* (here meaning “certainty”). Although *niyāma* usually means “way, course,” in the term *sammatta, niyāma* and similar usages, *niyāma* (as variant reading for *niyama*) always means “certainty.” This usage, apparently is found (in the context of *sammatta, niyāma*) only in the Āṅuttara, the Paṭisambhidā, magga and the Commentaries.¹¹

¹⁰ See Abhs:BRS 354 f.

¹¹ *Niyāma* as “certainty,” eg **Gilāna S** (A 1:121): *okkamati niyāmaṃ kusalesu dhammesu sammattaṃ; Sammat-ta Niyāma S 1-3 (A 3:174-176), **Āvaraṇa S** (A 3:435 f), **Voropita S** (A 3:436 f), **Sussūsati S** (A 3:437), **Paṭisam-***

The Paṭisambhidā, magga Commentary¹² says that *sammatta, niyāma* refers to the supramundane path, especially the path of streamwinning. Because of the certainty that is the path-assurance (*magga, -niyāma*), it is said of the streamwinner: “He is sure of liberation, destined for awakening” (*niyato sambodhi, parāyaṇo*). The “**rightness**” (*sammata*) refers to one’s certainty of going in the right direction, and to the right view of reality. The “**certainty**” (*niyāma*) is that this path will immediately bring fruition (*phala*), resulting finally in arhathood.¹³

4 Related suttas

The Aniccā Sutta should be studied alongside these suttas on how learn the Dharma effectively, namely:

(Ti) Gilāna Sutta (A 3.22/1:121)

Sammatta, niyāma Sutta 1 (A 5.151/3:174 f) = SD 4.2

Sammatta, niyāma Sutta 2 (A 5.152/3:175) = SD 4.3

Sammatta, niyāma Sutta 3 (A 5.153/3:175 f) = SD 4.4

Āvaraṇa Sutta or Āvaraṇatā Sutta 1 (A 6.86/3:435 f)

Voropita Sutta or Āvaraṇatā Sutta 2 (A 6.87/3:436 f)

Sussūsā Sutta or Sussūsati Sutta (A 6.88/3:437) = SD 4.5

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How to use a sutta

This sutta, like many others in the Sutta Discovery series, has been translated with the repetition cycles (*peyyāla*) given in full. In this way, the sutta teaching is given in full, without the mind filling in too much of its own details in the perceived gaps. One should study a sutta not merely to *know* it, but to learn to “let go” of the self (or more correctly, the notion of a self). To this effect, the sutta should be mindfully read, or listened to, and reflected upon, again and again, like taking a regular dose of medicine. The roots of realization are growing even as you do so, and before you know it, it flowers and bears fruit!

bhidā, magga (Pm 1:124): *niyāmaṃ okkamituṃ kusalesu dhammesu sammattamī*; see also DhA 3:83 (*catu, magga, -niyāma*); SnA 124.

¹² PmA 2:402, 3:697 f.

¹³ See A:ÑB 303 n47.

The Discourse on Impermanence

(A 6.98/3:441 f)

1 (a) Indeed, monks, it is impossible that a monk, who considers any formation as permanent, to be endowed with mental receptivity¹⁴ that goes with the grain [true reality].¹⁵

(b) It is impossible that one who is endowed with mental receptivity that goes against the grain [true reality] would plunge into the certainty of rightness [would enter the noble eightfold path].¹⁶

(c) It impossible that one, not plunging into the way of rightness,¹⁷ would realize the fruit of stream-winning, or the fruit of once-return, or the fruit of non-return, or the fruit of arhathood.

2 (a) Indeed, monks, it is possible that a monk, who considers all formations as impermanent,¹⁸ to be endowed with mental receptivity that goes with the grain [true reality].

(b) It is possible that one endowed with mental receptivity that goes with the grain [true reality] would plunge into the certainty of rightness [would enter the noble eightfold path].

(c) It possible that one, plunging into the way of rightness, would realize the fruit of stream-winning, or the fruit of once-return, or the fruit of non-return, or the fruit of arhathood.

— evaṃ —

050522; rev 060103; 081010; 081221a

¹⁴ “Mental receptivity,” *khanti*: see Introd (2).

¹⁵ *So vata bhikkhave bhikkhu kañci saṅkhāraṃ niccato samanupassanto anulomikāya khantiyā samannāgato bhavissatī ti n’etaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjati*. The phrase, *anulomikāya khantiyā samannāgato*, is here freely tr: lit “endowed with the preference that conforms with reality.” See Introd (2).

¹⁶ *Anulomikāya khantiyā asamannāgato sammatta, niyāmaṃ okkamissatī ti n’etaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjati* (A 441,24). On *khanti*, see §1 n (“Mental receptivity”).

¹⁷ “The certainty of rightness” (*sammatta, niyāma*). The factors of the noble eightfold path are known as “rightness” (*sammattā*) (**Saṅgīti S**, D 33.3.1(2)/3:255). See Introd (3).

¹⁸ *Sabba, saṅkhāraṃ aniccato samanupassanto*.