

## Abhijāna Sutta

### The Discourse on Directly Knowing

Also called **Parijāna Sutta** = The Discourse on Fully Understanding

[The five aggregates have to be directly known]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.24/3:26 f)

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#### 1 Levels of understanding

This short but important sutta is a succinct statement on the four noble truths. The first noble truth—that of suffering (*dukkha,sacca*)—is implicit in the first section [§§3-7], where the focus is on the second noble truth: the *arising* of suffering (*samudaya,sacca*), namely ignorance. The last two noble truths—that of the ending of suffering (*nirodha,sacca*) and that of the path (*magga,sacca*)—are found in the second and closing section [§§8-12], by way of direct knowing (*abhijāna*) or full understanding (*parijāna*), which is the noble eightfold path as well as the goal, nirvana.

The key words of the sutta are as follows, along with their commentarial glosses:

		<u>Commentarial gloss</u>
“without directly knowing”	<i>anābhijānam</i>	<i>anabhijānanto</i>
“without fully understanding”	<i>aparijānam</i>	<i>aparijānanto</i>
“directly knowing”	<i>abhijānam</i>	<i>abhijānanto</i>
“fully understanding”	<i>parijānam</i>	<i>parijānanto</i>

They are all present participles, that is, they are on-going processes and permanent results. The Commentary lists the three levels of full understanding (*pariññā*) here (SA 2:264) as follows, but without further comment:

“directly knowing” ( <i>abhijānam</i> )	full understanding of the known ( <i>ñāta,pariññā</i> )
“fully understanding” ( <i>parijānam</i> )	full understanding by scrutinization ( <i>tīraṇa,pariññā</i> )
“becoming dispassionate” ( <i>virājayam</i> )	full understanding as abandonment ( <i>pahāna,pariññā</i> )
“letting go of” ( <i>pajaham</i> )	

**Table. The three levels of understanding and their implications**

The three levels of full understanding are also mentioned in the Niddesa and Visuddhi,magga.<sup>1</sup> They are explained in the commentary to stanza 47 of **the Samiddhi Sutta**, that says:

<i>akkheyyañ ca pariññāya</i>	But <u>having fully understood</u> what can be expressed,
<i>akkhātāram na maññati</i>	One does not conceive of “one who expresses” ( <i>akkhātāra</i> ).
<i>taṃ hi tassa na hotī ti</i>	For there is nothing about him
<i>yena naṃ vajjā na tassa atthi</i>	With which there is to speak of him. (S 47/1.20/1:11 = SD 21.4)

“Having fully understood what can be expressed,” explains the Commentary, is by way of the three kinds of full understanding, that is,

<sup>1</sup> Respectively, Nm 53; Vism 606.

1. By “**full understanding of the known**” (*ñāta, pariññā*), one understands the five aggregates, “This is the form aggregate, etc,” in terms of their individual characteristics, etc.
2. By “**full understanding by scrutiny**” (*tīraṇa, pariññā*), one scrutinizes them in forty-two modes, as impermanent, suffering, as disease, etc.
3. By “**full understanding as abandonment**” (*pahāna, pariññā*), one abandons lustful desire for the aggregates by means of the foremost path. (SA 1:45)<sup>2</sup>

The suttas make a clearer distinction between *abhijānāti* and *parijānāti* than the Commentaries do. In the suttas, *abhijānāti* and its various forms (such as *abhiññā*) indicate direct knowledge of phenomena in terms of the four noble truths. This knowledge is common to both the learner (*sekha*) and the adept (*asekha*), that is, the arhat. *Parijānāti* and its various forms (such as *pariññā*), however, are usually used only for the arhat, signifying the consummation of the knowledge initiated by *abhijānāti*.

The **Mūla,pariyāya Sutta** (M 1), for example, stresses that the learner “has directly known” (*abhiññāya*) all the 24 bases of conceiving, but he still needs to continue his training to fully understand them (*pariñeyyam tassa*).<sup>3</sup> Only the Buddha or the arhat “has fully understood them” (*pariññātam tassa*).<sup>4</sup>

## 2 The integrated nature of the aggregates

Just as the four elements do not exist as separate entities, but are merely *phases* of matter,<sup>5</sup> so too the five aggregates are not separate entities, but are interdependent *aspects* of the mental process. They all arise and pass away together. Just as a scientific diagram of the atom is only a false and frozen model for learning the processes that constitute atoms, so too the five aggregates are a model for understanding how the mind works, that is, how we become conscious of things (or cognize them), how we experience them, how we name and recognize them, and what we make of them.

The working of the aggregates may be examined by way of two complementary methods of investigation: the methods of unity and of diversity.<sup>6</sup> **The method of unity** (*ekatta, naya*) discloses the coherence of the five aggregates working together with the mental aspects flowing in a succession of discrete conscious moments making up the continuum (*santana*).<sup>7</sup> It shows them as connected in a single series, “participants in a process of transmission and development, interconnected members unified through a law of conditional dependence.”<sup>8</sup>

**The method of diversity** (*nānatta, naya*) balances this approach by pointing out the difference. Though unified, the current of conscious moments are analyzable into the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness, all flowing in a chain of discrete links, some of which function as causes, other as effects, or working as effects, and then as causes. Sometimes, the continuum is interrupted: the death-moment and the rebirth-linking break it up into separate life-terms which show marked differences despite being part of the same series. They are the same yet not the same.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> These terms are more fully discussed as Vism 30.3 f/606 f & 20.18 f/611-613, based on Pm 2:238-242, where, however, only 40 modes are listed under 2. The 42 modes, however, are mentioned at Vism 21.59/655 in connection with “discerning formations as void.” See **Samiddhi S** (S 1.20) = SD 21.4.

<sup>3</sup> M 1.27-50/1:4 = SD 11.8.

<sup>4</sup> M 1.51-170/1:4-6 = SD 11.8.

<sup>5</sup> SD 17.2a.

<sup>6</sup> For their application to views, see **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1) = SD 25.3(49.2).

<sup>7</sup> A “continuum” (*santāna*) means a single beginningless series of life-processes extending into the indefinite future, and contains within itself a number of individual life-terms. The word “continuity” (*santati*) is used here for this individual life-term, with its distinct birth, life and death. Each continuity, in turn, comprises of a rapid succession of dharmas or momentary mental and physical factors, held together by laws of causal relationship. How the methods of diversity and of unity, when misapplied, gives rise to the wrong view of annihilation is explained in Bodhi 1978:20. (Summarized from Bodhi 1978:192 n1.)

<sup>8</sup> Bodhi 1978:20.

<sup>9</sup> There is the sandy beach simile: Seen from afar a sandy beach appears to be smooth and flat, but on careful examination (especially with a magnifying glass), the beach is seen as made of discrete particles of sand, which on a microscopic level actually do not touch each other.

When the method of unity is misunderstood or misapplied, it generally leads to the view of an identical self, leading on to a view of eternalism. A wrong understanding of the method of diversity misleads one into viewing the apparently discontinuous process of existence as being absolute, and so leads to annihilationism. A proper understanding of both methods will reveal

the continuum to be a causally connected succession of momentary processes, which continues so long as the causes retain their efficacy, and ceases when the causes are deactivated, in either case without harbouring a persisting core to be grasped as a personal self. This is the middle way which avoids the two extremes. (Bodhi 1978:20)

The purpose of understanding the nature of the five aggregates is not to give some scientific explanation of the mind or of existence, although these may well be elucidated by the way. They are not even meant to be an exhaustive analysis of a human being. Its true purpose is to understand the mental and perceptual processes so that we are less hampered by the weaknesses of the system, and learn to strengthen our mental tools to see phenomena directly into what they really are in the light of insight wisdom. More specifically, the aggregates describes the physical and mental aspects of what an individual really is, and shows the inappropriateness of thinking in terms of any permanent selfhood. In other words, a proper understanding of the five aggregates is essential for effective mindfulness practice and meditation, the goal of which is spiritual liberation.

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## The Discourse on Directly Knowing

(S 22.24/3:26 f)

1-2 At Sāvattthī.

### Ignorance of the aggregates is suffering

3 (1) Bhikshus, without directly knowing, without fully understanding form, without dispassion towards it, without letting go of it, one is incapable destroying suffering.

4 (2) Without directly knowing, without fully understanding feeling, without dispassion towards it, without letting go of it, one is incapable destroying suffering.

5 (3) Without directly knowing, without fully understanding perception, without dispassion towards it, without letting go of it, one is incapable destroying suffering.

6 (4) Without directly knowing, without fully understanding formations, without dispassion towards them, without letting go of them, one is incapable destroying suffering.

7 (5) Without directly knowing, without fully understanding consciousness, without dispassion towards it, without letting go of it, one is incapable destroying suffering.

### Understanding the aggregates is liberation

8 (1) And, bhikshus, having directly known, having fully understood, form, becoming dispassionate towards it, letting go of it, one is able to destroy suffering.

9 (2) Having directly known, having fully understood feeling, becoming dispassionate towards it, letting go of it, one is able to destroy suffering.

10 (3) Having directly known, having fully understood perception, becoming dispassionate towards it, letting go of it, one is able to destroy suffering.

11 (4) Having directly known, having fully understood formations, becoming dispassionate towards them, letting go of them, one is able to destroy suffering.

12 (5) Having directly known, having fully understood consciousness, becoming dispassionate towards it, letting go of it, one is able to destroy suffering.

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