

Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

**The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching
A Day of Sutta Study on the Buddha's First Three Discourses**

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According to Theravada Buddhist tradition, the first three discourses the Buddha gave after his enlightenment are:

- 1. Setting Rolling the Wheel of the Dhamma (Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana-sutta)**
- 2. The Characteristic of Not-Self (Anatta-lakkhana-sutta)**
- 3. The Fire Sermon (Aditta-pariyaya-sutta)**

The suttas are available at www.accesstoinsight.org

The entirety of the Buddha's teaching is encapsulated in these three discourses.

In this day of study we will cover all three suttas in detail, exploring how they weave together to inform each other and create a complete description of Dharma teaching and practice.

We will:

- 1) Examine some key concepts and background material necessary to understand the suttas.
- 2) Look in detail at each sutta
- 3) Bring all three suttas together to inform each other and convey a whole sense dharma teachings.
- 4) Reflect on the teachings in each sutta to see how they relate to our own experience and practice.

Key Concepts

Three Characteristics

- 1** Impermanence. Pali: anicca
- 2** Suffering, unreliability, unsatisfactoriness. Pali: dukkha
- 3** Not-self (also translated as 'non-self' and 'no-self'). Pali: anattā

Five Aggregates (Pali: Khandha)

1 Form. Pali: rupa

2 Feeling. Pali: Vedanā. Feeling or sensation, which can be either pleasant, unpleasant or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant (neutral).

3 Perception. Pali: saññā

4 Volitional Formations, mental formations, volitional effort, determinations, concoctions. Pali: sankharas.

5 Consciousness. Pali: viññāṇa.

Six Sense Bases

Eye (the sense organ), form (visual object), and contact (making contact with the eye and the form) together give rise to 'eye consciousness', which is the experience of seeing.

Ear, sounds, and contact together give rise to 'ear consciousness', which is the experience of hearing.

Similar for the Nose, Tongue, Body and Mind.

The Fire Sermon (Aditta-pariyaya Sutta)

Thus I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Gayā, at Gayā's Head, together with a thousand bhikkhus. There he addressed the bhikkhus.

"Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what is the all that is burning?

"The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning, and whatever feeling arises with eye-contact for its indispensable condition, whether it is pleasant, unpleasant or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant (neutral), that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust¹, with the fire of hate², with the fire of delusion³. I say it is burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrow, with lamentation, with pain, with grief, and despair.

"The ear is burning, sounds are burning...

"The nose is burning, odors are burning...

"The tongue is burning, flavors are burning...

"The body is burning, tangibles are burning...

"The mind is burning, ideas⁴ are burning, mind-consciousness is burning, mind-contact is burning, and whatever feeling arises with mind-contact for its indispensable condition, whether it is pleasant, unpleasant or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant (neutral), that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion. I say it is burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrow, with lamentation, with pain, with grief and despair.

"Bhikkhus, when a noble follower who has heard (the truth) sees thus, he experiences disenchantment⁵ toward the eye, toward forms, toward eye-consciousness, toward eye-contact, toward whatever feeling arises with eye-contact for its indispensable condition, whether it is pleasant, unpleasant or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant (neutral).

"He experiences disenchantment in the ear... in sounds...

"He experiences disenchantment in the nose... in odors...

"He experiences disenchantment in the tongue... in flavors...

"He experiences disenchantment in the body... in tangibles...

"He experiences disenchantment toward the mind, toward ideas, toward mind-consciousness, toward mind-contact, and toward whatever feeling arises with eye-contact for its indispensable condition, whether it is pleasant, unpleasant or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant (neutral).

"When he experiences disenchantment, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is liberated. When liberated, there is knowledge that he is liberated. He understands: 'Birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.'"

That is what the Blessed One said. The bhikkhus were glad, and they approved his words.

Now during his utterance, the hearts of those thousand bhikkhus were liberated from taints through non-clinging.

— [SN 35.28](#)

Key Terms from Fire Sermon Sutta

1 Pali: rāga – lust, excitement, passion. Is considered a synonym of lobha, covetousness, greed. Refers to wanting pleasant sense experiences.

2 Pali: dosa, ill-will, anger, hatred.

3 Pali: moha, stupidity, dullness of mind & soul, delusion, bewilderment, infatuation

4 Pali: Dhamma

5 Pali: Nibbindanti (verb; noun: Nibbidā) Disenchantment, weariness, had enough, disgust with worldly life, revulsion, tedium, aversion, indifference, estrangement.

The Characteristic of Not-Self (Anatta-lakkhana Sutta)

Thus I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Bārānasi, in the Deer Park at Isipatana (the Resort of Seers). There he addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five:

"Bhikkhus." — "Venerable sir," they replied. The Blessed One said this:

"Bhikkhus, form¹ is not-self². If form were self, then this form would not lead to affliction, and one could have it of form: 'Let my form be thus, let my form be not thus.' But since form is not-self, so it leads to affliction, and none can have it of form: 'Let my form be thus, let my form be not thus.'

"Feeling³ is not-self...

"Perception⁴ is not-self...

"Volitional formations⁵ are not-self...

"Bhikkhus, consciousness⁶ is not self. If consciousness were self, then this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and one could have it of consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness be not thus.' But since consciousness is not-self, so it leads to affliction, and none can have it of consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness be not thus.'

"Bhikkhus, what do you think: is form permanent or impermanent⁷?" — "Impermanent, venerable Sir." — "Now is what is impermanent suffering⁸ or happiness⁹?" — "Suffering, venerable Sir." — "Now is what is impermanent, what is suffering since subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'?" — "No, venerable sir."

"Is feeling permanent or impermanent?..."

"Is perception permanent or impermanent?..."

"Are volitional formations permanent or impermanent?..."

"Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?" — "Impermanent, venerable sir." — "Now is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?" — "Suffering, venerable sir." — "Now is what is

impermanent, what is suffering since subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'? — "No, venerable sir."

"So, bhikkhus any kind of form whatsoever, whether past, future or presently arisen, whether gross or subtle, whether in oneself or external, whether inferior or superior, whether far or near, should be seen as it really is with right understanding thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.'

"Any kind of feeling ...

"Any kind of perception ...

"Any kind of volitional formations ...

"Any kind of consciousness whatsoever, whether past, future or presently arisen, whether gross or subtle, whether in oneself or external, whether inferior or superior, whether far or near must, should be seen as it really is with right understanding thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.'

"Bhikkhus, when a noble follower who has heard (the truth) sees thus, he experiences disenchantment in form, in feeling, in perception, in mental formations, in consciousness.

"When he experiences disenchantment, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is liberated. When liberated, there is knowledge that he is liberated. He understands: 'Birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done been done, there is no more for this state of being.'"

That is what the Blessed One said. The bhikkhus were glad, and they approved his words.

Now during this utterance, the hearts of the bhikkhus of the group of five were liberated from taints through non-clinging.

— [SN 22.59](#)

Key Terms from Characteristic of Not-Self Sutta

- 1 Rupa (1st aggregate)
- 2 Pali: anattā, one of the three characteristics.
- 3 Vedanā (2nd aggregate)
- 4 Saññā (3rd aggregate)
- 5 Sankhara (4th aggregate)

6 Viññāṇa (5th aggregate)

7 Pali: anicca, one of the three characteristics.

8 Pali: dukkha, one of the three characteristics.

9 Pali: Sukha. Pleasure, happiness.

Setting Rolling the Wheel of the Dhamma (Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana Sutta)

Thus I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Bārānasi in the Deer Park at Isipatana (the Resort of Seers). There he addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five.

"Bhikkhus, these two extremes ought not to be followed by one gone forth from the household life. What are the two? The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is inferior, low, vulgar, ignoble, and unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble and unbeneficial.

"The middle way discovered by the Tathāgata avoids both these extremes; it gives rise to vision, it gives rise to knowledge, and it leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna. And what is that middle way? It is simply the Noble Eightfold Path, that is to say, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. That is the middle way discovered by the Tathāgata, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, and which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna.

"This is the noble truth of suffering¹: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with what is displeasing is suffering, separation from what is pleasing is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering — in short, the five aggregates of clinging are suffering².

"This is the Noble Truth of the origin of suffering: It is the craving³ that produces renewal of being accompanied by enjoyment and lust, and enjoying this and that; in other words, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being, craving for non-being.

"This is the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering: It is the remainderless fading away and cessation, giving up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting, of that same craving.

"This is the Noble Truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering : It is simply the Noble Eightfold Path, that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

"This is the Noble Truth of suffering.' Such was the vision, the knowledge, the understanding, the finding, the light, that arose in regard to ideas not heard by me before.

'The noble truth of suffering is to be understood.' Such was the vision, the knowledge, the understanding, the finding, the light, that arose in regard to ideas not heard by me before.

'The noble truth of suffering has been fully understood.' Such was the vision, the knowledge, the understanding, the finding, the light, that arose in regard to ideas not heard by me before.

"This is the Noble Truth of the origin of suffering.' Such was the vision...

'The noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned.' Such was the vision...

'The noble truth of the origin of suffering has been abandoned.' Such was the vision... in regard to ideas not heard by me before.

"This is the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering.' Such was the vision...

'The noble truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized.' Such was the vision...

'The noble truth of the cessation of suffering has been realized.' Such was the vision... in regard to ideas not heard by me before.

"This is the Noble Truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.' Such was the vision...

'The noble truth leading of the way leading to cessation of suffering is to be developed.' Such was the vision...

'The noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering has been developed.' Such was the vision... in regard to ideas not heard by me before.

"As long as my knowing and seeing how things are, was not quite purified in these twelve aspects, in these three phases of each of the four noble truths, I did not claim in the world with its gods, its Māras and high divinities, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmans, with its princes and men to have discovered the full awakening that is supreme. But as soon as my knowing and seeing how things are, was quite purified in these twelve aspects, in these three phases of each of the four noble truths, then I claimed in the world with its gods, its Maras and high divinities, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmans, its princes and men to have discovered the full awakening that is supreme. Knowing and seeing arose in me thus: 'My heart's deliverance is unassailable. This is my last birth. Now there is no renewal of being.'"

That is what the Blessed One said. The bhikkhus of the group of five were glad, and they approved his words.

Now during this utterance, there arose in the venerable Kondañña the spotless, immaculate vision of the Dhamma: "Whatever is subject to arising is all subject to cessation."

When the Wheel of Truth had thus been set rolling by the Blessed One the earth-gods raised the cry: "At Bārānasi, in the Deer Park at Isipatana, the matchless Wheel of the Dhamma has been set rolling by the Blessed One, not to be stopped by ascetic or divine or god or Māra or high divinity or anyone in the world."

On hearing the earth-gods' cry, all the gods in turn in the six paradises of the sensual sphere took up the cry till it reached beyond the Retinue of High Divinity in the sphere of pure form. And so indeed in that hour, at that moment, the cry soared up to the World of High Divinity, and this ten-thousandfold world-element shook and rocked and quaked, and a great measureless radiance surpassing the very nature of the gods was displayed in the world.

Then the Blessed One uttered the exclamation: "Kondañña knows! Kondañña knows!" and that is how that venerable one acquired the name, Añña-Kondañña — Kondañña who knows.

— [SN 56.11](#)

Key Terms from Setting Rolling the Wheel of the Dhamma Sutta

1 Pali: dukkha.

2 "the five aggregates of clinging are suffering". Pali: "pañcupādānakkhandhā dukkhā".

Pañca: five

Upādāna: Two meanings: 1) clinging, 2) fuel for a fire.

Khandha: Group (the aggregates).

So this can also mean "the five burning masses of fuel are dukkha" or "the five aggregates which are on fire (metaphorically, with lust, hatred and delusion) are suffering".

3 Pali: tanhā, meaning 'thirst'.