

# **The Fire Sermon**

## *The Third Sermon of the Buddha*

Compiled and edited

by

Anagarika Tevijjo

It is often good to start off with a story as a way of getting into the topic:

### **Conversion of Kassapa, the Fire-Worshiper**

“At that time there lived in Uruvela the Jatilas, Brahman hermits with matted-hair, worshipping the fire and keeping a fire-dragon; and Kassapa was their chief.

Kassapa was renowned throughout all India, and his name was honored as one of the wisest men on earth and an authority on religion.

And the Blessed One went to Kassapa of Uruvela the Jatila, and said:

"Let me stay a night in the room where you keep your sacred fire."

Kassapa, seeing the Blessed One in his majesty and beauty, thought to himself:

"This is a great muni and a noble teacher. Should he stay overnight in the room where the sacred fire is kept, the serpent will bite him and he will die."

And he said:

"I do not object to your staying overnight in the room where the sacred fire is kept, but the serpent lives there; he will kill you and I should be sorry to see you perish."

But the Buddha insisted and Kassapa admitted him to the room where the sacred fire was kept. And the Blessed One sat down with body erect, surrounding himself with watchfulness. In the night the dragon came, belching forth in rage his fiery poison, and filling the air with burning vapor, but could do him no harm, and the fire consumed itself while the World-honored One remained composed.

And the venomous fiend became very wroth so that he died in his anger. When Kassapa saw the light shining forth from the room he said:

"Alas, what misery! Truly, the countenance of Gotama the great Sakyamuni is beautiful, but the serpent will destroy him."

In the morning the Blessed One showed the dead body of the fiery fiend to Kassapa, saying:

"His fire has been conquered by my fire."

And Kassapa thought to himself.

"Sakyamuni is a great samana and possesses high powers, but he is not holy like me."

There was in those days a festival, and Kassapa thought:

"The people will come hither from all parts of the country and will see the great Sakyamuni. When he speaks to them, they will believe in him and abandon me." And he grew envious. When the day of the festival arrived, the Blessed One retired and did not come to Kassapa. And Kassapa went to the Buddha on the next morning and said: "Why did the great Sakyamuni not come?"

The Tathagata replied:

"Didst thou not think, O Kassapa, that it would be better if I stayed away from the festival?"

And Kassapa was astonished and thought:

"Great is Sakyamuni; he can read my most secret thoughts, but he is not holy like me."

The Blessed One addressed Kassapa and said:

"Thou seest the truth, but acceptest it not because of the envy that dwells in thy heart. Is envy holiness? Envy is the last remnant of self that has remained in thy mind. Thou art not holy, Kassapa; thou hast not yet entered the path."

And Kassapa gave up his resistance. His envy disappeared, and, bowing down before the Blessed One, he said:

"Lord, our Master, let me receive the ordination from the Blessed One."

And the Blessed One said:

"Thou, Kassapa, art chief of the Jatilas. Go, then, first and inform them of thine intention, and let them do as thou thinkest fit."

Then Kassapa went to the Jatilas and said:

"I am anxious to lead a religious life under the direction of the great Sakyamuni, who is the Enlightened One, the Buddha. Do as ye think best."

The Jatilas replied:

"We have conceived a profound affection for the great Sakyamuni, and if thou wilt join his brotherhood, we will do likewise."

The Jatilas of Uruvela now flung their paraphernalia of fire-worship into the river and went to the Blessed One.

Nadi Kassapa and Gaya Kassapa, brothers of the great Uruvela Kassapa, powerful men and chieftains among the people, were dwelling below on the stream, and when they saw the instruments used in fire-worship floating in the river, they said:

"Something has happened to our brother. And they came with their folk to Uruvela. Hearing what had happened, they, too, went to the Buddha.

The Blessed One, seeing that the Jatilas of Nadi and Gaya, who had practiced severe austerities and worshiped fire, were now come to him, preached a sermon on fire, and said:

"Everything, O Jatilas, is burning. The eye is burning, all the senses are burning, are thoughts burning. They are burning with the fire of lust. There is anger, and there is ignorance, there is hatred, and as long as the fire finds flammable things upon which it can feed, so long will it burn, and there will be birth and death, decay, grief, lamentation, suffering, despair, and sorrow.

"Considering this, a disciple of the Dharma will see the four noble truths and walk in the eightfold path of holiness. He will become *wary*\* [See editorial note below] of his eye, wary of all his senses, wary of his thoughts. He will divest himself of passion and become free. He will be delivered from selfishness and attain the blessed state of Nirvana."

And the Jatilas rejoiced and took refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

([www.sacred texts.com](http://www.sacred texts.com))

\*[The word "wary" in the above has the meaning of watching-out and being aware and careful and mindful of how the dangers of contact and dependent attraction arising through sense consciousness and an unmindful thought processes can become the cause of craving, dissatisfaction and suffering.]

Now, as the above-cited text of the sutta story seems somewhat informal, let's look at the renderings of some other translations from Pali scholars to compare their texts to see what we can learn from that exercise:

## *Āditta Sutta*

Translation and commentary by Ledi Sayadaw

## **The Fire Sermon**

At one time, the Blessed one was living near Gayā, at Gayā's head, with a thousand bhikkhus. Then the Blessed One addressed them:

“Everything, monks, is burning. What, monks, is everything that is burning? The *eye*, monks, is burning, form is burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning. The *feeling* that arises dependent on eye-contact, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, that also is burning.

With what is it burning? It is burning with the fire of passion, the fire of hatred, the fire of delusion. I declare that it is burning with the fire of birth, decay, death, grief, lamentation, pain, sorrow, and despair.

The ear, monks, is burning, sound is burning, ... and despair.

The nose, monks, is burning, odour is burning, ... and despair.

The tongue, monks, is burning, taste is burning, ... and despair.

The body, monks, is burning, touch is burning, ... and despair.

The mind, monks, is burning, thought is burning ... and despair.

Seeing thus, monks, the well-informed noble disciple is *disgusted* with the eye, is *disgusted with forms*, disgusted with eye-consciousness, disgusted with eye-contact.

He is *disgusted*\* [See editorial comment below at the end of this translation] with the feeling that arises dependent on eye contact, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

He is *disgusted* with the ear ... with the nose ... with the tongue ... with the body ... with the mind, with thoughts, with mind-contact, with the feeling that arises dependent on mind-contact, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Being *disgusted*, he is dispassionate, being dispassionate he is freed. Being freed, he knows he is free, and he knows,

“Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been fulfilled, what should be done has been done, there is no more of this.”

Thus spoke the Blessed One. Those monks delighted in what the Blessed One had said. And while this discourse was being delivered the minds of those one thousand monks were liberated from defilements without any remainder.”

Samyuttanikāya (S.iv.19), Saḷāyatanasamyuttam, Sabbavaggo, Ādittasuttam

\*[While “disgusted” sounds a bit strong, in the above rendering, the meaning is that, once one sees that the senses arise out of sense-contact and resultant sense-attachment, (which may be low and base), one becomes disenchanted and one turns away from such sense-consciousnesses and desires which also lead to false expectations dependent upon ignorance. ]

## **What Ledi Sayadaw says about the Fire Sutta:**

“This important discourse was given by the Buddha to a thousand fire-worshipping ascetics early in his dispensation.

The account of the Buddha’s meeting with the Kassapa brothers at Uruvela is told in the Vinaya Mahāvagga.

After giving his first discourse, the Dhammacakka Sutta, and the Anattalakkhana Sutta, the discourse on not-self, to his first five disciples they all attained Arahantship after the first Rains Retreat.

The Buddha spent the second Rains Retreat at Uruvela, during which time he performed numerous feats of psychic power to humble the pride of the fire-worshipping ascetics, so that they gained faith in him and became his disciples. After the Buddha taught the Āditta Sutta, all one thousand of these bhikkhus became Arahants.

The Ādittapariiyāya Sutta or Āditta Sutta is found in the Saḷāyatanavagga of the Samyuttanikāya, as well as in the Vinaya Mahāvagga. “Pariiyāya” means “instruction.”

All six sense spheres — the eye and forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and odours, the tongue and tastes, the body and touches, the mind and thoughts — are the basis for *contact, feeling, and craving*.

*Craving is like a fire* that burns everything with which it comes into contact. If we are mindful of the feeling at the moment of sense contact, before feeling gives rise to craving, we can break the link between feeling and craving.

See also the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw’s Discourse on the Mālukyaputta Sutta. The knowledge of disgust (*nibbida ñāna*) is an advanced stage of insight knowledge where the mind sees nothing desirable in any sense object. This leads on to the higher stage of equanimity about formations or *dispassion* regarding pleasant and unpleasant sense objects, and finally to the realisation of nibbāna.

The early discourses like the Dhammacakka, Anattalakkhana, and Āditta Sutta, seem very simple, but only those with well developed insight knowledge were able to gain the final goal on listening to them. Nowadays, meditators will need to practise insight meditation diligently for many months or years to gain similar realisations. For most of us, the objects of the six senses do not seem to be on fire, nor disgusting.

On the contrary, our mind still take delight in them, pursues them, and clings to them constantly. Unless we can change our perception through gaining insight, we cannot become aware of the danger that lies dormant therein.”

So, once again we see that attachment to the sense objects is, here, the problem.

Let's now look at another translation from Nanamoli Thera for further comparison:

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SN 35.28

**Adittapariyaya Sutta**

**The Fire Sermon**

Translation from the Pali by

**Ñanamoli Thera**

Revised: Saturday 2008-03-01

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PTS: S iv 19  
CDB ii 1143

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Source: From [\*Three Cardinal Discourses of the Buddha \(WH 17\)\*](#), translated from the Pali by Ñanamoli Thera (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1981). Copyright © 1981 Buddhist Publication Society. Used with permission.

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Thus I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Gaya, at Gayasisa, 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, also whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant that arises with eye-contact, for its indispensable condition, 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 sorrows, with lamentations, with pains, with griefs, with despairs.

"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, ideas are burning, mind-consciousness is burning, mind-contact is burning, also whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant that arises with mind-contact, for its indispensable condition, 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 sorrows, with lamentations, with pains, with griefs, with despairs.

"Bhikkhus, when a noble follower who has heard (the truth) sees thus, he finds *estrangement* [disillusionment and detachment] in the eye, finds *estrangement* in forms, finds *estrangement* in eye-consciousness, finds *estrangement* in eye-contact, and whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant that arises with eye-contact for its indispensable condition, in that too he finds estrangement.

"He finds estrangement in the ear... in sounds..."

"He finds estrangement in the nose... in odors..."

"He finds estrangement in the tongue... in flavors..."

"He finds estrangement in the body... in tangibles..."

"He finds estrangement in the mind, finds estrangement in ideas, finds estrangement in mind-consciousness, finds estrangement in mind-contact, and whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant that arises with mind-contact for its indispensable condition, in that too he finds estrangement.

"When he finds estrangement, passion fades out. With the fading of passion, he is liberated. When liberated, there is knowledge that he is liberated. He understands:

'Birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived out, what can be done is done, of this there is no more beyond.'"

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 clinging no more.”

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Now, we can continue to compare texts with the next translation from the Pali into English by Bhikkhu Thanissaro:

## **Samyutta Nikaya XXXV.28**

### **Aditta-pariyaya Sutta**

#### **The Fire Sermon**

**Translated by Bhikkhu Thanissaro**

“Several months after his Awakening, the Buddha delivers this sermon to an audience of 1,000 fire-worshipping ascetics. In his characteristically brilliant teaching style, the Buddha uses a *metaphor* which quickly penetrates to the heart of the audience — in this case, the *metaphor of fire*. Upon hearing this sermon, the entire audience attains full Awakening (arahatta).

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The sutta reads:

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying in Gaya, at Gaya Head, with 1,000 monks. There he addressed the monks:

"Monks, the All is aflame. What All is aflame? The eye is aflame. Forms are aflame. Consciousness at the eye is aflame. Contact at the eye is aflame. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the eye — experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain — that too is aflame.

Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs.

"The ear is aflame. Sounds are aflame. Consciousness at the ear is aflame. Contact at the ear is aflame. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the ear — experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain — that too is aflame.

Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, [and] the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs.

"The nose is aflame. Aromas are aflame. Consciousness at the nose is aflame. Contact at the nose is aflame. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the nose — experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain — that too is aflame.

Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs.

"The tongue is aflame. Flavors are aflame. Consciousness at the tongue is aflame. Contact at the tongue is aflame. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the tongue — experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain — that too is aflame.

Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs.

"The body is aflame. Tactile sensations are aflame. Consciousness at the body is aflame. Contact at the body is aflame. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the body — experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain — that too is aflame.

Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs.

"The intellect is aflame. Ideas are aflame. Consciousness at the intellect is aflame. Contact at the intellect is aflame. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the intellect — experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain — that too is aflame.

Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Aflame, I say, with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs.

"Seeing thus, the instructed noble disciple grows disenchanted with the eye, disenchanted with forms, disenchanted with consciousness at the eye, disenchanted with contact at the eye. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the eye, experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain: With that, too, he grows *disenchanted*.\*[See editorial comment at the end of this translation.]

"He grows *disenchanted* with the ear, disenchanted with sounds, disenchanted with consciousness at the ear, disenchanted with contact at the ear. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the ear, experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain: With that, too, he grows disenchanted.

"He grows *disenchanted* with the nose, disenchanted with aromas, disenchanted with consciousness at the nose, disenchanted with contact at the nose. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the nose, experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain: With that, too, he grows disenchanted.

"He grows *disenchanted* with the tongue, disenchanted with flavors, disenchanted with consciousness at the tongue, disenchanted with contact at the tongue. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the tongue, experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain: With that, too, he grows disenchanted.

"He grows disenchanted with the body, disenchanted with tactile sensations, disenchanted with consciousness at the body, disenchanted with contact at the body. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the body, experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain: With that, too, he grows disenchanted.

"He grows disenchanted with the intellect, disenchanted with ideas, disenchanted with consciousness at the intellect, disenchanted with contact at the intellect. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the intellect, experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain: He grows disenchanted with that too.

"Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is fully released. With full release, there is the knowledge, 'Fully released,' He discerns that 'Birth is depleted, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.'  
"

That is what the Blessed One said.

Gratified, the monks delighted at his words.

And while this explanation was being given, the hearts of the 1,000 monks, through no clinging (not being sustained), were fully released from fermentation/effluents.

Source of above: **Access-to-Insight** [<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/>]

(Revised: Fri 22 May 1998)

\*[The word "disenchanted" here seems to mean that whatever has attracted the mind-body to attachment to an object of consciousness, in the first place, comes to be seen, (through developing insight and mental awareness, understanding, knowledge and wisdom) as actually a source of mental irritation or some sense of stress of one kind or another, pleasant or unpleasant, and the mind, having seen through the original illusion as actual attachments to delusions, becomes "disenchanted" in the positive sense with this level of base experience.]

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Below, is yet another translation for comparison and consideration:

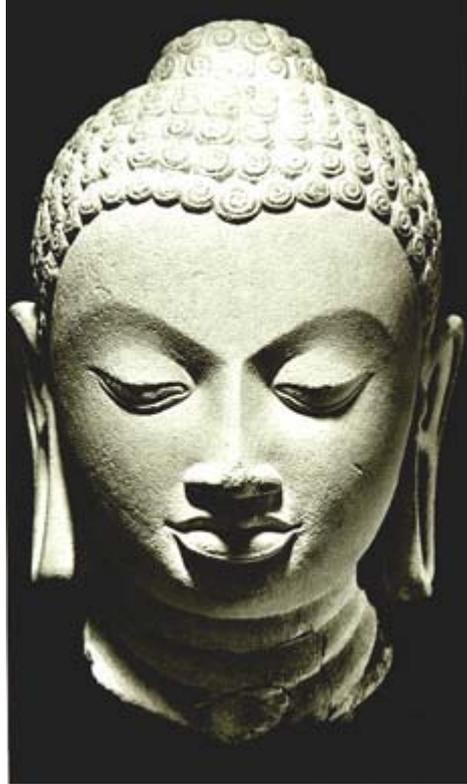
Translated from  
the *Maha Vagga*

Readings in Buddhist Philosophy

**Background  
Information  
Fire Sermon**

## The Fire Sermon

The worship of fire was a feature of Bramanical ideas of the period. Conversions of Brahman priests and their followers are relatively rare in the literature. The conversion of the Kassapa brothers and their 1000 followers at Uruvela is exceptional.



### Fire

Fire was one of the basic elements of material things in Indian thinking

"Then The Blessed One, having dwelt in Uruvela as long as he wished, proceeded on his wanderings in the direction of Gaya Head, accompanied by a great congregation of priests, a thousand in number, who had all of them aforetime been monks with matted hair. And there in Gaya, on Gaya Head, the Blessed One dwelt, together with the thousand priests.

### Fire Worship

Fire worship was part of Vedic rituals, the fire being the voice of the god Agni and the male principle, water being female.

And there The Blessed One addressed the priests:—

"All things, O priests, are on fire. And what, O priests, are all these things which are on fire?

"The eye, O priests, is on fire; forms are on fire; eye-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the eye are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye, that also is on fire.

### Agni

The god Agni is one of the most important of the

"And with what are these on fire?

"With the fire of passion, say I, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation; with birth, old age, death, sorrow,

Vedic gods. He is represented as the fire of the sacrifice, the thunderbolt and the sun.

lamentation, misery, grief, and despair are they on fire.

"The ear is on fire; sounds are on fire; . . . the nose is on fire; odors are on fire; . . . the tongue is on fire; tastes are on fire; . . . the body is on fire; things tangible are on fire . . . the mind is on fire; ideas are on fire; . . . mind-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the mind are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the mind, that also is on fire.

"And with what are these on fire?

"With the fire of passion, say I, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation; with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair are they on fire.

"Perceiving this, O priests, the learned and noble disciple conceives an *aversion*\* [See editorial comment following this translation] for the eye, conceives an aversion for forms, conceives an *aversion* for eye-consciousness, conceives an aversion for the impressions received by the eye; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye, for that also he conceives an *aversion*. Conceives an aversion for the ear, conceives an aversion for sounds, . . . conceives an aversion for the nose, conceives an aversion for odors, . . . conceives an aversion for the tongue, conceives an aversion for tastes, . . . conceives an aversion for the body, conceives an aversion for things tangible, . . . conceives an aversion for the mind, conceives an aversion for ideas, conceives an aversion for mind-consciousness, conceives an aversion for the impressions received by the mind; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the mind, for this also he conceives an aversion. And in conceiving this aversion, he becomes divested of passion, and by the absence of passion he becomes free, and when he is free he becomes aware that he is free; and he knows that rebirth is exhausted, that he has lived the holy life, that he has done what it behooved him to do, and that he is no more for this world."

Now while this exposition was being delivered, the minds of the thousand priests became free from attachment and delivered from the depravities.

Here Endeth the Fire-Sermon."

\*[The word "aversion" is yet another translation of the Pali word "*nibbida*" and the meaning from the text, here, would indicate an intention of avoiding

the illusion of anything dependent on the passions arising out of the six senses as they are let loose to imagine all sorts of satisfactions arising out of contact to mind objects of consciousness as a cause of unheedful and harmful actions.]

The above passage was adapted from Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translation*.

Thanks for the foregoing input go to University of Miami's John Knoblock, Department of Philosophy.

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Above, we have provided the reader with some different renderings of the translations of the textual content of the Fire Sermon partially, at least, for the sake of common-understanding [to allow us guess-between the-lines] in order to 'get at the intended meaning' so-to-speak.

The above may also be of interest for Pali scholars, who will know the original Pali text very well, but may have not yet have had the time or opportunity of comparing the styles and skills of the above-quoted Pali-English translators and their individual ways of "putting-the-wording" into comprehensible English.

This, indeed, could be the basis for a wholly separate discussion, but, as it is not the main purpose of our essay, we shall stick to our topic, which is explaining and understanding and knowing the meaning and intention of the Buddha's words in this sutta within the wider-context of his teaching.

With this purpose in mind, we shall return again to Bhikkhu Nanamoli and his *Cardinal Discourses of the Buddha* in which he explains to us the relationship between the Buddha's first two sermons, so that we may better know the historical background and significance of his earliest teachings.

Indeed, many educated Westerners will well-remember, from the time of their literary studies, the allusion to the Fire Sermon in T.S. Eliot's, monumental poem, "The Wasteland" but most will have long-since forgotten the content of Eliot's footnote thereto and very few will have since satisfied their curiosity about the wider significance of the literary allusion to the Fire Sermon and its even broader significance for understanding man's universal sense of 'malaise' and the common cause of feelings of emptiness, lack of fulfillment and lack of satisfaction in their lives.

So what we shall do, next, is look to Nanamoli Thera's carefully structured explication of each of the Buddha's first three Sermons in order to understand the broader background against which the meaning of the Fire Sermon itself is set.

# Three Cardinal Discourses of the Buddha

Translated by  
Ñānamoli Thera

Source: *The Wheel*  
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## Introduction

Not doing any kind of evil,  
Perfecting profitable skill,  
And purifying one's own heart:  
This is the Buddha's dispensation.

— Dhammapada 183

The message of the Awakened Ones, so stated as it is in the *Dhammapada* in the plain terms of good and evil, upholds the same values that every great compassionate religion shares.

But the seed of good has to grow in the soil of truth; and how the tree grows depends upon the nature of the soil in which it is planted, and whence it draws nourishment. With men as the custodians of the true, the fulfillment of the good depends upon how truth is conceived by men to be. By their acts they verify it.

A monk called Gotama, it seems, a son of the Sakyans, who went forth into homelessness from a Sakyan clan, has come... Now a good report of Master Gotama has been spread to this effect:

"That Blessed One is such since he is accomplished and fully awakened, perfect in true knowledge and conduct, sublime, knower of worlds, incomparable leader of men to be tamed, teacher of gods and men, awakened and blessed... He teaches a True Idea that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, with its own special meaning and phrasing; he exhibits a holy life that is utterly perfect and pure." Now it is good to see such Accomplished Ones."

— MN 41

So it was said of him at the time. But what, then, was the fundamental ground of that teaching? Of the many ways that such a question might be answered, perhaps the simplest and best is this:

"He expounded the teaching that is peculiar to Buddhas: suffering, origination, cessation and a path" (MN 56).

These four are known as the *Four Noble Truths*.

This, with the cognate teaching of No Self, may be said to constitute the fundamental ground of the teaching of Buddhas; this is what marks them, sets them apart and entitles them to the unique epithet "Buddha."

The three discourses here presented display precisely, in all its incomparably serene simplicity, without assumptions, that special fundamental teaching, from which all Buddhism branches, and to which it all points back. The first discourse displays this fourfold Truth as something to be realized and verified for oneself here and now; the second discloses the contradictions which infect all "self" conceits; the third echoes the second from another angle.

The circumstances that lead up to the discovery of these four Truths, and to the delivery of these discourses, were briefly as follows. The Bodhisatta — as he then was, before his awakening — was twenty nine when he left the 'house-life,' where he [had] enjoyed the extreme of luxury.

He went into "exile" in order to find (not a palliative) but the true and incontrovertible way out of suffering.

'This world has surely happened upon woe, since it is born and ages and dies but to fall from one kind of existence and reappear in another. Yet it knows no escape from

this suffering, from aging and death; surely there is an escape from this suffering, from aging and death?’

— SN 12.65

He studied and practiced under two of the foremost teachers of *Samadhi* (concentration, or [calm and] quiet), and reached the highest meditative attainments possible thereby. But that was not enough ("I was not satisfied with that as a True Idea; I left it and went away." — MN 36) He then spent the best part of the next six years in the practice of asceticism, trying every sort of extreme self-mortification. During this time he was waited-on by five ascetics, who hoped that if he discovered the "deathless state" he would be able to communicate his discovery to them. This too failed.

‘By this grueling penance I have attained no distinction higher than the human ideal worthy of a noble one's knowing and seeing. Might there be another way to awakening.’

— MN 36

He decided to try once more the path of concentration, attained through mindfulness of breathing, though, this time, not pushed to the extremity of [fully-quieting the mind] , but guided instead by ordered consideration.

I thought:

"While my Sakyan father was busy and I (as a child) was sitting in the shade of the a rose apple tree, then quite secluded from sensual desires, secluded from unprofitable ideas, I had direct acquaintance of entering upon and abiding in the first *jhana*-meditation, which is accompanied by thinking and exploring, with happiness and pleasure born of seclusion. Might that be the way to enlightenment?" And, following that memory, came the recognition: "That is the only way to enlightenment."

— MN 36

He now gave-up self-mortification and took normal food again in order to restore to his emaciated body strength sufficient for his purpose. Then the five ascetics left him in disgust, judging that he had failed, and was merely reverting to what he had forsaken.

“But now in solitude, his new balanced-effort in the harmony of virtue, unified in concentration, and guided by the ordered consideration of insight with mindfulness, at length brought success in discovery of the way to the goal he had sought for so long.

"So I too found the ancient path, the ancient trail, traveled by the Awakened Ones of old." — SN 12.65

Five faculties in perfect balance had brought him to his goal: they were the four, namely energy, mindfulness, concentration, and understanding, with faith in the efficacy of the other four — [as the fifth] — the five that "merge into the Deathless" (SN 48.57). According to tradition, the "Awakening" took place on the night of Vesakha full moon in the fruitful month of May.

It was upon invitation that he resolved to communicate his discovery to others. For his first audience to whom to divulge it he chose the five ascetics who had shared his self-mortification, but had later left him. They were now at Benares — India's "eternal city" — and so in due course he went there to rejoin them.

Just two months after his awakening he preached his first sermon — the "Setting Rolling of the Wheel of Truth" or "Bringing into Existence the Blessing of the True Ideal" — with the five ascetics for his hearers. The tradition says it was the evening of the Asalha full moon in July, the day before the rainy season begins, and he began to speak at the moment when the sun was dipping, and the full moon simultaneously rising.

This, his first sermon, made one of his listeners, the ascetic Kondañña, a "stream-enterer," with his attainment of the first of the four progressive stages of realization. The other four soon followed in his footsteps. The second sermon, on the characteristic of Not-Self, was preached to the same five, and it brought them to the fourth and final stage, that of arahatship: "and then" as it is said, "there were six arahats in the world" (Vinaya Mahavagga 1).

These are the first two discourses presented here, and they were the first two sermons ever uttered by the Buddha. The third, the "Fire Sermon," was delivered some months later to an audience of a thousand ascetics converted from the heaven-bent practice of fire-worship.

All three discourses deal only with understanding (*pañña*), among the faculties mentioned above as required to be balanced.

But understanding, in order to reach perfection, has indeed to be aided by the other faculties, or in other words to be founded upon virtue ("habit without conflict"), and to be fortified by concentration (though not necessarily developed to the fullness of quietude). Thus and not otherwise can it reach its goal of unshakable-liberation.

Now the hearers of all these three discourses were, like the Buddha himself, all ascetics already expert in the techniques and refinements of both virtue (*sila*) and concentration (*samadhi*). So the Buddha had thus no need to tell them about what they already knew very well. Similarly he had no need to expound the doctrine of action (*kamma*) and its ripening (*vipaka*), with which they were thoroughly-acquainted through the ancient teachings.

What he had to do was first to show how it is possible to go astray towards the opposite extremes of sensual indulgence and self-torment; and second to describe the facts, to show [explain] how things are, — [both] clearly and succinctly enough —to stir his hearers to the additional spontaneous movement of understanding essential and indispensable for the final discovery of deliverance, each for himself.

## **The First Sutta**

### **Setting Rolling the Wheel of Truth (Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana-sutta)**

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

"Bhikkhus, these two extremes ought not to be cultivated by one gone forth from the house-life. What are the two? There is devotion to indulgence of pleasure in the objects of sensual desire, which is inferior, low, vulgar, ignoble, and leads to no good; and there is devotion to self-torment, which is painful, ignoble and leads to no good.

"The middle way [which has been] discovered by a Perfect One avoids both these extremes; it gives vision, it gives knowledge, and it leads to peace, to direct acquaintance, to discovery, to nibbana. 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 a Perfect One, which gives vision, which gives knowledge, and which leads to peace, to direct acquaintance, to discovery, to nibbana.

"Suffering, as a noble truth, is this: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the loathed is suffering, dissociation from the loved is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering — in short, suffering is the five categories of clinging to objects.

"The origin of suffering, as a noble truth, is this: It is the craving that produces renewal of being accompanied by enjoyment and lust, and enjoying this and that; in other words, craving for sensual desires, craving for being, craving for non-being.

"Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, is this: It is remainderless fading and ceasing, giving up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting, of that same craving.

"The way leading to cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, is this: 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.

"Suffering, as a noble truth, is this.'

Such was the vision, the knowledge, the understanding, the finding, the light, that arose in regard to ideas not heard by me before. 'This suffering, as a noble truth, can be diagnosed.'

Such was the vision, the knowledge, the understanding, the finding, the light, that arose in regard to ideas not heard by me before. 'This suffering, as a noble truth, has been diagnosed.'

Such was the vision, the knowledge, the understanding, the finding, the light, that arose in regard to ideas not heard by me before.

"The origin of suffering, as a noble truth, is this.' Such was the vision... 'This origin of suffering, as a noble truth, can be abandoned.' Such was the vision... 'This origin of suffering, as a noble truth, has been abandoned.' Such was the vision... in regard to ideas not heard by me before.

"Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, is this.' Such was the vision... 'This cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, can be verified.' Such was the vision... 'This cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, has been verified.' Such was the vision... in regard to ideas not heard by me before.

"The way leading to cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, is this.' Such was the vision... 'This way leading to cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, can be developed.' Such was the vision... 'This way leading to the cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, 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 [actually] 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 Maras and high divinities, in this generation with its monks and brahmins, 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 monks and brahmins, 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 the 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 true idea that: "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 Benares, in the Deer Park at Isipatana, the matchless Wheel of truth has been set rolling by the Blessed One, not to be stopped by monk or divine or god or death-angel 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 within the sphere of 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](#)

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## **Second Sermon:**

### **The Not-Self Characteristic (Anatta-lakkhana-sutta)**

Thus I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Benares, 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, form is not-self. Were form self, then this form would not lead to affliction, and one could have it [own and control] it as form and say: 'Let my form be thus, let my form be not thus.' And since form is not-self, so it leads to affliction, and none can have [and determine his] form: 'Let my form be thus, let my form be not thus.'

"Bhikkhus, feeling is not-self...

"Bhikkhus, perception is not-self...

"Bhikkhus, determinations are not-self...

"Bhikkhus, consciousness is not self. Were consciousness self, then this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and one could have it [be in control] of consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness be not thus.' And 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, how do you conceive it: Is form permanent or impermanent?" — "Impermanent, venerable Sir."

"Now is what is impermanent painful or pleasant?" — "Painful, venerable Sir." —

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

"Is feeling permanent or impermanent?..."

"Is perception permanent or impermanent?..."

"Are determinations permanent or impermanent?..."

"Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?" — "Impermanent, venerable sir." —

"Now is what is impermanent pleasant or painful?" — "Painful, venerable sir." —

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

"So, bhikkhus any kind of form whatever, whether past, future or presently arisen, whether gross or subtle, whether in oneself or external, whether inferior or superior, whether far or near, must with right understanding of how it is, be regarded thus: 'This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself.'

"Any kind of feeling whatever..."

"Any kind of perception whatever..."

"Any kind of determination whatever..."

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

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

"When he [becomes detached from the idea of form], he finds estrangement [and] passion fades out. With the fading of passion, he is liberated.

When liberated, there is knowledge that he is liberated. He understands: 'Birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived out, what can be done is done, of this there is no more beyond.'"

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 clinging no more.

### **Third Sermon:**

#### **The Fire Sermon (Aditta-pariyaya-sutta)**

Thus I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Gaya, at Gayasisa, 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, also whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant that arises with eye-contact for its indispensable condition, 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 sorrows, with lamentations, with pains, with griefs, with despairs.

"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, ideas are burning, mind-consciousness is burning, mind-contact is burning, also whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant which arises with mind-contact for its indispensable condition, — 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 sorrows, with lamentations, with pains, with griefs, with despairs.

"Bhikkhus, when a noble follower who has heard (the truth) sees thus, he finds *estrangement*\* [See editorial note at end of this sutta translation] He finds estrangement in the eye, finds estrangement in forms, finds estrangement in eye-consciousness, finds estrangement in eye-contact, and whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful- nor-pleasant that arises with eye-contact for its indispensable condition, in that too he finds estrangement.

"He finds estrangement in the ear... in sounds..."

"He finds estrangement in the nose... in odors..."

"He finds estrangement in the tongue... in flavors..."

"He finds estrangement in the body... in tangibles..."

"He finds estrangement in the mind, finds estrangement in ideas, finds estrangement in mind-consciousness, finds estrangement in mind-contact, and whatever is felt as

pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant that arises with mind-contact for its indispensable condition, in that too he finds estrangement.

"When he finds estrangement, passion fades out. With the fading of passion, he is liberated. When liberated, there is knowledge that he is liberated. He understands: 'Birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived out, what can be done is done, of this there is no more beyond.'"

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 clinging no more.

— [SN 35.28](#)

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\*["Estrangement," one might suggest, may be taken, in the above translation, as a sense of disillusionment and detachment resultant from the apparent existential paradox that, others in the rest of the world actually seem to believe the delusion that both 'they' as selves (individual personalities) and other sense objects (externally perceived as being concretely there) actually exist for the sake of satisfaction..

One with insight into the mundane false view of perception is "estranged" from the world because one sees through the assumed absurdity of the sham of the supposed-permanency of all external phenomenal entities in which all people unquestioningly seem to believe.

One is "estranged" from the way which others see the world — because one does not feel a part of it, — because one has developed the insight to know that one does not have any existence in such a world of delusional phenomena and one develops disenchantment and detachment from the senses and mental and external objects. One becomes "estranged" from any view of personal self in the world.

We might mention, also, the little-known fact that Bhikkhu Nanamoli had also followed a keen interest in existentialism, which was the prevailing contemporary philosophy of his day, and he had read Jean Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* in the original French language version as well as being familiar with the works of Heidegger and Husserl, so when he uses the word "estrangement" in this way, he may quite-well also have had, (consciously or unconsciously), his familiarity with epistemology, existential philosophy, and phenomenology somewhere in the back of his head.]

## Nanamoli Thera's Notes

### First Sutta

*Thus I Heard:* Words spoken by Ananda Thera at the First Council when all the Discourses were recited, three months after the Buddha's *Parinibbana*.

*Perfect One:* The Pali word *Tathagata* has several alternative explanations, including *tatha agato* ("thus come," i.e., by the way followed by all Buddhas) *tatha gato* ("thus

gone," i.e., to the discovery of the Four Truths), and *tathalakkhanam agato* ("come to the characteristic of the 'real' or the 'such,' namely the undeceptive truth").

*Nibbana*: Pali *nibbana*, Sanskrit *nirvana*. The meaning is "extinction," that is, of the "fires" of lust, hate, and delusion, or, more briefly, of craving and ignorance, and so *nibbana* is a name for the third Truth as liberation. The word is made up of the prefix *nir* (not) and *vana* (effort of blowing; figuratively, craving); probably the origin was a smith's fire, which goes out or becomes extinguished (*nibbayati*) if no longer blown on by the bellows; but the simile most used is that of a lamp's extinguishment (*nibbana*) through exhaustion of wick and oil.

*Noble Eightfold Path*: The members of the path are defined in the *Maha-satipatthana Sutta* and elsewhere as follows:

*Right View* of the Four Truths;

*Right Intention* governed by renunciation (non-sensuality), non-ill-will, and non-cruelty (harmlessness);

*Right Speech* in abstention from lying, slander, abuse and gossip;

*Right Action* in abstention from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct;

*Right Livelihood* for bhikkhus as that allowed by the Rules of the Discipline, and for laymen as avoidance of trading in weapons, living beings, meat, intoxicants, and poisons (AN V);

*Right Effort* to avoid un-arisen and to abandon arisen evil, and to arouse un-arisen and to develop arisen good;

*Right Mindfulness* of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as given in the *Maha-satipatthana Sutta* — that is, contemplation of the body as a body, of feelings as feelings, of states of consciousness as states of consciousness, and of ideas as ideas;

*Right Concentration* as (any of) the four *jhana* -meditations.

Collectively the first two members are called Understanding (*pañña*), the next three Virtue (*sila*), and the last three Concentration (*samadhi*). The Noble Eightfold Path is developed in four progressive stages, namely those of stream-entry (where wrong view ritualism and doubt are ended), once-return (where sensuality and ill will are weakened), non-return (where these two are ended) and Arahathship (where lust for form, lust for the formless, conceit, agitation and ignorance are ended), this being the end of craving which causes suffering.

*Suffering*: the Pali word *dukkha*, made up of *dur* (bad, unsatisfactory) and *kha* (state,"-ness") extends its meaning from the actual suffering present in physical pain or mental grief to any unwelcome state of insecurity, no matter how vague.

*Truth*: Pali *sacca* (compare Sanskrit *satya*), from the root "sa" (to be there to be existent, to have reality, etc.) and so literally a "there-is-ness" in the sense of a state

that, unlike a mirage, does not deceive or disappoint. The common sense use of truth is by no means consistent, and the word and the notion must therefore be handled with some care, taking it here only as treated by the Buddha.

As to individual philosophers' and divines' individual factional truths — that is to say, "The world is eternal" or "The world is not eternal"; or "The world is finite or the world is infinite"; "The soul is what the body is" or "The soul is one, the body is another"; "After death a Perfect One is" or "After death a Perfect One is not" or "After death a Perfect One both is and is not" or "After death a Perfect One neither is nor is not" — when a bhikkhu has cast off all of these [factional truths], has renounced and rejected, banished, abandoned, and relinquished them all, he thus becomes one who has cast-off all factional truths.

— AN 4.38

But how is truth to be found which is not factional?

There are five ideas that ripen here and now in two ways. What five? — Faith, preference, hearsay-learning, arguing upon evidence, and liking through pondering a view. Now something may have faith well placed in it and yet be hollow, empty, and false; and again something may have no faith placed in it and yet be factual, true, and no other than it seems; and so with preference and the rest. If a man has faith, then he guards truth when he says, "My faith is thus," but on that account draws no unreserved conclusion, "Only this is true, the other is wrong." In this way he guards the truth; but there is as yet no discovery of truth. And so with preference and the rest.

How is truth discovered? Here a bhikkhu lives near some village or town. Then a householder or his son goes to him in order to test him in three kinds of ideas, in ideas provocative of greed, of hate, and of delusion, wondering, "Are there in this venerable one any such ideas, whereby his mind being obsessed he might not knowing, say 'I know,' unseeing, say 'I see,' or to get others to do likewise, which would be long for their harm and suffering?"

While thus testing him he comes to find that there are no such ideas in him, and he finds that, "The bodily and verbal behavior of that venerable one are not those of one affected by lust or hate or delusion. But the True Idea that this venerable one teaches is profound, hard to see and discover; yet it is the most peaceful and superior of all, out of reach of logical ratiocination, subtle, for the wise to experience; such a True Idea cannot be taught by one affected by lust or hate or delusion."

It is as soon as by testing him, he comes to see that he is purified from ideas provocative of lust, hate, and delusion, that he then plants his faith [confidence] in him. When he visits him he respects him, when he respects him he gives ear, one who gives ear hears the True Idea, he remembers it, he investigates the meaning of the ideas remembered. When he does that he acquires a preference by pondering the ideas. That produces interest.

One interested is actively committed. So committed he makes a judgment. According to his judgment he exerts himself. When he exerts himself he comes to realize with

the body the ultimate truth, and he sees it by the penetrating of it with understanding. That is how there is discovery of truth. But there is as yet no final arrival at truth. How is truth finally arrived at? Final arrival at truth is the repetition, the keeping in being, the “development,” of those same ideas. That is how there is final arrival at truth.”

— [MN 95](#) (abbreviated)

This undeceptive truth so arrived at is the Four Noble Truths, of which it is said:

These four noble truths are what is real, [and] not unreal, not other (than they seem), that is why they are called Noble Truths.

— Sacca-Samyutta

Besides this essential static unity of the four truths as undeceptiveness, the dynamic structure of the transfiguration which they operate in combination is expressed as follows:

Who sees suffering sees also the origin of suffering and the cessation of suffering and the way leading to cessation of suffering (and whichever of the four truths he sees, he sees the three therewith).

— Sacca Samyutta

and:

Of these four noble truths, there is noble truth to be diagnosed, there is noble truth to be abandoned, there is noble truth to be verified, and there is noble truth to be developed (kept in being).

— Sacca Samyutta

*Categories*: this represents the Pali word *khandha* (Sanskrit *skandha*), which is often rendered by "aggregate." The five are as given in the second Discourse. They are headings that comprise all that can be said to arise and that form the object of clinging. "The clinging is neither the same of these five categories which are its objects, nor is it something apart from them; it is will and lust in regard to these five categories of clinging's objects that is the clinging there." (MN 109) The five are respectively compared to a lump of froth, a bubble, a mirage, a coreless plantain-stem, and a conjuring trick.

*Clinging*: an unsatisfactory and inadequate, but accepted rendering for the Pali *upadana*. The word means literally "taking up" (*upa* plus *adana*; compare the Latin *assumere* from *ad* plus *sumere*.) By [this] first metaphor [it is meant that] it is used for the assumption and consumption that satisfies craving and produces existence. As such, it is the condition *sine qua non* for being. What is consumed (or assumed) is the

categories (q.v.). The word "clinging" has to represent this meaning. Clinging's ending is nibbana.

*Craving*: though the word *tanha* doubtless once meant "thirst" (compare Sanskrit *tr̥sna*) it is never used in Pali in that sense. With ignorance it is regarded as a basic factor in the continuity of existence. Craving draws creatures on through greed, and drives them on through hate, while ignorance prevents their seeing the truth of how things [really] are or where they are [actually] going. Denial is as much an activity of craving as assertion is. Denial maintains the denied.

*Cessation*: *nirodha*, meaning the cessation of suffering through the cessation of craving, is regardable as the removal of a poison, the curing of a disease, not as the mere denial of it opposed to the assertion of it, or the obstruction (*pativirodha*) of it in conflict with the favoring (*anurodha*) of it (see under *Craving*), since both assertion and denial confirm and maintain alike the basic idea or state that is required to be cured. Cessation, therefore, is not to be confounded with mere negativism or nihilism. "Any pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on the world is *gratification* [of an expectation, without actually seeing] that the world is impermanent, pain-haunted and inseparable from the idea of change is the *disappointment* in the world; the removal of desire and lust is the *cure* (the *escape*) in the world." (AN III) The cure or escape is Cessation: the Buddha would not claim awakening till he had diagnosed how these three things came to be.

*Knowing and seeing how things [actually] are*: the force of the Pali word *yathabhuta*, (literally how (it has) come to be, how (it) is, how (things) exist lies in the direct allusion to the absolutely relative conditionedness of all being. It is given specially thus: "Seeing 'such is form, such its origin, such its going out [ceasing]," and so with the other four categories.

*The Venerable Kondanna*: one of the five bhikkhus. See Introduction.

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## Second Sutta

*Form*: Pali *rūpa* (what appears, appearance). As the first of five categories (q.v.) it is defined in terms of the four Great entities, namely earth (hardness), water (cohesion), fire (temperature), and air (distension and motion), along with the negative aspect of space (what does not appear), from all of which are derived the secondary phenomena such as persons, features, shapes, etc. These are regarded as secondary because while form can appear without any of them they cannot appear without form. It is also defined as "that which is being worn-away" (*rūppati*), thus underlining its general characteristics of instability.

*Not-Self*: Together with the four truths, this is taught only by Buddhas. *Anatta* (not-self) is shown as a general characteristic without exception.

The characteristic of impermanence does not become apparent because, when rise and fall are not given attention, it is concealed by [the impression of] continuity; the characteristic of pain does not become apparent because, when continuous oppression is not given attention, it is concealed by the postures (changing from one posture to another, waking and sleeping); the characteristic of not-self does not become apparent because, when resolution into the various elements (that compose whatever is) is not given attention, it is concealed by compactness.

— Visuddhimagga Ch. XXI

Self-identification and hunger for permanence and bliss form the principal manifestations of craving, guided by view that is wrong because it is not in conformity with undeceptive truth. When confronted with the contradictions and the impossibility of self-identification with any of the five Categories of Clinging's objects (q.v.) craving seeks to satisfy this need by imagining a soul (individual or universal); but since no such soul, however conceived, can escape falling within the five Categories of Clinging's objects, this solution is always foredoomed to failure. Similarly any attempt to identify self with nibbana must always fail for the same reason. Nibbana conceived as identical (with self) or (self) as apart from it (emanence) or inside it (immanence), or nibbana conceived as "mine" is misconceived. (MN 1). This does not prevent a Perfect One from using the speech that is current in the world in order to communicate, though he does so without misapprehending it, as is shown in the *Dhammapada*:

Self is savior of self;  
what other savior could there be?  
For only with (one-) self well tamed  
one finds the savior, hard to find.

Only by self is evil done,  
self born and given being by self,  
oppressing him who knowledge lacks  
as grinding diamond does the stone.

— Dhammapada Verses 160-1

Similarly with the expression "in oneself" (*ajjhattam*) in the Second Discourse, this is simply a convenient convention for the focus of the individual viewpoint, not to be misapprehended. A bhikkhu heard the Buddha saying, as in the Second Discourse here, that the five Categories are "not mine," etc., and he wondered; "So it seems form is not-self; feeling, perception, determinations, and consciousness are not-self. What self, then, will the action done by the not-self affect?" He was severely rebuked by the Buddha for forgetting the conditionedness of all arisen things. (MN 109) "It is impossible that anyone with right view should see any idea as self." (MN 115) and "Whatever philosophers and divines see self in its various forms, they see only the five Categories, or one or other of them." (SN 22.47)

*Feeling: (vedana)* this is always confined strictly to the affective feelings of (bodily or mental) pleasure and pain with the normally ignored neutral feeling of "neither-pain-nor pleasure." These can be subdivided in various ways.

*Perception: (sañña)* means simply recognition.

*Determinations:* a great many different renderings of this term are current, the next best of which is certainly "formations." The Pali word *sankhara* (Sanskrit *samskasa*) means literally "a construction," and is derived from the prefix *sam* (con) plus the verb *karoti* (to do, to make); compare the Latin *conficere* from *con* plus *facere* (to do), which gives the French *confection* (a construction). The Sanskrit means ritual acts with the purpose of bringing about good rebirth. As used in Pali by the Buddha it covers any aspects having to do with action, willing, making, planning, using, choice, etc. (anything teleological); and 'contact' (q.v.) is often placed at the head of lists defining it. Otherwise defined as bodily, verbal, and mental action.

Consciousness: (*viññana*) is here the bare "being conscious" left for consideration when the other four categories have been dealt with. It is only describable in individual plurality in terms of the other four Categories, as fire is individualized only by the fuel it burns (see MN 38 & 109). Otherwise it is regardable as an infiniteness (MN 111) dependent upon the contemplation of it as such. It is only impermanent, etc., because however it arises, it can only do so in dependence on the other Categories, that is, on conditions themselves impermanent, painful and not-self. It never arises unless accompanied by co-nascent *perception* (q.v.) and *feeling* (q.v.). It has six "doors" (see under Eye and Mind) for cognizing its objective fields, but no more.

*Estrangement:* the Pali noun *nibbida* and its verb *nibbindati* are made up of the prefix *nir* in its negative sense of "out," and the root *vid* (to find, to feel, to know intimately). *Nibbada* is thus a finding-out. What is thus found-out is the intimate hidden contradictoriness in any kind of self-identification based in any way on these things (and there is no way of determining self-identification apart from them — see under Not-Self). Elsewhere the Buddha says:

“Whatever there is there of form, feeling, perception, determinations, or consciousness, such ideas he sees as impermanent, as subject to pain, as a sickness, as a tumor, as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as an alienation, as a disintegration, as a void, as not-self. He averts his heart from those ideas, and for the most peaceful, the supreme goal, he turns his heart to the deathless element, that is to say, the stilling of all determinations, the relinquishment of all substance, the exhaustion of craving, the fading of passion, cessation, extinction.

— MN 64

The "stuff" of life can also be seen thus. Normally the discovery of a contradiction is for the unliberated mind a disagreeable one. Several courses are then open. It can refuse to face it, pretending to itself to the point of full persuasion and belief that no contradiction is there; or one side of the contradiction may be unilaterally affirmed and the other repressed and forgotten; or a temporary compromise may be found (all

of which expedients are haunted by insecurity); or else the contradiction may be faced in its truth and made the basis for a movement towards liberation.

So too, on finding estrangement thus, two main courses are open: either the search, leaving "craving for self-identification" intact, can be continued for sops to allay the symptoms of the sickness; or else a movement can be started in the direction of a cure for the underlying sickness of craving, and liberation from the everlasting hunt for palliatives, whether for oneself or others. In this sense alone, "Self protection is the protection of others, and protection of others self-protection" (*Satipatthana Samyutta*).

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### Third Sutta

*Eye*, etc.: [means] the six, beginning with the eye and ending with the mind (q.v.), are called the six "Bases for Contact (see Contact) in oneself," and are also known as the six "Doors" of perception. Their corresponding objects are called "external bases," ("sense-organ" is both too material and too objective), since the emphasis here is on the subjective faculty of *seeing*, etc., not the associated piece of flesh *seen* in someone else or in the looking-glass, which, in so far as it is visible, is not "seeing" but "form" as the "external" object of the seeing "eye in oneself," and insofar as it is tangible is the object of the body-base in oneself, and insofar as it is apprehended as a "bodily feature" is the object of the mind-base in oneself. Here the eye should be taken simply as the perspective-pointing-inward-to-a-center in the otherwise uncoordinated visual field consisting of colors, which makes them cognizable by eye-consciousness, and which is misconceivable as "I." The six Bases in Oneself are compared to an empty village, and the six External Bases to village-raiding robbers.

*Forms*: the first of the six External Bases, respective objective fields or objects of the six Bases in Oneself (see Eye). The Pali word *rupa* is used for the eye's object as for the first of the five Categories, but here in the plural. Colors, the basis for the visual perspective of the eye (q.v), are intended, primarily (see also under FORM above).

*Contact*: the Pali word *phassa* comes from the verb *phusati* (to touch, sometimes used in the sense of to arrive at, or to realize), from which also comes the word *photthabba* (tangible, the object of the Fifth Base in oneself, namely, body-sensitivity). But here it is generalized to mean contact in the sense of presence of object to subject, or presence of cognized to consciousness, in all forms of consciousness. It is defined as follows: "Eye-consciousness arises dependent on eye and on forms; the coincidence of the three is contact (presence), and likewise in the cases of the ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. Failing it, no knowledge, no consciousness of any sort whatever, can arise at all." This fundamental idea is sometimes placed at the head of lists of things defining Determinations (q.v.).

*Body*: the Pali word *kaya* is used both for the physical body and for any group, as the English word "body" is. In Pali it is also used in the sense (a) for the physical frame, namely "this body with its consciousness" in a general sense, sometimes called "old action," and then it forms the subject of body contemplation as set forth in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the aim of which is to analyze this "conglomeration" into its motley constituents. Or else it is used in a strict sense, as here, namely (b) that "door"

of the subjective body-sensitivity or tactile sense, the perspective-pointing-inwards-to-a-center in the otherwise uncoordinated tactile field of tangibles consisting of the hard, the hot-or-cold, and the distended-and-movable (see also under Eye).

*Mind*: the Pali word *mano* belongs to the root meaning to measure, to compare, to coordinate. Here it is intended as that special "door" in which the five kinds of consciousness arising in the other five doors (see under Eye), combine themselves with their objective fields into a unitive *perspective-pointing-inwards-to-a-center*, together with certain objects apprehendable in this mind-door, such as infiniteness of space, etc. (and names, fictions, etc.). Whatever is cognized in this door (see under Consciousness) is cognized as an *idea* (q.v.). And in the presence (with the contact) of ignorance (of the four truths) it is misconceived as "I." It is thus the fusing of this heterogeneous stuff of experience into a coherent pattern, when it also has the function of giving temporal succession and flow to that pattern by its presenting all ideas for cognition as "preceded."

In the *Abhidhamma*, but not in the *Suttas*, "the (material) form which is the support for the mind" is mentioned (implying perhaps the whole "body with its consciousness"), but not further specified. This would place mind on a somewhat similar basis to the eye-seeing, as meant here in its relation to the objective piece of flesh (see under Eye). Later notions coupled it with the heart. Now fashion identifies it with the brain; but such identifications are not easy to justify unilaterally; and if they in any way depend upon a prior and always philosophically questionable assumption of a separate body-substance and a mind-substance, they will find no footing in the Buddha's teaching where substances are not assumed.

*Mind-Consciousness*: if it is remarked that each of the six pairs of Bases, the five consisting of eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body, being coordinated by mind, are open to any one's self-inspection; and that consciousness is considered here as arising dependently upon each of these six pairs of Bases and in no other way whatsoever (since no other description rejecting all six is possible without self-contradiction); then, this notion of mind-consciousness should present no special difficulty.

*Idea*: the word *dhamma* is gerundive from the verb *dharati* (to carry, to remember), thus it means literally a "carryable, a rememberable." In this context of the six pairs of Bases it means the rememberables which form the mind's special object; as distinct from the forms seen only with the eye, the sounds heard with the ear, the odors smelt with the nose, the flavors tasted with the tongue, and the tangibles touched with the body, ideas are what are apprehended through the mind-door (see under Eye, Forms and Mind, and also Contact). These six cover all that can be known. But while the first (see FORMS) are uncoordinated *between themselves* and have no direct access to each other, in the mind-door the five find a common denominator and are given a coordinating perspective, together with the mind's own special objects. So the *idea* as a rememberable, is the aspect of the known apprehended by the mind, whether coordinating the five kinds of consciousness, or apprehending the ideas peculiar to it (see Mind), or whether apprehending its own special objects. This must include all the many other meanings of the word *dhamma* (Sanskrit *dharma*). Nibbana, in so far as it is knowable — describable — is an object of the mind, and is thus an idea. "All ideas are not-self." What is inherently unknowable has no place in the Teaching.

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## The Three Suttas and Their Relationship

The first of these three discourses sets out the vision of the truth peculiar to Buddhas, with its foundation of Suffering ("I teach only suffering, and the liberation from suffering").

The second, then, takes the five Categories given in the definition of Suffering in the first, and it shows how, in this comprehensive analysis every component can be diagnosed rightly, that is to say in conformity with truth.

It is this treatment that elicits the characteristic of Not-self. The two characteristics of Impermanence and Suffering in the world were well recognized in ancient Indian philosophies and have never been peculiar to Buddhism. This exposure of the inherent contradiction in the very nature of the idea of self-identity, to which craving cleaves with the would-be self-preserving stranglehold of a drowning-man upon his rescuer, is here made the very basis for the movement to liberation.

Craving is cured through coming to understand how 'things are,' while truth is being guarded (see under *Truth* above). The consequent fading of lust is brought about by this discovery of truth, and the understanding 'that there is no more of this beyond' is the result of the final arrival at Truth by keeping it in being through development.

In the third discourse the very same ground is gone over but described in different terms. The comprehensive analysis in terms of the five categories, with their general rather than individual emphasis, is replaced by the equally comprehensive and complementary analysis in terms of the six pairs of Bases, which analyze the individual viewpoint, without which no consciousness can arise. And instead of the dispassionate term "Not-self," everything that could possibly be identified as self is, without mentioning the term, presented to the same effect in the colors of a conflagration of passion behind a mirage of deception. Only a Buddha "whose heart is cooled by compassion" can have the courage to venture so far in the search for truth and discover, thereby, the true state of peace.

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## Questions

Is not seeking one's own salvation a selfish aim?

If the aim prescribed were a heavenly personal existence forever with self-preservation (whether through selfishness as such, or disguised as altruism), then the answer could hardly but be, "Yes." But with the aim as the removal of self-insistence in every form (not excluding ultimately self-denial, which like any negation, is just another affirmation of the basic idea so strenuously denied) — the cure of the infectious sickness that leads to untold suffering — does the question arise at all? But even granting that it did, would not the arahant disciple display, after the Buddha, the highest altruism by showing

how the aspiration to health is not a deception, since by his success he bears witness that it can be achieved and that no one is forever excluded from following his example?

But, this description in terms of suffering, is it not pessimistic?

Is it not rather the very reverse? For true optimism is surely shown by having the courage and energy to see how things are, and where liberation lies; and would it not be true pessimism to be satisfied to try and make existence out to be pleasanter or safer, and liberation easier, than is in conformity with the truth? Must not true liberation lie beyond the dialectic of pessimism and optimism, beyond alternatives of selfishness and altruism, as Truth (not factional truths) lies beyond that of being and non-being?

Does not the teaching of "Not-Self" imply that there is in fact no action; that, for instance, there are no living beings to kill?

The answer is certainly, "No." The reasons would be too lengthy to go into here in detail. But it is said by the Buddha:

“The Buddhas in the past, accomplished and fully-awakened, those the Blessed Ones maintained the efficacy of action and of certain action to be done, and so will those do in the future, and so do I now.”

— AN 3.136

Thus ends Nanamoli's discourse on the three Cardinal Suttas.

So far, our understanding of the *Aditta Sutta*, in the above readings, seems to have depended, one way or another, on the way we define the Pali word, “*nibbida*” which is translated sometimes as ‘disgust,’ or ‘aversion’ or ‘delusion’ or, sometimes, even as ‘estrangement,’ and, we, especially at first, become somewhat perplexed — especially if we have been expecting an exact word-for-word translation, in which the renderings of all translators would be the exactly the same — but in translation of literary texts, it doesn't work that way, especially with ancient texts which use figures of speech, in the way which the Buddha does which often work on several levels at once in the original language, for example, but can only be transliterated into another language by losing some of the original sense and compromising some of the implications of meaning. In the following text below, we shall look at this problem as seen through the eyes of Andrew Olendzki in an informal but useful exposition to be found in:

**Buddhadharma**  
THE PRACTITIONER'S QUARTERLY

## “Nibbida”

As defined by Andrew Olendzki

So there you are, happily reading the primary texts of early Buddhism in order to better understand the essential teachings of the Buddha.

You get to the part that talks about a person practicing in accordance with the dhamma—knowing things directly as they really are and seeing what is impermanent as impermanent with right view.

Your head is nodding in affirmation, “Yes, that’s me all right.” Then all of a sudden you get to the next sentence: “Therefore, one should abide in the *utter disgust* for the aggregates” <sup>[1]</sup> (Woodward’s translation).

“Wait a minute. What’s up with that?” You think there must be something wrong here. How can the intimate awareness of moment-to-moment phenomena, the opening to states just as they are, lead to such a response? We all know the monks and nuns are encouraged to contemplate death, the disintegration of the body in cemeteries, and other such monastic things. But surely a lay Buddhist vipassana practitioner (for example, expects he deserves)] a more positive outlook on life from all this mindful, conscious awareness.

“It’s probably just one of those archaic translations,” you think, and look up the passage in another, more modern, translation. But there it is again: “When a bhikkhu is practicing in accordance with the dhamma, he should dwell engrossed in *revulsion* towards the aggregates” (Bodhi). Checking a third translation yields the phrase “*turns away from*” (Horner). That’s better, at least, and perhaps offers a glimmer of how the term might be pointing to something more profound than merely an aversive reaction. And yet another translation finally points you in a whole new direction: “When one sees it thus as it actually is with proper wisdom, one becomes *disenchanted* with the aggregates.” (Nanamoli).

“What *is* this word, anyway?” you wonder. A little rummaging around in the footnotes and glossaries yields the information that the word being translated as “utter disgust” and “revulsion” is the Pali word *nibbida*. The word is derived from the prefix *nis-* (“without”) and the verbal root *vindati* (“to find”), and so, most literally, means something like “without finding.” So how do we get from “without finding” to “disgust”?

There is a story in the texts that usefully illustrates the meaning of this important term. A dog stumbles across a bone that has been exposed to the elements for many months and has been therefore bleached of any residual flesh or marrow.

The dog gnaws on it for some time before he finally determines that he is “not finding” any satisfaction in the bone, and he thus turns away from it in disgust.

It is not that the bone is intrinsically disgusting; it is rather the case that the dog’s raging desire for meat just will not be satisfied by the bone.

He is enchanted by the prospect of gratification as he furiously scrapes away at the bone, but when he finally wakes-up to the truth that the bone is empty of anything that will offer him satisfaction, he becomes disenchanted and spits it out in disgust.

The Buddha uses this word at the high end [level] of his teaching. The novice meditator need not practice by regarding things as disgusting. It is not even that an advanced meditator will thereby become disenchanted with the home life and ‘get herself to a nunnery.’

But the Buddha is suggesting that a thorough investigation of all aspects of one’s experience, the sort of examination that can only be accomplished by intensive insight over an extended period of time, will eventually mature into a deep understanding of the unsatisfactory nature of the ‘conditioned’ world of ‘constructed’ experience.

Such an insight, like all Buddhist insights, is not so much a statement about the nature of the world *out there* as it is about the nature of our ‘construction’ [formulation] of a world *in here*.

As I understand the basic teachings of the Buddhist tradition, what is really *out there* is largely irrelevant—partly because we cannot accurately know it, partly because speculating about it pulls us off course, and partly because there is plenty to deal with once the sense data has entered into subjective view by coming into contact with sensory and mental phenomena.

The objects of experience are simply “such as they are.” It is the primal need to appropriate these objects for our own selfish purposes that needs to be healed by this penetrative wisdom.

This general teaching about turning away from the “external” world, or about finally realizing that we will perpetually “not find” the nutrients we seek in the bleached bones of sensory objects, or about waking from the enchantment cast upon us by a primordial delusion, is not unique to the early Buddhist tradition.

The same thought seems to be conveyed in that consummate Mahayana and Zen text, the *Lankavatara Sutra*. In the introduction to his translation of this text, D.T. Suzuki brings special attention to what he calls an important psychological event of “turning back” from the world: “Technically, it is a spiritual change or transformation which takes place in the mind, especially suddenly, and I have called it ‘revulsion.’”

The moral of the story is that it is worth investigating the language one encounters in Buddhist texts—especially the meaning of key technical words. The understanding of *nibbida* that lies on the near side [lower, mundane level] of such investigation (turning away in utter disgust from the revolting world) is very different from the meaning that lies on the far side [higher level] deeply understanding the conditioned nature of [mere mentally] constructed experience, thereby allowing a stance of non-attachment to all phenomena).

("A 'Perfect One' is one who shows the way." — MN 70)

Now let the discourses speak for themselves. Their incalculable strength lies in their simplicity, and in their actuality. The profound truth is there, discoverable even through the misty medium of translation!

[1] From Woodward's translation of *Samyutta Nikaya* 22:39, published in *The Book of the Kindred Sayings, Part III* (Pali Text Society, 1975).

With thanks for the above quotation to the *Buddhadharma's Practitioner's Quarterly*.

[Editor's note: The above text has been edited slightly to bring a few of Olendzki's informal, everyday expressions into line with the more formal tone and tenor and text of this book as a whole.]

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In the conclusion, we may end the exposition with two apt comparisons which should help illustrate the meaning of our textual commentary on the Fire Sutta as a whole:

One is an analogy of the man in a burning house. The Buddha sometimes used the analogy of the 'house' to represent the mind-body. What would you do if your house were on fire and burning?

The immediate and apparent answer to the question is to perceive the danger with a sense of urgency and get out of there as fast as you can. So, if the burning house stands for the mind-body which is, figuratively speaking, burning with worldly desire and craving, one should escape [through practice] from the dangers of bodily attachment and mental imaginings, striving with a sense of urgency, for the sake of one's own safety.

A more subtle answer would be that since, obviously, you cannot just run out of your body the moment you begin to sense the immanent dangers of being mentally consumed by burning human desires, you can learn to begin to quench the fires of the mind-body, heedfully with a sense of urgency, [the moment you see them on the point of arising], for the sake of insuring mental-physical security, comfort and contentment, thereby leading to a growing sense of peace and mind development (bhavana), which, in turn, may lead towards a higher state of sublime abiding.

The second and final analogy hinges on the question: "What should a man do when he notes that his turban is on fire?" This may seem like a comical image, at first, but, just as we would not want anybody else to get burnt through having his head-on-fire, so we should be careful to protect ourselves from allowing our heads to become enflamed by burning fires of desires in, one way or another.

This image might seem ironically funny at first, if we are picturing other persons imaginatively, but what would you do? What does this comparison mean for you? If the analogy of the 'turban' is taken, figuratively speaking, as burning bodily-mental desires, which through self-centered desires and needs and unheedful thinking, have heated-up to the point of 'setting one's head on fire,' the answer is certainly not to

start running as fast as you can, because that would cause the flames of fire to burn even hotter.

The proper answer is to slow down to the point of cooling your desires and then gradually one-by-one eliminating them in the pursuit of purity of mind.

We may end with the observation that we all have an aversion to fire, and we are heedful and take security measures not to get caught in a fire, but the tragedy of the human comedy is that most of us seem [for unknown reasons] leave the doors of our minds wide open and unprotected so that anything can easily get in and set our house on fire.

If we were more careful about our mental security, we would work to guard the doors of the mind-body more mindfully and heedfully.

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Thus ends this exposition.

## Appendix

Those who are still interested and have not quite yet had their fill may browse the appendix which follows for the sake of the additional information and references it may be found to contain. Once one picks up the scent, one may follow it on for as long as it takes to quench one's thirst for understanding:

### Notes from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia:

The *Ādittapariyāya Sutta* ([Pali](#), "Fire Sermon Discourse") or, more simply, *Āditta Sutta* is a discourse from the [Pali Canon](#), popularly known as the **Fire Sermon**.<sup>[1]</sup> In this discourse, the [Buddha](#) preaches about achieving liberation from [suffering](#) through detachment from the five senses and mind.

*In the Pali Canon, the Adittapariyaya Sutta is found in the [Samyutta Nikaya](#) ("Connected Collection," abbreviated as either "SN" or "S") and is designated by either "SN 35.28"<sup>[2]</sup> or "S iv 1.3.6"<sup>[3]</sup> or "S iv 19".<sup>[4]</sup> This discourse is also found in the Buddhist monastic code ([Vinaya](#)) at *Vin I 35*.<sup>[5]</sup> English speakers might be familiar with the name of this discourse due to [T. S. Eliot](#)'s entitling the third section of his celebrated poem, [The Waste Land](#), as "The Fire Sermon." In a footnote, Eliot states that this Buddhist discourse "corresponds in importance to the [Sermon on the Mount](#)."<sup>[6]</sup>*

### **Background**



Gayasisa or Brahmayoni hill, where Buddha taught the Fire Sermon.

In the [Vinaya](#), the Fire Sermon is the third discourse delivered by the Buddha (after the [Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta](#) and the [Anattalakkhana Sutta](#)), several months after his [enlightenment](#), on top of the [Gayasisa Hill](#), near [Gaya, India](#). He delivered it to a thousand newly converted [ascetics](#) who formerly practiced a sacred fire ritual (Pali: *aggihutta*; *Skt.*: *agnihotra*).<sup>[7]</sup>

The 5<sup>th</sup> c. [CE](#) post-[canonical](#) Pali [commentary](#), *Sāratthappakāsinī* (Spk.), attributed to [Buddhaghosa](#), draws a direct connection between the ascetics' prior practices and this discourse's main rhetorical device:

*Having led the thousand [bhikkhus](#) [monks] to [Gayā](#)'s Head, the Blessed One reflected, 'What kind of [Dhamma](#) talk would be suitable for them?' He then realized, 'In the past they worshipped the fire morning and evening. I will teach them that the twelve [sense bases](#) are burning and blazing. In this way they will be able to attain [arahantship](#).'<sup>[8]</sup>*

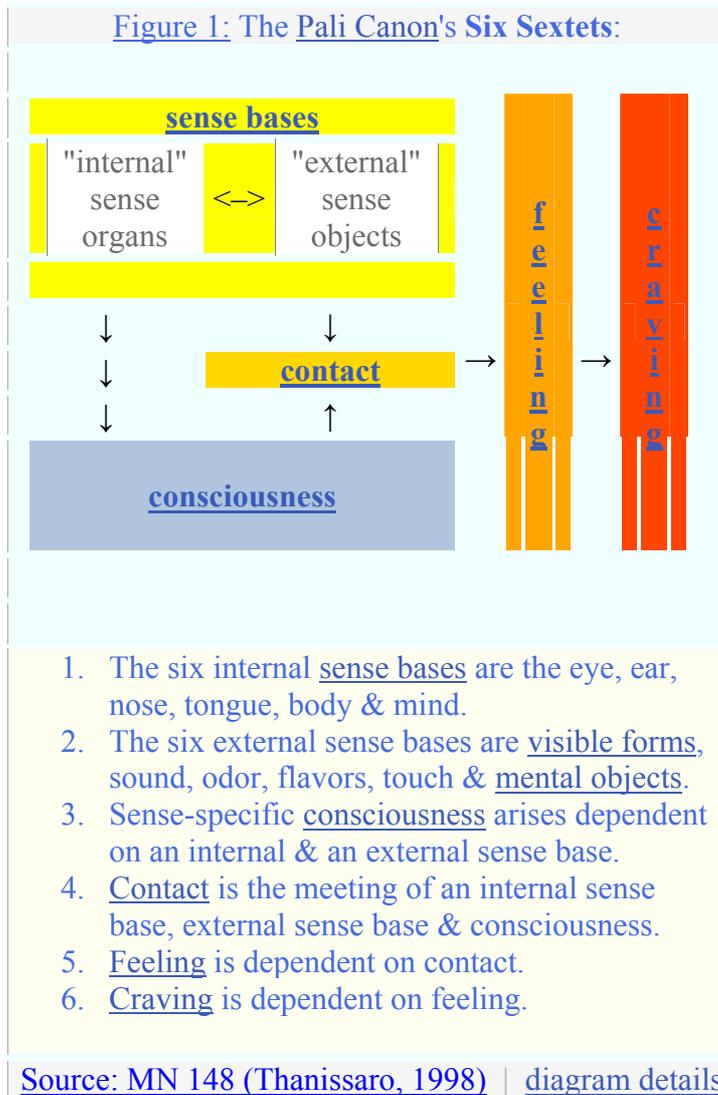
### **Text**

In this discourse, the Buddha describes the sense bases and resultant mental phenomena as "burning" with passion, aversion, delusion and [suffering](#). Seeing such, a [noble disciple](#) becomes disenchanted with, dispassionate toward and thus liberated from the senses bases, achieving arahantship. This is described in more detail below.<sup>[9]</sup>

After a prefatory paragraph identifying this discourse's location of deliverance ([Gaya](#)) and audience (a thousand monks or *bhikkhus*), the Buddha proclaims (represented here in English and Pali):

**"Bhikkhus, all is burning."**<sup>[10]</sup>

*Sabbam bhikkhave ādittam*<sup>[11]</sup>



The ensuing text reveals that "all" (*sabba*) refers to:

- the six *internal* sense bases (*ayatana*): eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind
- the six *external* sense bases: visible forms, sound, smells, tastes, touches and mental objects
- consciousness (*viññāna*) contingent on these sense bases
- the contact (*samphassa*) of a specific sense organ (such as the ear), its sense object (sound) and sense-specific consciousness.
- what is subsequently felt (*vedayita*): pleasure (*sukha*), pain (*dukkha*), or neither (*adukkhamasukham*).

By "burning" (*āditta*) is meant:

- the fire of passion (*rāgagginā*)
- the fire of aversion (*dosagginā*)
- the fire of delusion (*mohagginā*)
- the manifestations of suffering: birth, aging and death, sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses and despairs.<sup>[12]</sup>

According to the Buddha, a well-instructed noble disciple (*sutavā ariyasāvako*) sees this burning and thus becomes disenchanted (*nibbindati*) with the sense bases and their mental sequelae. The text then uses a formula found in dozens of discourses<sup>[13]</sup> to describe the manner in which such disenchantment leads to liberation from suffering:

"Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is fully released. With full release, there is the knowledge, 'Fully released.' He discerns that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.'" <sup>[14]</sup>	<i>Nibbindam virajjati virāgā vimuccati, vimuttasmim vimuttamiti ñānam hoti, khīnā jāti, vusitam brahmacariyam, katam karanīyam nāparam itthattāyāti pajānātī ti.</i> <sup>[15]</sup>
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A closing paragraph reports that, during this discourse, the thousand monks in attendance became liberated.

### ***Related canonical discourses***

While the central metaphor of burning combined with "the all" (sense bases, etc.) make this discourse unique in the [Pali Canon](#), its core message can be found throughout, condensed and embellished in a number of instructive ways.

### ***Andhabhūta/Addhabhūta Sutta (SN 35.29)***

The very next discourse listed in the [Samyutta Nikaya \(SN 35.29\)](#) is nearly identical with the Fire Sermon with the significant exception that, instead of the central metaphor of the senses being "aflame" (*āditta*), this next discourse uses a different metaphor.<sup>[16]</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi notes that different editions of the [Tipitaka](#) vary as to what this subsequent discourse's central metaphor is: [Sinhala](#) editions use the term *andhabhūta* — meaning "figuratively blinded" or "ignorant" — while the [Burmese](#) edition and commentary use *addhabhūta* — meaning "weighed down."<sup>[17]</sup>

Regardless which edition is referenced, both the Fire Sermon and this subsequent discourse, with their seemingly diametric similes of burning and oppressiveness, underline that the senses, their objects and associated mental impressions are unto

themselves beyond our complete control and are aversive; and, thus provide the escape of disenchantment, dispassion and release.

### ***Āditta Sutta* (SN 22.61)**

In this discourse, instead of describing the sense bases (*ayatana*) as being aflame, the Buddha describes the five aggregates (*khandha*) in this manner:

"Bhikkhus, form is burning, feeling is burning, perception is burning, volitional formations are burning, consciousness is burning. Seeing thus, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple experiences revulsion towards form ... feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness .... Through dispassion [this mind] is liberated...."<sup>[18]</sup>

### ***Kukkuḷa Sutta* (SN 22.136)**

Like the Fire Sermon, this discourse has a central metaphor related to fire — likening our physical and mental apparatus to hot embers (Pali: *kukkuḷa*) — and concludes with the well-instructed noble disciple becoming disenchanted with and dispassionate about and liberated from these burning constituents. Unlike the Fire Sermon, instead of using the sense bases and their mental sequelae as the basis for this burning and disenchantment, this discourse uses the five aggregates (*khandha*) for the underlying physical-mental framework.<sup>[19]</sup>

### ***Ādittapariyāya Sutta* (SN 35.235)**

Also entitled "Fire Sermon," this discourse cautions that it is better for an internal sense base (eye, ear, etc.) to be lacerated by a burning implement than for one to "grasp the sign" (*nimittaggāho*) of an external sense base (visible form, sound, etc.); for such grasping might lead to rebirth in a lower realm. Instead of grasping, the well-instructed noble disciple discriminates (*paṭisañcikkhati*) the impermanence of the internal sense base, external sense base, related consciousness and contact, and the resultant feeling. Such discrimination leads to liberation.<sup>[20]</sup>

### ***See also***

- [Ayatana](#) - includes description of "the All"
- [Dukkha](#) ("suffering")
- [Agnihotra](#) - type of fire worship previously performed by this discourse's monks according to the Vinaya
- [Gaya, India#Holy Sites in Gaya](#) - includes location where this discourse was reputedly delivered

### ***Notes***

1. <sup>^</sup> For instance, while the Sinhala SLTP edition refers to this discourse as the *Ādittapariyāyasuttam*, the Burmese CSCD edition refers to it as *Ādittasuttaṃ*. [Ñanamoli \(1981\)](#), [Thanissaro \(1993\)](#) and other English translators consistently refer to this (or mention its being referred to) as "The Fire Sermon."

2. <sup>^</sup> "SN 35.28" denotes that this discourse is the twenty-eighth discourse in the 35<sup>th</sup> group (*Saḷāyatanaśamyutta*) in the Samyutta Nikaya. (Note that in the Sri Lankan edition of the Canon, the *Saḷāyatanaśamyutta* is the 34<sup>th</sup> group.) As an example, [Thanissaro \(1993\)](#) uses this designation.
3. <sup>^</sup> "S iv 1.3.6" denotes that this is the sixth discourse in third group of ten discourses (*Sabbavaggo*) in the fourth book (*Catutthobhāgo*) in the Samyutta Nikaya. As an example, [La Trobe University \(n.d.\)](#) uses this designation.
4. <sup>^</sup> "S iv 19" denotes that, in the [Pali Text Society](#) edition of the Canon, this discourse starts on page 19 of the fourth volume of the Samyutta Nikaya.
5. <sup>^</sup> [La Trobe University \(n.d.\)](#), [Vinaya Pitaka](#), *Mahavagga*, [BJT p. 72](#); [Rhys Davids & Oldenberg \(1881\)](#), [the Mahavagga, First Khandhaka](#), ch. 21; [Bodhi \(2005\)](#), p. 449, *n.* 38; and, [Gombrich \(1990\)](#), p. 16.
6. <sup>^</sup> [Allison et al. \(1975\)](#), p. 1042 *n.* 9. Eliot concludes "The Fire Sermon" section with: "Burning burning burning burning / O Lord Thou pluckest me out / O Lord Thou pluckest // burning" and associates the identified footnote with the first line represented here ("Burning burning....").
7. <sup>^</sup> [Rhys Davids & Oldenberg \(1881\)](#), [the Mahavagga, First Khandhaka](#), chs. 15 - 21; [Gombrich \(1990\)](#), p. 16; [Ñānamoli \(1981\)](#), "Introduction"; and, [La Trobe University \(n.d.\)](#), [Vinaya Pitaka](#), *Mahavagga*, [BJT pp. 70ff.](#)
8. <sup>^</sup> [Bodhi \(2000\)](#), p. 1401, *n.* 13.
9. <sup>^</sup> English based on [Ñānamoli \(1981\)](#) and [Thanissaro \(1993\)](#). Pali based on [La Trobe University \(n.d.\)](#), [Samyutta Nikaya](#), book 4, [BJT pp. 38 - 42](#).
10. <sup>^</sup> [Ñānamoli \(1981\)](#).
11. <sup>^</sup> [La Trobe University \(n.d.\)](#), [Samyutta Nikaya, Book iv, BJT p. 38](#) (retrieved 28 Sep 2007).

<sup>^</sup> While this discourse does not explicitly use the word *dukkha* to designate what is here called "suffering" (and, in fact, the word *dukkha* is used in the specific physical notion of "pain"), nonetheless the frequently repeated formula for the Buddhist technical notion of *dukkha* is repeatedly stated, translated here as "birth, aging and death, sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses and despairs" (Pali: *jātiyā jarāmaraṇena, sokehi paridevehi dukkhehi domanassehi upāyāsehi*).

12. <sup>^</sup> For instance, using the search engine at [La Trobe University \(n.d.\)](#), this formulaic phrase (with varying punctuation) was found in [MN 11](#), [MN 147](#), [SN 12.61](#), [SN 22.79](#), [SN 22.95](#), [SN 22.136](#), [SN 35.28](#), [SN 35.29](#), [SN 35.60](#), [SN 35.73](#), [SN 35.74](#), etc.
13. <sup>^</sup> [Thanissaro \(1993\)](#).
14. <sup>^</sup> [La Trobe University \(n.d.\)](#), [Samyutta Nikaya, Book iv, BJT p. 42](#) (retrieved 28 Sep 2007).
15. <sup>^</sup> For instance, see [Bodhi \(2000\)](#), p. 1144; [La Trobe University \(n.d.\)](#), [BJT p. 42](#); and, [Vipassana Research Institute \(n.d.\)](#), [Saḷāyatanaśamyuttaṃ](#). Beside the central metaphor, the Fire Sermon and the *Andhabhuta/Addhabuta Sutta* differ in terms of locale and in regards to whom is being addressed; additionally, the last paragraph in the Fire Sermon (regarding the congregation's gratification, delight and release) is not present in the subsequent discourse.
16. <sup>^</sup> [Bodhi \(2000\)](#), p. 1401, *n.* 14. Bodhi himself uses the Burmese edition as the basis for his own translation. The translation of *andhabhūta* here is based on [Rhys Davids & Stede \(1921-25\)](#), p. 49, entry for "[Andha.](#)" The translation of

- addhabhūta* is from Bodhi (2000), p. 1144. To compare the different editions, see the [Sinhala SLTP](#) and [Burmese CSCD](#).
17. <sup>^</sup> Bodhi (2000), pp. 904-5. Square brackets are included in the original. In an associated end note to this discourse (p. 1067, *n.* 94), Bodhi writes: "This [SN 22.61] is a compressed version of the fuller Āditta Sutta at [SN] **35:28** ...."
  18. <sup>^</sup> English based on Bodhi (2000), p. 976. Pali based on La Trobe University (n.d.), [SN iii, BJT p. 314](#).
  19. <sup>^</sup> Quoted English text from Bodhi (2000), pp. 1233-36. Bodhi translates this discourse's title as "The Exposition on Burning." Pali from Vipassana Research Institute (n.d.) at <http://www.tipitaka.org/romn/cscd/s0304m.mul0.xml>.

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