

Samyutta Nikaya – Selected Truths for Reflection

In reading the brief notes and summaries of the discourses in the Samyutta Nikaya on the Access to Insight website, in the article entitled "Samyutta Nikaya: The Grouped Discourses", I found myself wanting to capture the key thoughts (by excerpting small sections of the text) in order to reflect on them later and so better remember the truths I was reading. Then I thought perhaps others might enjoy reflecting on some of these truths as well, and so I share my notes as follows. The topics have been alphabetically arranged.

Abiding "Self": Questions that presuppose the existence of an abiding "self," are fundamentally invalid. There is folly in believing this fickle mind to be "self." Ideas about the self lead to worry. There can be no abiding self in any of the five aggregates that we tend to identify as "self." A person who incorrectly takes the five aggregates to be "self" is like a person swept away by a swift river, who grasps in vain at the passing trees and branches. The sense of "self" cannot be found anywhere within the realm of the senses.

Anger: What is your best response when someone is angry with you? Hint: if you offer some food to a guest, but the guest declines the offer, to whom does the food belong? Equally, forbearance is the best response to another's anger.

Attachment: The Buddha points out that attachment to things comes from paying more attention to the pleasure they give, than to the stress and pain (*dukkha*) they cause. By turning your attention to the *dukkha*, however, you can gain *release*. Cling to anything at all, and you are in bondage to Mara. What are the phenomena to which we cling? Answer: each one of the five aggregates.

Awakening: Awakening results from direct knowledge of the "fourfold round" with respect to the aggregates (i.e., knowledge of the aggregate, its origination, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation). The path leading out of samsara springs from contemplation of the Four Noble Truths. Awakening also comes about not by wishful thinking, but only through deliberate effort. The path of Dhamma is one with a definite goal — the abandoning of desire — which can only be attained by developing a strong desire to end desire.

Death: Sometimes it is said that the last moment of consciousness is all-important in determining one's rebirth, but there are suttas that show that well-developed virtues in the mind can override even a muddled mind-state at death.

Dependent co-arising: Applies in the development of right view. When dependent co-arising is clearly seen and understood, wrong views and confusion disappear. Seeing deeply into dependent co-arising leads to Awakening. The world arises and falls according to the law of dependent co-arising. (The causal chain includes an additional set of factors not present in the "standard" chain of dependent co-arising.)

Feelings: Sense-impressions give rise to feelings. Feelings rise and fall, like winds blowing across the skies. Feelings come and go, like house-guests. Therefore, recognize the impermanence of feelings. Know the origin of, danger in, and escape from feelings. Feelings must be understood in order to gain freedom from attachment to feelings. There are three feelings: Pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling, and neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling.

Freedom: In the Samyutta Nikaya, Ven. Maha Kaccana explains to a householder what it means to live as a monk, free of society, free of sensual passion, free of yearning, and free of quarreling. The Buddha also elaborates on his advice to "be an island unto yourself."

Happiness: There are many kinds of happiness that can be experienced through sustained practice. In other words, there are various grades of potential happiness and freedom, ranging from the worldly to the transcendent. We can either "feed" or "starve" the wholesome and unwholesome tendencies in the mind, according to how we apply our attention.

Human Realm: This human realm — neither too pleasurable nor too painful — is the best place to practice Dhamma. The Buddha's famous simile of the blind sea-turtle illustrates the precious rarity of this human birth. A fortunate rebirth is rare. Therefore: We have to practice!

Ignorance: Is the cause of wrong view, wrong resolve, wrong speech, etc., whereas clear knowing gives rise to right view and all the factors of the eightfold path.

Illness: The Buddha explains to the aging householder Nakulapita how one need not be sick in mind even though one may be sick in body.

Kamma: When I perform an action (*kamma*), am I the same person when I experience its results, or am I a different person? In the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha helps to clear up confused thinking on this. The results of "old" kamma (the actions we performed in the past) and "new" kamma (the ones we perform now) are both experienced in the present. Present experience cannot be described solely in terms of the results of past actions (kamma). However, the principles of kamma and rebirth are as inviolable as the law of gravity. Therefore, we need to choose our actions with care, lest we sink like a stone! Although one can never undo a past misdeed, there are ways one can mitigate its inevitable harmful results.

A Key Question: How can one tell when one is seeing things as they really are?

Life: How quickly life passes! Knowing this, how should we conduct our lives? The Samyutta Nikaya gives answers.

Meditation: Every meditator, from beginner to arahant, should contemplate the five aggregates (*khandha*). The Buddha explains how tranquillity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassana*) function together as a "swift pair of messengers" to guide the meditator onwards to Nibbana. Mindfulness leads to freedom from desire — and beyond. Success in meditation, however, calls for more than simply being mindful; there are specific skills that must be developed. Nevertheless, no matter how far along you are in your meditation practice, the basic principle is the same: you should develop and sustain mindfulness of breathing. The practice of concentration through mindfulness of breathing clarifies the underlying purpose of other meditation practices. The sustained practice of mindfulness of breathing (*anapanasati*) leads, by stages, to full Awakening.

Mental Faculties: The five mental faculties are: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment.

Metta: There is extraordinary power in *metta* (goodwill).

Sense-Doors: In the Samyutta Nikaya it shows how to guard the sense-doors – to be moderate in eating, and to remain steadfast in heedfulness. If we guard the senses wisely, as a tortoise guards against attack by withdrawing into the safety of its shell, we are safely out of Mara's reach.

Stream-entry: There are teachings that lead one to stream-entry. Conviction in, and understanding of, inconstancy of *the six senses* can lead to stream-entry. Conviction in, and understanding of, inconstancy of *sense objects* can lead to stream-entry. Conviction in, and understanding of, inconstancy of *sense consciousness* can lead to stream-entry. Etc. There is a way one can tell if one is a "learner" (*sekha*; one who has attained at least stream-entry, but not yet arahantship) or an arahant.

Suffering: There is suffering inherent in everything the body and mind depend upon for nourishment. The Buddha describes four factors to which the mind habitually clings. Those who succeed in abandoning passion for these "nutriments" can realize the cessation of birth, aging, and death.

One ought to think of how much suffering one totally puts behind oneself upon attaining the stream to Nibbana (this becomes good encouragement for putting some extra effort into the practice). When you encounter an unfortunate person, remember: you've been there, too. (When you encounter a fortunate person, remember: you've been there, too.) Which is greater, the tears (blood) you have shed in your long journey in samsara, or the water in the four great oceans? There are burdens we carry – and so we need to know how to cast them off. Our problem lies neither in the senses themselves nor in the objects to which the senses cling – suffering comes from the passion that arises in dependence on both.

Teachings: Be careful: there are many popular teachings nowadays that may sound good, but they're not necessarily consistent with the Buddha's teachings.

Ten suttas explain why it is worth abandoning desire that is associated with: (1) the six sense bases; (2) their objects; (3) consciousness; (4) contact; (5) feeling; (6) perception; (7) intentions; (8) craving; (9) the six elements (earth, liquid, fire, wind, space, and consciousness); and (10) the five aggregates.

The Aggregates: In the Samyutta Nikaya, we find how we define ourselves in terms of the aggregates, and how we don't have to do so. We should realize the voidness of the five aggregates. Not even the slightest trace of the aggregates is exempt from stress and suffering. We need to seek to penetrate the not-self nature of the five aggregates. We can ask ourselves: What are the phenomena to which we cling? Answer: Each one of the five aggregates.

Every meditator, from beginner to arahant, should contemplate the five aggregates (*khandha*). Since none of the five aggregates can arise on their own, independent of their objects, how can we identify any one of them as "self"?

The Buddha: In the Samyutta Nikaya, we find that the Buddha retells the story of how, on the eve of his Awakening, he re-discovered the long-forgotten laws of dependent co-arising and the Four Noble Truths. Also, a timeless teaching is: "He who sees Dhamma, sees me."

The Oneness of All Being: Is sometimes taught as a basic Buddhist principle, but a discourse in the Samyutta Nikaya shows that the Buddha himself rejected the idea. It is simply one of the extremes that he avoided by teaching dependent co-arising.

Understanding: True comprehension means the end of *passion*, *aversion*, and *delusion*.

Wisdom: One's inner wisdom and outward appearance are unrelated. The development of concentration leads to discernment. The Buddha, in the Samyutta Nikaya, recommends concentration practice as a way to develop discernment.

Source: "Samyutta Nikaya: The Grouped Discourses", edited by Access to Insight. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 21 December 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/index.html> .