

# Sutta Interpretation – Uddesa, Niddesa, Paṭiniddesa

Explanation of *dhamma* concepts in the *Tipiṭaka* comes under three categories: “*uddesa*, *niddesa*, *paṭiniddesa*.” One should not translate the *uddesa* version directly from Pāli to other languages.

## Word-by-Word Translations Lead to Confusion

1. Many *suttās* are in the “*uddesa*” or “utterance” form; see #2 below. The word-for-word translation of such *suttās* can lead to utter confusion. Keywords like *viññāṇa*, and *saṅkhāra* have different meanings depending on the context.

▪ Most *suttās* only give only the *uddesa* form of the *Paṭiloma* (reverse) *Paṭicca Samuppāda*, for example, “*avijjā nirodhā.. viññāṇa nirodho*.” If that is translated word-by-word as “**when ignorance ceases, . consciousness ceases,**” that leads to utter confusion. Did the Buddha lose consciousness upon attaining Enlightenment? Would an *Arahant* lose consciousness upon attaining *Arahanthood*? That is the danger of direct word-for-word translations! Not only that, those direct translations say sensory contacts, and *vedanā*, also stop arsing with the cessation of *avijjā*! See, for example, “[WebLink: suttacentral.net: Paṭiccasamuppāda Sutta \(SN 12.1\).](http://WebLink: suttacentral.net: Paṭiccasamuppāda Sutta (SN 12.1).)”

▪ Many terms in *Paṭicca Samuppāda* (*saṅkhāra*, *viññāṇa*, *phassa*, *vedana*) need to be explained in detail. Many online discussions illustrate the confusion: “[WebLink: dhammadownload.com: Do Arhats experience contact with their sixfold sense media? What about vedanā?](http://WebLink: dhammadownload.com: Do Arhats experience contact with their sixfold sense media? What about vedanā?)” “[WebLink: discourse.suttacentral.net: Cessation of DO?](http://WebLink: discourse.suttacentral.net: Cessation of DO?)” and “[WebLink: dhammadownload.com: Vedana](http://WebLink: dhammadownload.com: Vedana)” are just a few examples.

▪ I discussed that problem in “[Distortion of Pāli Keywords in Paṭicca Samuppāda.](http://Distortion of Pāli Keywords in Paṭicca Samuppāda.)”

## Dhamma Concepts Explained at Three Levels

2. Explanation of *dhamma* concepts in the *Tipiṭaka* comes under three categories: “*uddesa*, *niddesa*, *paṭiniddesa*.” A fundamental concept is first stated (“*uddesa*” or “utterance”). “*Niddesa*” is a “brief explanation”. Finally, “*paṭiniddesa*” explains in detail with examples to clarify complex or “knotty” points.

[*uddesa* : [fr. uddisati] -- 1. pointing out, setting forth, proposition, exposition, indication, programme M. III, 223 (u. uddiṭṭha) , 239 ; S. IV, 299 ; SnA 422. -- 2. explanation S. V, 110 sq. ; sa-uddesa (adj. ) with (the necessary) expln. , point by point, in detail, D. I, 13, 81 ; III, 111 ; A. III, 418 ; It. 99 ; Nd2 6171. -- 3. samaṇuddesa one marked as a Samaṇa, a novice (cp. sāmaṇera) D. I, 151 ; M. III, 128 ; A. IV, 343 ; uddesa-bhatta special or specified food Vin. I, 58 = 96, cp. II. 175, propounding, recitation, repetition.

*niddesa* : [m.] description; analytic explanation.]

▪ For example, “*ye dhammā hetuppabbavā. Tesaṃ hetuṃ tathāgato āha; Tesaṃca yo nirodho, Evaṃvādī mahāsamaṇo*” is the ***uddesa* version**.

▪In English, the *uddesa* version is: “Of those phenomena which arise from causes. Those causes have been taught by the *Tathāgata* (Buddha), And their cessation too – thus proclaims the Great Ascetic.”

▪The fundamental characteristics of “this world” state that everything arises due to causes. But that explanation is not enough to understand the embedded deep concepts. Upatissa (who later became Ven. Sāriputta) attained the *Sotāpanna* stage by hearing that *uddesa* version from Ven. Assaji. See “[Ye Dhammā Hetuppabhavā.. and Yam Kiñci Samudaya Dhammam..](#)”

3. Therefore, word-for-word translation is NOT enough to convey the teachings of the Buddha to an average person.

▪The next level of explanation is the “*niddesa*” version. A teacher must explain that “*dhammā*” here refers to the *kammic* energies created by the three root causes (*hetu*): *lobha*, *dosa*, and *moha*. Cessation of *avijjā* (ignorance of the Four Noble Truths) leads to eliminating those root causes and thus to *Nibbāna*.

▪Clarification of each term in *Paṭicca Samuppāda* (*avijjā*, *saṅkhāra*, *viññāna*, *nāmarūpa*,” leading to “*upādāna*, *bhava*, *jāti*, and suffering), requires long explanations with examples. That is the *paṭiniddesa* explanation.

4. Some sections of the *Tipiṭaka* have an explicit *niddesa* version. However, that is mainly in the Original commentaries that explain certain concepts in SOME detail.

▪For example, the correct *Ānāpānasati* and *Paṭicca Samuppāda* are discussed in detail in “[WebLink: suttacentral.net: Ānāpānassatikathā \(KN Ps 1.3\)](#),” and “[WebLink: suttacentral.net: Paṭiccasamuppādavibhaṅga \(Abhidhamma Vb 6\)](#).”

### ***Paṭiniddesa* (Detailed Explanation) in Commentaries and Discourses**

5. During the Buddha’s time, other *bhikkhus* explained each *sutta* in detail to audiences when they delivered discourses. That is the “*paṭiniddesa*” version. Especially after the *Buddha’s Parinibbāna*, many *Arahants* started composing “*Attakathā*” or commentaries on fundamental concepts. But a few were composed during the time of the Buddha. Of course, these were also composed in a way suitable for oral transmission and, thus, do not have lengthy explanations.

▪Three original early commentaries remain preserved in the *Tipiṭaka*: *Paṭisambhidhā Magga Prakarana*, *Nettipparakana*, and *Petaḥkopadesa*. Of these, the *Paṭisambhidhā Magga Prakarana* consists of the analyses by Ven. Sāriputta, one of the chief disciples of the Buddha, and the *Nettipparakana* by Ven. Mahā Kaccāyana. Thus we are lucky to have these three original commentaries still with us.

▪These three books contain “*niddesa/paṭiniddesa*” versions of many essential *suttā*, which describe the keywords/phrases in a given *sutta*. Other excellent commentaries have been lost; see “[Incorrect Theravada Interpretations – Historical Timeline](#)” and “[Buddhaghosa and Visuddhimagga – Historical Background](#).”

## Most People Today Need *Paṭiniddesa* (Detailed Explanation)

6. During the time of the Buddha, some could comprehend just the *uddesa* version. For example, Upatissa and Kolita (who became Ven. Sāriputta and Ven. Moggallāna later) became *Sotāpannas* upon hearing the verse, “*ye Dhamma hetupabbhavā....*”. They had done much in their past lives and needed “just a little push” to complete that understanding. They are called *ugghaṭitañña* or “persons with high wisdom.”

- And many could understand the *niddesa* version. Those were *vipañcitañña* and needed a bit more explanation to grasp the concepts. “[Ugghaṭitaññū Sutta \(AN 4.133\)](#)” discusses the four categories of persons — *ugghaṭitañña*, *vipañcitañña*, *neyya*, and *padaparama*.

- However, most people today are in the lower category of *neyya* and *padaparama*. They need detailed explanations (i.e., *paṭiniddesa*) to grasp a concept. They also belong to two groups. Those with *tihetuka paṭisandhi* (optimum births) can attain *magga phala* in this life. But those with *dvihetuka paṭisandhi* (inferior births) cannot achieve *magga phala* but can accrue merits to attain *magga phala* in future lives. Of course, there is no way for anyone to figure out (except for a Buddha) whether a particular person has a *tihetuka* or *dvihetuka paṭisandhi*.

- **It is essential to realize that those who are either *ugghaṭitañña* or *vipañcitañña* had been *neyya* and *padaparama* persons in previous lives.** They had strived to gain more wisdom and now benefitting from this life. Thus there is no point worrying about whether one is a *tihetuka* or *dvihetuka*. This is the concept of “*pāramitā*”; see “[Pāramitā and Niyata Vivarana – Myths or Realities?](#)”

## Erroneous Commentaries Are Harmful

7. There are many erroneous commentaries today. The best example is the *Visuddhimagga* of *Buddhaghosa*. It was written around 400 CE (where CE is “Current Era” or AD) when the “pure Dhamma” was already lost, and the conventional meanings were commonplace, just as now.

- The “pure Dhamma” has been lost for an extended period from about 200 CE up to now. See “[Incorrect Theravāda Interpretations – Historical Timeline](#).” But the original *suttā* survived because people at least used and preserved them even if they used the “conventional” or “mundane” (“*padaparama*” in Pāli) meanings.

- Thus we can see why people have been translating *suttā* “word for word” and just getting the conventional meanings. But it can also lead to contradictions and confusion, as we saw above. Profound verses in *suttā* need detailed explanations.

## Many *Suttā* Are in *Uddesa* or *Niddesa* Versions

8. Most *suttā* are in *uddesa* or *niddesa* versions (*Dīgha Nikāya* is an exception, even though some verses do have deeper meanings). They require detailed explanations. **Translating word-by-word is not appropriate in many instances.**

- For example, “*anicca, dukkha, anatta*” is only in the *niddesa* version in *Dhamma Cakka Pavattana Sutta* and *Anatta Lakkhana Sutta*. [[SN 56.11 Rolling Forth the Wheel of Dhamma](#)]

▪However, each *sutta* took many hours to deliver. It was impossible to condense all that information in a *sutta* for primarily oral transmission that was available at the time. Each *sutta* is condensed (most likely by the Buddha himself; see below).

### **Tipiṭaka Was Compiled for Faithful Oral Transmission**

9. The Buddha knew that Buddha Dhamma would go through periods of decline where *bhikkhus* capable of interpreting deep *suttā* would not be present. Thus *suttā* were composed so that only the “conventional” meaning was apparent. **That was necessary to preserve the *suttā*, especially before writing became commonplace.**

▪It is important to remember that Ven. Ānanda had memorized all the *suttā* that he recited at the First Buddhist Council, just three months after Buddha’s *Parinibbāna*. They are in a format suitable for oral transmission.

▪Ven. Ānanda was Buddha’s assistant over the last few decades of the Buddha’s life. I believe that the Buddha condensed each *sutta* and Ven. Ānanda memorized them. The Buddha synthesized each *sutta* in a “double meaning” way for them to survive the “dark periods.” That part is my theory, and I believe it will be proven accurate.

▪Then, at the first Buddhist Council, all the *suttā* were recited and sorted into various categories (*Nikāyas*). The Vinaya Piṭaka was also completed.

▪The *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* was started at the First Council but finalized at the Third. Having learned *Abhidhamma* from the Buddha, Ven. Sāriputta taught it to his 500 student-*bhikkhus*. They had to expand that summary to the form we have in seven books today. That task was completed only by the Third Council. See #9 and #10 of “[Abhidhamma – Introduction](#).”

### **Deeper Meanings Can Stay Hidden for Long Times**

10. There are long periods when the correct teachings remain “underground” or “hidden.” That happened just 500 years after the *Parinibbāna* of the Buddha with the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism. During such times, people use conventional interpretations. **And that served the purpose of keeping the *suttā* intact, especially before written texts became common.**

▪A perfect example is the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (or the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*). The conventional meaning is to tie up “*āna*” with breath inhaling and “*āpāna*” with breath exhaling.

▪That was consistent with the breath meditation that has been there in the world at any time. Many *yogis* practiced it even before the time of the Buddha. He learned those methods from such *yogis* before attaining Buddhahood.

▪For details, see “[Elephant in the Room 3 – Ānāpānasati](#).”

## Special Role of *Jāti Sotāpannas* With *Paṭisambidhā Ñāṇa*

11. From time to time, *jāti Sotāpannas* are born. They had attained the *Sotāpanna* stage in a previous life, possibly when Buddha was alive. They likely have had births in the *Deva loka* for a long time and are reborn humans now.

- However, not all *jāti Sotāpannas* can explain Buddha Dhamma to others. Some have the unique capability to interpret the keywords/phrases in the *suttā*. This specialized knowledge is “*Paṭisambidhā Ñāṇa*.”

- Waharaka Thero was such a *jāti Sotāpanna* with *Paṭisambidhā Ñāṇa*. He brought out these deeper meanings in recent years. See, “[Parinibbāna of Waharaka Thero](#).”

## Misinterpretation of *Dhamma* Concepts Is an Offense

12. It is an offense (*pārājika*) to misinterpret *suttā* (and *dhamma* concepts in general.) That is in several *suttā* in the [WebLink: suttacentral: Bālavagga of Aṅguttara Nikāya 2](#).

- For example, [WebLink: suttacentral.net: AN 2.25](#) is a short *sutta* that says: “*Dveme, bhikkhave, tathāgataṃ nābbhācikkhanti. Katame dve? Yo ca neyyatthaṃ suttantaṃ neyyattho suttantoti dīpeti, yo ca nītatthaṃ suttantaṃ nītattho suttantoti dīpeti. Ime kho, bhikkhave, dve tathāgataṃ nābbhācikkhanti*” ti.

- Translation (to provide the idea):** “Monks, these two people slander the *Tathāgata*. Which two? One who briefly explains a deep discourse when it needs a detailed explanation. The other explains a discourse in detail whose meaning is already clear. These are two who slander the *Tathāgata*.” [“[WebLink: suttacentral: A Meaning to be Inferred \(AN 2.25\)](#)”] [*Tathāgata* : the ‘Perfect One’, lit. the one who has ‘thus gone’, or ‘thus come’, is an epithet of the Buddha used by him when speaking of himself.]

- Two perfect examples of the first type of slander say that the words *anicca* and *anatta* are fully explained by “impermanence” and “no-self.” Those two concepts require detailed explanations. See “[Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta](#).”

## Checking for Inter-Consistency Among the Three *Piṭakas* Is the Key

13. The Buddha advised resolving any issues by consulting the three *Piṭakā*: *Sutta*, *Vinaya*, and *Abhidhamma*.

- For example, a concept in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, for instance, must be consistent with other places in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. It must also be compatible with explanations in the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* and the *Vinaya Piṭaka*. See “[Buddha Dhamma: Non-Perceivability and Self-Consistency](#).”

- As the Buddha emphasized, what matters is to get the IDEA across and not memorize the Pāli *suttā*. (Memorization is needed only for transmission purposes).

## Summary

14. The following are the key points from the above discussion that I wish to emphasize:

- The *suttā* convey “conventional” meanings while keeping the “deep meanings” embedded in them.
- Those “deep meanings” bring out the uniqueness of Buddha Dhamma.
- Word-for-word translation of a *sutta* does not convey the message of the Buddha. Examples are critical Pāli words like *viññāṇa*, *saṅkhāra*, *anicca*, and *anatta*.
- The surviving three original commentaries in the *Tipiṭaka* can verify the deep meanings of the keywords/phrases.

### **Good Resource for Pāli *Tipiṭaka***

15. A helpful resource for finding Pāli *Tipiṭaka* (and translations in several languages) is [suttacentral.net](http://suttacentral.net).

- Once you open a *sutta*, click on the left-most drop-down to choose one of several languages. That is a valuable resource; consider donating if you find it useful.
- However, as I explained above, those translations (and most English translations elsewhere) are frequently incorrect.**
- But at least one can see the correct Pāli version.