

Cattāro Iddhi,pādā

The Four Bases of Spiritual Power

[The fourfold path to success]

Selections from the Iddhi,pāda Sāmyutta (Sāmyutta ch 51)
or “the connected discourses on the bases of spiritual power”
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2004

1 Definition of terms

1.1 IDDHI AND IDDHI,PĀDA. The *iddhi,pādā* are explained in the **Chanda Sutta** (S 51.13).¹ The term is elaborated according to the Sutta method in the Vibhaṅga (Vbh 216-220), and according to the Abhidhamma method at Vbh 220-224, where they are factors of the supramundane paths.² The Commentaries resolve *iddhi,pādā* as *iddhiyā pādā*, “a base for spiritual power” and as *iddhi,bhūtam pādā*, “a base which is spiritual power.”³ As such, the best translation denoting both senses would be “bases of spiritual power.”

Iddhi is derived from the verb *ijjhati* (to prosper, succeed, flourish): it originally means “success,” but by the Buddha’s time “had already acquired the special nuance of spiritual success or, even more to the point, spiritual power” (S:B 1939 f n246). The term here has two senses:

- (1) success in the exercise of the psychic power (*iddhi,vidhā*),⁴ and
- (2) success in the effort to win liberation.

Psychic power (*iddhi,vidhā*) form the first of the five or six superknowledges (*abhiññā*).⁵ “Psychic power” itself is defined in this stock passage, and here numbered into its eight types:

Here, a monk has manifold psychic powers:

- (1) Having been one he becomes many; having been many he becomes one.
- (2) He appears, and vanishes.
- (3) He goes unhindered through walls, through ramparts, and through mountains as if through space.
- (4) He dives in and out of the earth as if it were water.
- (5) He walks on water without sinking as if it were earth.
- (6) Sitting cross-legged, he flies through the air like a winged bird.
- (7) With his hand he touches and strokes even the sun and the moon, so mighty and powerful.
- (8) He has power over his body up to as far as the Brahmā worlds. (D 11.4/1:212) = SD 1.7⁶

The two kinds of *iddhi* converge in arhathood: the arhat’s “knowledge of the destruction of the cankers” (*āsava-k,khaya,ñāṇa*)⁷ is both the sixth superknowledge (*abhiññā*) (in continuity with the psychic powers)

¹ S 51.13/5:268 f.

² See also Vism 385/12.50-53 & VbhA 303-308.

³ DA 3:1007; MA 2:69; SA 3:250; AA 2:50.

⁴ S 51.11/5:263-66, 51.14/5:269-71, 51.17/5:274 f.

⁵ See eg **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2), where they are listed in a set of stock passages, under these headings, as “knowledges of”: (1) psychic power; (2) the divine ear (clairaudience); (3) mind-reading; (4) the recollection of one’s own past lives; (5) the passing away and re-arising of beings (or divine eye); (6) the destruction of mental cankers (D 2.87-98/1:78-85) = SD 8.10. These passages also have their respective similes.

⁶ See further **Miracles** = SD 27.5.

⁷ *Āsava-k,khaya,ñāṇa*. The term *āsava* (lit “cankers”) comes from *ā-savati* “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as taints (“deadly taints,” RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Mahā Parinibbāna S & Abhidhamma lists four *āsava*: the canker of (1) sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) wrong views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*) (D 16.1.12/2:81, 16.2.4/2:92), Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937/373 f). These 4 are also known as “floods” (*ogha*) and “yokes” (*yoga*). The list of 3 cankers (omitting the

and the final fruit of of the noble eightfold path. The *iddhi,pāḍā* (bases of spiritual power), as such, are the supporting conditions for the exercise of psychic powers (*iddhi*).

1.2 THE FOUR PATHS OF SPIRITUAL POWER. Each of the “paths to spiritual power” (*iddhi,pāḍā*) introduces a particular quality (*dhamma*)—will [desire to act] (*chanda*), effort [energy] (*virīya*), mind (*citta*), or investigation (*vīmaṃsā*)—as a whole. What is important in each case is the interaction of these with concentration (*samādhi*) and the forces of exertion (*padhāna,saṅkhārā*).⁸ The paths seem ultimately to be understood as focusing on one particular thing, namely, success in mental concentration.

Ajahn Sujato, in *A Swift Pair of Messengers*, gives these instructive observations:

[The path to success] are various mental qualities which predominate in gaining samadhi. “**Enthusiasm**” [will, *chanda*] is a wholesome mode of desire; not the worldly desire to “be” or “have,” but especially in this context of samadhi, the desire to know. Both enthusiasm and energy are compassed within the path factor of right effort in its role as “requisite of samadhi.” “**Inquiry**” [*vīmaṃsā*] is wisdom in its mode of investigation into the reasons for progress or decline in meditation. “**Mind**” [*citta*] here denotes samadhi itself.

The word “**mind**” (*citta*) is a common synonym for samadhi. It is not defined further here, but as it is a basis for psychic power, there is no doubt as to the meaning.

That a monk without refined, peaceful, tranquil, and unified samadhi could wield the various kinds of psychic power...or witness the evaporation of the poisons [*āsava*]: that is not possible. [A 6.70.1/3:425 f]

An interesting analysis details the manner of developing all four of these factors.

Here, bhikshus, a monk develops the basis of psychic power consisting of samadhi due to enthusiasm (...to energy...to mind...to inquiry) and active striving, thinking:

“Thus my enthusiasm will be neither too slack nor too tense, and it will neither [be] constricted within [due to sloth & torpor] nor [be] distracted externally [due to sense pleasures].” He abides perceiving before and after:

“As before, so after; as after, so before;
as below, so above; as above, so below;
as by day, so by night; as by night, so by day.”

Thus with heart open and unenveloped, he develops a mind imbued with luminosity.

[**Iddhi,pāḍa Vibhaṅga Sutta**, S 51.20/5:276-278; slightly edited]

“**As below, so above**” is explained in the sutta with reference to the meditation on the parts of the body “upwards from the soles of the feet, and downwards from the tips of the hairs.”

“**As before, so after**” probably refers to evenness in attending to the meditation subject throughout the session. The phrase “well apprehended, well attended, well borne in mind, well penetrated with understanding” is used here just as with the “basis for reviewing,” implying that reviewing and inquiring into causes is a key to developing this evenness.

Given the importance of this inquiry into causes, we might postulate a causal relationship between the bases of psychic power themselves, in line with similar relationships described elsewhere.

Enthusiasm is the wish, the motivation to do the work of purifying the mind. **Effort** is the actual exerting of energy to do the work. The purified **mind** is the result of that work. And in the clarity of the purified mind, the causes and conditions for that purity can be discerned through **inquiry**.

canker of views) [43] is probably older and is found more frequently in the Suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these āsavas is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict under āsava.

⁸ On *padhāna,saṅkhāra*, see **Chanda Samādhi S** (S 51.13) below; also S 51.13/5:268 f.

The manner in which these qualities work together may be compared to **an electric light**. Enthusiasm is like the voltage in the circuits. Energy is like the current of electricity which flows when the switch is turned on. The mind is like the globe lighting up. And when the room is lit, it is easy to see what is there. Anyone who has ever had to search [inquiry] for something in a dark room would know that the quickest way, if one must grope in the dark, is to grope first of all for the light switch. (Sujato, *A Swift Pair of Messengers*, 2001:47 f)

Presumably, while all the four bases (*iddhi,pāda*) coexist in every state of mental concentration, at any given time, only one of the four will dominate in generating concentration, giving its name to the *iddhi,pāda*. Since the purpose of these four bases is to empower the mind to reach concentration, we understandably sometimes find them included in a more complex context of meditation and spiritual progress. In **the Pubba Sutta** (S 51.11), the Buddha relates how he discovers and applies these four faculties when he is still a Bodhisattva.⁹

1.3 BENEFITS OF THE PATHS OF SPIRITUAL POWER. When the four paths are accomplished, the result is dhyana (*jhāna*). On attaining the fourth dhyana, we remain in it as long as necessary, that is, until we have mastered it. Then we emerge from dhyana and direct the calm and clear mind to cultivating the multifarious psychic powers, that is, the eightfold *iddhi*. In fact, throughout the Nikāyas, see the four *iddhi,pāda* associated with the eightfold *iddhi*.

Besides the eightfold psychic power, the paths to spiritual power are associated with other meditation-related power, such as:

- the ability to prolong one's life;
- the ability to create a kingdom through Dharma, without violence;
- the ability to turn the Himavant into a mountain of gold; and
- continued success (*iddhi*) in meditation.

The first three abilities are listed in **the Rajja Sutta** (S 4.20/1:116 f) [5.3.2]. The fourth power here is a non-technical sense of *iddhi*, meaning “skill, success,” found throughout the Suttas.

2 Padhāna or prahāna

In the Sanskrit texts, in place of *padhāna,saṅkhārā*, there is *pahāna,saṃskārā*. Scholars like **RC Childers** have early noticed this discrepancy. Quoting the passage on the four *iddhi,pāda* in **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33),¹⁰ Childers, in his *A Dictionary of the Pali Language* (1875), notes,

Here *padhāna* is no doubt used in its Pāli sense of ‘exertion,’ but the northern Buddhists, misunderstanding the word, have rendered it by *prahāna*, ‘abandonment,’ and so made nonsense of the passage. (DPL 157)¹¹

While the former (*padhāna,saṅkhārā*) is a tatpuruṣa (“forces of exertion”), the latter (*pahāna,saṃskārā*) is a dvandva (“abandoning and forces [formations]”).

From a variation in terminology, we can also deduce the provenance of the text. For example, although the Pali texts generally have *padhāna,saṅkhāra*, **the Netti-p,pkaraṇa** preserves this interesting treatment of the *iddhi,pādā*:¹²

⁹ S 51.11/5:263-266.

¹⁰ D 33.1.11(10)/3:226.

¹¹ As examples, Childers pointed to E Burnouf, *Introduction à l'Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*, Paris, 1844: 625 & Burnouf (tr), *Le Lotus de la Bonne Loi*, Paris, 1852: 310, 311, 312. Other “northern blunders” Childers noticed as *iddhi,pāda*, *pātimokkha*, *upādiseso*, *paṭisambhidā*, *uposatha* and *phāsu* (svv). “I may add, that from not knowing the meaning of the Pali *kāravika*, the author of the Lalita Vistāra appears to have ascribed to Buddha the attribute of being sparrow-voiced!” (Childers, DPL 301 f), quoting *Le Lotus de la Bonne Loi*, 1852: 566:

¹² See Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 2001:93.

Here, the one-pointedness of mind that is faith-dominant is the “**concentration through the will to act**” (*chanda, samādhi*). When consciousness [the mind] (*citta*) is concentrated due to suppression of the defilements either by the power of reflection or by the power of cultivation [meditation]—this is **abandoning** (*pahāna*). Therein, breathing in and out, initial application and sustained application, perception and feeling, mindfulness and thought—these are **the forces** [formations] (*saṅkhārā*).¹³ Thus, there is the initial [prior] “concentration through the will to act,” there is the abandoning due to suppression of the defilements—and there are these forces. Both these he develops into the *iddhi, pāda* accomplished with *chanda, samādhi, padhāna* [sic], -*saṅkhārā*¹⁴ that is dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, ripening in release.¹⁵

Tattha yā saddhā’ dhipateyyā citt’ekaggatā ayaṃ chanda, samādhi, samāhite citte kilesānaṃ vikkhambhanatāya paṭisaṅkhāna, balena vā bhāvanā, balena vā idaṃ pahānaṃ. tattha ye assāsa, -passāsā, vitakka, vicārā saññā, vedayitā sara, saṅkappā ime saṅkhārā. Iti purimako ca chanda, -samādhi, kilesa, vikkhambhanatāya ca pahānaṃ ime ca saṅkhāra, tad-ubhayaṃ chanda, -samādhi, padhāna, saṅkhāra, samannāgataṃ iddhi, pādāṃ bhāveti viveka, nissitaṃ virāga, nissitaṃ nirodha, nissitaṃ vosagga, pariṇāmiṃ. (Nett §87/15 f)

This divergence of the Nettippakaraṇa from the Pali texts (and other similar divergences) are evidence that at least portions of it “were composed in North India at some time prior to the introduction of the text into Ceylon.”¹⁶ Gethin notes,

In conclusion one might suggest that *pahāna* (**abandoning**) perhaps makes better sense than *padhāna* (endeavour) as the original intention of the *iddhi-pāda* formula, in that it avoids the overlap with *virīya* in the second *iddhi-pāda*. It would be interesting to know whether the Chinese Āgamas preserve a parallel to the *iddhi-pāda-sāmyutta* passage that associates the *samma-padhāna* formula with *padhāna-saṅkhāra*. (Gethin 2001:94; emphasis added)

3 Connected suttas

The Apāra Sutta (S 51.1) is a brief definition of the four bases of spiritual power (or more simply, the path to success). **The Uṇṇābha Sutta** (S 51.15)¹⁷ records how Ānanda succinctly explains to the brahmin Uṇṇābha what the four bases are, and that desire is the beginning of the path to arhathood. While the bases are briefly listed in the Apāra Sutta, they are fully listed in **the Chanda Samādhi Sutta** (S 51.13).

One of the most instructive texts on the four spiritual powers is **the Iddhi, pāda Vibhaṅga Sutta** (S 51.20), where each of the four “paths to spiritual success” (*iddhi, pāda*) or aspects of meditation practice, is moderated progressively so as to avoid the four faults (*catu, dosa*), that is, it is too slack, too tense, narrow [constricted] internally, or distracted externally.¹⁸

The Commentaries to the latter give examples as regards to the application of these bases of spiritual power for attaining the supramundane state (*lok’uttara dhamma*):

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|------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| The elder Raṭṭha, pāla | the will to act (<i>chanda</i>) | (M 82) |
| The elder Soṇa | effort (<i>virīya</i>) | (V 1:179-185; A 3:374-379) |
| The elder Sambhūta | mind (<i>citta</i>) | (Tha 291-294) |
| The elder Mogha, rāja | investigation (<i>vīmaṃsā</i>) | (Sn 1116-1119) |

¹³ On *padhāna, saṅkhārā*, see **Chanda Samādhi S** (S 51.13) below; also S 51.13/5:268 f.

¹⁴ Cf S 51.1/5:254, 51.13/5:268 f.

¹⁵ Cf S 5:340.

¹⁶ KR Norman, “Pali Literature,” in J Gonda (ed), *A History of Indian Literature*, vol 7, fasc 2. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983:110; cf AK Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, Delhi, 2nd ed, 1980:342.

¹⁷ S 51.15/5:271-273 = SD 10.10.

¹⁸ S 51.20/5:276-281 = SD 28.14; AA 1:49.

(DA 2:642; SA 3:256; VbhA 306)

The Commentaries illustrate the four bases of power with the case of **four royal ministers aspiring to a high position**. One who gains his position by waiting upon the rajah day and night, seeking to satisfy his wishes and preferences, is comparable to the one who attains the supramundane state by emphasizing the will to act (*chanda*). The one who gains his position by his courage, as in crushing a border rebellion, is like the one who attains the supramundane state by emphasizing effort (*virīya*). The one who gains his position by his counseling the rajah on statecraft is like the one who attains the supramundane state by emphasizing mind (*citta*). And the one who gains his position solely by reason of his birth or class (*jāti*) is like the one who attains the supramundane state by emphasizing investigation (*vīmaṃsā*) (DA 2:642 f= SA 3:256 f). The Vibhaṅga Commentary (VbhA 305 f), however, inverts the similes for the mind and counsel representing investigation.

This seems more cogent, since investigation (*vīmaṃsā*) and counsel (*manta*) are both from the root *man*, to think, and mind is often classified according to its class (*jāti*) as wholesome, unwholesome, or indeterminate. (Bodhi, S:B 1945 n261)

Gethin, in his *The Buddhist Path of Awakening*, discusses the two versions of the simile (2001:90 f).

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Apāra Sutta

The Discourse on the Near Shore

[The four bases of spiritual power]

(S 51.1/5:254)

2 Bhikshus, there are these four bases of spiritual power, when cultivated and often developed, lead to going from the near shore to the far shore.¹⁹ What are the four?

3 Here, bhikshus, a monk develops the basis for spiritual power that is accomplished in concentration²⁰ due to the will to act (*chanda*)²¹ and the forces of exertion.²²

He develops the basis for spiritual power that is accomplished in concentration due to effort (*virīya*) and the forces of exertion.²³

He develops the basis for spiritual power that is accomplished in concentration due to mind (*citta*) and the forces of exertion.

He develops the basis for spiritual power that is accomplished in concentration due to investigation (*vīmaṃsā*) and the forces of exertion.

These, bhikshus, are the four bases of spiritual power, when cultivated and often developed, lead to going from the near shore to the far shore.

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¹⁹ *Cattāro’me bhikkhave iddhi,pādā bhāvītā bahulī,katā apārā pāraṃ gamanāya samvattanti*. PTS has wr *apar-âparam* (“again and again; repeatedly”). The reading *apārā pāraṃ* is found at M 1:134; S 4:174, 5:24, 180; A 5:4; cf *apārā pāraṃ gantu,kāma* (D 2:89; U 90). Comy glosses **apārā pāraṃ** as “(going) from the rounds to nirvana,” *vaṭṭato nibbānaṃ* (SA 3:132). Here the “near shore” (*apārā*) represents “the rounds” of rebirth and “the far shore” (*pāraṃ*) represents nirvana. See S:B 1896 n29.

²⁰ “The basis for spiritual power that is accomplished in concentration,” *chanda.samādhi,padhāna,saṅkhāra,-samannāgatam*.

²¹ “Concentration due to the will to act,” *chanda,samādhi*. See foll n & Introd.

²² “The forces of exertion,” *padhāna,saṅkhārā*. The whole phrase is *chanda,samādhi,padhāna,saṅkhāra,samannāgatam*. See prev n & Intro.

²³ On the repetition of “effort” here, see Intro (2).

Chanda Samādhī Sutta

The Discourse

On the Concentration Due to the Will to Act

[An analysis of the four bases of spiritual power]
(S 51.13/5:268 f)

2 (1) Bhikshus, if a monk gains concentration, gains one-pointedness of mind, relying on **the will to act** (*chanda*),²⁴ this is called **concentration due to the will to act** (*chanda, samādhī*).

He brings forth the desire (*chanda*) for the non-arising of unarisen evil unwholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives;

he brings forth the desire for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives;

he brings forth the desire for the arising of unarisen wholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives;

he brings forth the desire for the maintaining of arisen wholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives—these are called **the forces of exertion** (*padhāna, saṅkhārā*).²⁵

Thus, there are this will to act and the concentration due to the will to act and these forces of exertion—this, bhikshus, is called the bases of spiritual power accomplished in concentration due to the will to act and *these forces of exertion* [these forces and abandoning].²⁶

3 (2) Bhikshus, if a monk gains concentration, gains one-pointedness of mind, relying on the **effort** (*virīya*), this is called **concentration due to effort** (*virīya, samādhī*).

He brings forth the desire for the non-arising of unarisen evil unwholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives.

he brings forth the desire for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states....

he brings forth the desire for the arising of unarisen wholesome states....

he brings forth the desire for the maintaining of arisen wholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives—these are called the forces of exertion.

Thus, there are this effort and the concentration due to effort and these forces of exertion—this, bhikshus, is called the bases of spiritual power accomplished in concentration due to effort and *these forces of exertion* [these forces and abandoning].²⁷ [269]

4 (3) Bhikshus, if a monk gains concentration, gains one-pointedness of mind, relying on the **mind** (*citta*), this is called **concentration due to mind** (*citta, samādhī*).²⁸

He brings forth the desire for the non-arising of unarisen evil unwholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives.

he brings forth the desire for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states....

he brings forth the desire for the arising of unarisen wholesome states....

he brings forth the desire for the maintaining of arisen wholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives—these are called the forces of exertion.

²⁴ “The will to act,” *chanda*, which Comy glosses as *kattu, kamyatā chandaṃ*, “the desire to do” (SA 3:255).

²⁵ *Ime vuccanti padhāna, saṅkhārā*. Comy says that “the forces of exertion” (*padhāna, saṅkhārā*) is a designation for the effort that accomplishes the fourfold function of right exertion (*samma-p, padhāna*) (SA 3:255 f). See (**Cattā-ro**) **Padhāna S** (A 4.14/2:16 f) = SD 10.2 (2005).

²⁶ *Iti ayaṃ ca chanda ayaṃ ca chanda, samādhī ime ca padhāna, saṅkhārā. Ayaṃ vuccati bhikkhave chanda, - samādhī, padhāna, saṅkhārā, samannāgato iddhi, pādo*. The amplification, “these forces of abandoning,” Skt *pahāna, - saṃskārā* is an alt reading. See Introd (2).

²⁷ There seems to be a repetition here, as “effort” (*virīya*) and “exertion” (*padhāna*) are syns. The amplification, “these forces of abandoning,” Skt *pahāna, saṃskārā*. See above Introd (2).

²⁸ Vbh 218 defines *citta* only with stock phrases, without specifying how it becomes a basis of power.

Thus, there are this mind and the concentration due to mind and these forces of exertion—this, bhikshus, is called the bases of spiritual power accomplished in concentration due to mind and *these forces of exertion* [these forces and abandoning].

5 (4) Bhikshus, if a monk gains concentration, gains one-pointedness of mind, relying on the **investigation** (*vīmaṃsā*), this is called **concentration due to investigation** (*vīmaṃsā,samādhi*).²⁹

He brings forth the desire for the non-arising of unarisen evil unwholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives.

he brings forth the desire for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states....

he brings forth the desire for the arising of unarisen wholesome states....

he brings forth the desire for the maintaining of arisen wholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives—these are called the forces of exertion.

Thus, there are this investigation and the concentration due to investigation and these forces of exertion—this, bhikshus, is called the bases of spiritual power accomplished in concentration due to investigation and *these forces of exertion* [these forces and abandoning].

— evaṃ —

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050314; rev 070905; 080411; 090129a

²⁹ Vbh 219 defines *vīmaṃsā* with the stock phrases for *paññā*.