

Cūḷa Suññata Sutta

The Lesser Discourse on Emptiness

[The realization of impermanence in the highest meditation]

(Majjhima Nikāya 121/3:104-109)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2005

Introduction

1 The sutta title

Both **Rod Bucknell** (in his Pali & Chinese Āgama concordance, 2004) and **Analayo** (in his *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima Nikāya*)¹ say that the Cūḷa Suññatā Sutta is found in the Taishō Tripiṭaka as **MĀ 190 (T1.736c-738a)**. While Bucknell cites its Tibetan parallel as **P956 (P38.278)** in the Kanjur,² Analayo cites it as the **mdo chen pos tong pa nyid ces bya ba** in the Derge Kanjur as **Kj:De 71.250a-253b**.³ The Tibetan version is entitled **Śūnyatā Mahā,sūtra** (The Great Discourse on Emptiness).⁴

In the Majjhima Nikāya, this sutta precedes **the Mahā Suññata Sutta** (M 122). In gradual stages, the Cūḷa Suññatā Sutta shows how the “abiding in emptiness” (*suññatā, vihāra*) refers to the fruition attainment of emptiness (*suññata, phala, samāpatti*),⁵ the fruition attainment of arhathood that is attained by focussing on the perception of nirvana as empty. The main idea of this sutta is that of the application of insight (“impermanence”) to the attainment of the signless concentration of mind and thereby winning spiritual liberation.

The Pāli for “emptiness” or “voidness” is *suññatā*, but in the title here it is spelt as *suññata*,⁶ which as such could be an adjective (when it should be rendered as “the empty” or “the void”) or it is a noun with a shortened (weakened) final vowel within a compound, that is, as *Cūḷasuññatasutta*. This form is apparently often found in other sutta titles, for example,

Metta Sutta (Sn 1.8 = Kh no 9), “The Lovingkindness Discourse,”

Ratana Sutta (Sn 13/2.1 = Kh no 6), “The Discourse on the Jewels.”

While *suññata* and *metta* are adjectives, translatable as “empty” and “friendly” respectively, it is difficult to translate *ratana* as an adjective: at best perhaps one could render it as “jewelled,” as in “the jeweled discourse” for Ratana Sutta, but this does not seem to sound right.

2 Sutta summary

The Cūḷa Suññata Sutta opens with Ānanda’s recalling the Buddha’s own “abiding in emptiness” (*suññatā, vihāra*) and he questions the Buddha about it [§3]. The Buddha goes on to elaborate the “truly real, undistorted, utterly pure descent into emptiness” [§4-11]. Firstly, the practitioner should begin to “cultivate oneness” by avoiding the perception of village and of people, that is, not to look at society in terms of the defilements of liking and disliking. Instead, one should first focus on the “oneness dependent on the community of monks,” and then turn to the perception of forest, that is, to mindfully observe nature [§4].

¹ Draft, 2005.

² Beijing ed, Ōtani reprint, Tokyo, 1956. *Kanjur* means “Buddha Word” (in Tib tr).

³ This latter cited by Peter Skilling 1994:146-186. M 121 and MĀ 190 have been compared by Choong 1999: 66-76. All three versions of this sutta have been studied by Schmithausen 1981:232-239 and Skilling 1997:335-363. Skilling 1997:14, 338 says that the Tibetan version comes from the Madhyama Āgama of the Mūla, sarvāstivāda.

⁴ For a Tib-Pāli critical comparison, see **Skilling** 1994:146-181. See **Mahā Suññata S** (M 122) = SD 11.4(1).

⁵ Also spelt *suññatā, phala, samāpatti*, but less frequently.

⁶ See PED: *suññata* & *suññatā* (<http://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/search3advanced?dbname=pali&query=sunnata&matchtype=exact&display=utf8>).

The practice becomes more focussed into the perception of earth [§5], that is, one of the meditations on the elements,⁷ which contains the sutta's only simile (that of the bull's hide). The mindfulness practice then goes on to the perceptions of each of the four formless attainments [§§6-9].

The sutta climaxes with the teaching on the signless concentration of mind [§10], leading to arhat-hood [§§11-12]. The Buddha closes by declaring that the "truly real, undistorted, utterly pure descent into emptiness" is a universal practice of all true spiritual seekers, and exhorts Ānanda (and all practitioners) to abide in that same emptiness [§13].

3 Is the Pali Canon incomplete?

Ānanda is recorded in §3 as correctly recalling the Buddha's constant abiding in emptiness, and that the Buddha endorses his statement. However, it is interesting that this earlier statement has not been recorded elsewhere in the Pali Canon. Peter Skilling notes that **Vasubandhu**⁸ "in a section of his *Vyākhyā,yukti*, devoted to a spirited defence of the Mahāyāna" cited this silence "to demonstrate that the sūtra collection of the Śrāvakas is not complete: that it does not record every teaching of the Buddha."⁹ **Analayo**, in his *Comparative Study of the Majjhima Nikāya*, gives this response:

Yet if on the earlier occasion the Buddha had given further explanation or a full exposition of the matter, Ānanda would not have needed to inquire about the matter again on the present occasion. This suggests that the Buddha made only the short statement quoted in the present discourse, a statement that due to its brevity does not suffice for being recorded as a discourse. In view of this it would not seem surprising that this brief statement has not been recorded elsewhere, all the more since by being mentioned in the introductory section of the present discourse it was preserved for posterity, together with a detailed exposition. In fact, taken on its own this statement does not seem to be particularly remarkable, as in M 151 at M 3:294,4 and V 2:304,12 other monks similarly declare that they often dwell in emptiness. (2005, M 3:104 n ad loc)

Early pre-sectarian Buddhism, that is, the direct teachings of the Buddha and his first arhats, is pragmatically soteriological. It is concerned only with declaring "just suffering and the ending of suffering" (*dukkhañ c'eva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodham*) (M 22; S 22.86).¹⁰ After the Buddha's passing, however, Buddhism generally went into stages and episodes of philosophical and sociocultural developments within and outside India, and this development is still going on today, especially in the West and westernized societies.

In one of the most radical departures from an oral tradition of the direct experience of the inner silence, post-Buddha Buddhism became more and more book-based: from the way of the spirit, it grew into a religion of the letter, especially in Sri Lanka and in philosophical Mahāyāna, and today prominently exemplified in academic Buddhism. As a forest of letters, Buddhist scripture (like any religion's scripture) is subject to explorations, interpretations and developments in the business of professional knowledge. In the process, many trees are cut down, and the deforestation is spreading alarmingly, the results of which are clearly evident, for example, in any internet Buddhist chat sites. Much of Buddhism today has become free-market cults and businesses, where everyone is an expert. However, the forest remains untamed, still teeming with wild beasts and other dangers.

Buddhism of the spirit is always complete, just as silence is always present in the most beautiful piece of music, and pure light in every colour. No amount of mastery of the texts will bring awakening, though it might help to point in the right direction. But the map is never the territory. The journey to inner silence must be taken after the maps have been studied, and along the way the maps may still help, but the

⁷ There are 4 basic meditations on the elements (earth, water, fire, air): see **Mahā Rāhul'ovāda S** (M 61.8-12/1:421-423) & **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140.22/3:244).

⁸ Born probably in late 4th cent BCE, NW India; half-brother of Asaṅga. He started off with Sarvāstivāda, but dissatisfied with it turned to Mahāyāna and became one of the most influential founders of the Yogācāra school.

⁹ Skilling 1997:346.

¹⁰ M 22.38/1:140; S 22.86/3:119 = 44.2/4:384; cf S 12.15/2:17.

humble and ancient natives are always the best guides, for they have walked the uncharted paths and have themselves heard the silence.

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife
Their sobre wishes never learn'd to stray;
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.
(Thomas Gray, 1716-1771, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*)

4 *Pakkhandati*

The word *pakkhandati* occurs 8 times in the Cūḷa Suññata Sutta [4-11], and literally means “he leaps forward” with an additional sense of “enters into, descends.” It is here translated as “he plunges.” The Commentaries give various glosses: *otarati* (goes down into) (MA 4:151), *okkhanditvā pakkhanditvā* (descending into, entering) (MA 1:238; Vism 636). It is usually used figuratively: “rejoices in, finds pleasure or satisfaction in, he takes to.” The word is found in the stock passage: *cittam pakkhandati pasīdati santiṭṭhati adhimuccati*, “His mind plunges into (that perception of forest), brightens with faith, becomes steady, and is resolute.” [§4].¹¹ Here the underscored phrase is progressively replaced by the perceptions of earth, of each of the four formless attainments, and finally of the signless concentration of mind. This stock passage refers to a leap of faith in a person as result of spiritual experience (Miln 36).

In the **Mahā Hatthi, padōpama Sutta** (M 28), it is said, “And his mind, having made the element [earth] its objective support, plunges into it, brightens with faith, becomes steady, and is resolute” (M 28.8/1:186). On *tassa dhāt'ārammaṇam eva cittam pakkhandati* (underscored), Bodhi notes:

This sentence can be construed in two alternative ways, depending on how the compound *dhātārammaṇam* is understood. Nyanaponika Thera takes it as the object of the verb pakkhandati, and he understands *dhātu* here as ‘an impersonal element in general’ capable of including sound, contact, feeling, etc. Thus he translates, ‘And his mind enters into that very object [taking it just as an impersonal] element.’ [Ñāṇamoli] reads the compound as an adjunct qualifying citta, and supplies the object of the verb in parenthesis. The Majjhima Commentary (MA) seems to support the former reading; Majjhima Commentary Ṭīkā explicitly identifies *dhātu* as the earth element, thus supporting the latter reading. MA explains the phrase ‘acquires resolution’ [*adhimuccati*, ‘is resolute’] to mean that the meditator contemplates the situation by way of elements and thus has neither attachment nor aversion concerning it.”

(M:ÑB 1221 n334; emphases added)¹²

The Channa Sutta (S 22.90) mentions how the monk Channa, having accepted that the aggregates (*khandhā*) are impermanent and not self (omitting “suffering”), and that all formations (*sabbe saṅkhārā*) are impermanent and not self, finds that still his mind “does not plunge into the stilling of all the formations” and so “does not brighten with faith, nor does he steady his mind, nor is he resolute (S 22.90/3:133). The monks, fearing Channa’s quarrelsome nature, have earlier on refrained from mentioning the characteristic of “suffering” (*dukkha*) of the aggregates so as not to offend him¹³ (SA 2:318).

5 Abiding in emptiness

The key term in the Cūḷa Suññata Sutta is “**abiding in emptiness**” (*suññatā, vihāra*), of which the Buddha declares, “As before, Ānanda, so do I now often abide in emptiness” [§3]. Basically, this abiding is a profound mental focus on one of the three characteristics (*lakkhana*)—impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and not-self (*anattā*):

¹¹ M 3:104; cf M 1:186; Miln 326.

¹² On *pakkhandati* and nirvana, see MA 2:299.

¹³ See S:B 1084 n180.

The contemplation on impermanence	Cūḷa Suññata Sutta (M 121/3:104-109)
The contemplation, on suffering (or unsatisfactoriness)	Mahā Suññata Sutta (M 122.5/3:111)
The contemplation, on not-self	Mahā Suññata Sutta (M 122.17/3:115)

In gradual stages, the sutta shows how the “abiding in emptiness” (*suññatā, vihāra*) refers to the fruition attainment of emptiness (*suññata, phala, samāpatti*), the fruition attainment of arhathood that is attained by focusing on the empty aspect of nirvana.

In the **Piṇḍapāta Pārisuddhi Sutta** (M 151), the Buddha declares that the abiding in emptiness is also known as “the abiding of a great person” (*mahā, purisa vihāra*) (M 151.2/3:294), because the Buddhas, Pratyeka Buddhas and the Tathagata’s great disciples constantly abide in it (MA 5:106).

In the **Mahā Vedalla Sutta** (M 43), the term “emptiness” (*suññatā*) forms one of four synonyms for spiritual liberation, namely,

- (1) the immeasurable liberation of mind (*appamāṇā ceto, vimutti*),
- (2) the liberation of mind through nothingness (*ākiñcaññā ceto, vimutti*),
- (3) the liberation of mind through emptiness (*suññatā ceto, vimutti*), and
- (4) the signless liberation of mind (*animittā ceto, vimutti*). (M 43.26-37/1:296-298)

All these four liberations of mind are synonymous in that they all refer to the fruition attainment of arhathood. The Commentary says that all these terms are names for nirvana (MA 2:354 f).

The Kathā, vatthu Commentary says that there are two kinds of emptiness:

- (1) that of a being (*satta, suññatā*);
- (2) that of formations (*saṅkhāra, suññatā*). (KvuA 63)

A being is empty or void in the sense that it is comprised of the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness), all of which are characterized as impermanent, suffering and not self. The emptiness of formations refers to nirvana itself.¹⁴

6 The formless attainments

The practice section of the Cūḷa Suññata Sutta begins with “oneness” (*ekatta*), that is, concentration, arising from down-to-earth perception methods progressing into the more profound perception of the formless attainments, namely:

- (1) The oneness dependent on the perception of the community of monks [§4];
- (2) The oneness dependent on the perception of the forest [§4];
- (3) The oneness dependent on the perception of earth [§5];
- (4) The oneness dependent on the perception of the base of infinite space [§6];
- (5) The oneness dependent on the perception of the base of infinite consciousness [§7];
- (6) The oneness dependent on the perception of the base of nothingness [§8]; and
- (7) The oneness dependent on the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception [§9].

The Animitta Ceto, samādhi Pañha Sutta (S 40.9) similarly records Moggallāna’s progression through the four formless attainments culminating in his attainment of *the signless concentration of the mind*,¹⁵ going through the same stages as those described in the Cūḷa Suññata Sutta.

On the other hand, the insight practice described in the **Aṭṭhaka, nāgara Sutta** (M 52) and the **Mahā Māluṅkyā Sutta** (M 64) do not mention the fourth formless attainment in a series of meditative states that includes the other three formless attainments.¹⁶ The Subcommentary on the Aṭṭhaka, nāgara Sutta explains that the fourth formless attainment is too subtle an experience for the insight contemplation

¹⁴ See Kvu:SR 142 n4; Dhs:RD §344 & header n.

¹⁵ S 40.9/4:269 = SD 24.19. Analayo notes that while the preceding stages of Moggallāna’s practice in S 40.1-8 do not seem to have Chinese counterparts, his attainment of signlessness is also recorded in the parallel to S 40.9 at SĀ 503 = T2.132b18 (2005 ad M 3:107 n).

¹⁶ M 52/1:352 & M 64/1:437. Analayo notes that the Chinese Āgama parallels to M 52 (MĀ 217 = T1.802b27 & T92 = T1.916c8), differ in as much as they do include the 4th formless attainment in their treatment, whereas the parallel to M 62 (MĀ 205 = T1.780a17) agrees with the Pali version in taking its treatment only up to the 3rd formless attainment (2005 ad M 3:107 n).

described in these discourses (MĀT:Be 2:9). Analayo notes in his *Comparative Study of the Majjhima Nikāya*:

The same could well apply to the present context, as the Cūḷa Suññata Sutta is also concerned with insight contemplation. Whereas in the set of discourses concerned with Moggallāna's meditation development the emphasis was on attaining each immaterial sphere as part of his development of concentrative mastery, in the Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta, in the Mahāmālunkya Sutta and in the Cūḷa-suññata Sutta the point at stake is not the attainment of the immaterial spheres as such, but their use for the purpose of insight. Hence the Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta, in the Mahāmālunkya Sutta would support the Chinese version of the Cūḷasuññata Sutta, which do not include the fourth immaterial attainment in their exposition. (Analayo, 2005 ad M 3:107; emphasis added)

However, what is of special interest here is that the signless concentration is placed after these eight states, which leads Bodhi to conclude that “its placement after the eighth formless attainment suggests it is a *samādhi* qualitatively different from those attained in *samatha* meditation” (S:B 1440 n280).

7 “Emptiness” (*suññatā*)

All the three versions of the sutta describe how through mental focus, one cultivates a unitary type of perception (*saññā paṭicca manasikaroti ekattam*) that regards the present experience as devoid of the disturbances (*darathā*)¹⁷ connected with the previous stage, so that only that unitary perception remains, relying on which (*saññā paṭicca ekattam*), one goes on to the next successively more refined state, so that “whatever disturbances there were...they are no more here” (*ye assu darathā...te 'dha na santi*) [§4(1) etc].

The agreement of the three versions of the sutta is remarkable in showing the notion of emptiness (*suññatā*) in early Buddhism. Of this, **Analayo** makes a very important note:

The agreement between the Pāli, Chinese and Tibetan versions of the Cūḷasuññatā Sutta on this basic procedure for developing a genuine and undistorted approach to emptiness is worth noting, as it throws into relief the implications of “emptiness” in early Buddhism.¹⁸ The present passage shows “emptiness” to be a qualification, not an abstract state. That is, from an early Buddhist perspective to qualify something as “empty” means simply that it is “devoid of” something else.

The same applies in relation of selfhood, when personal experience is seen to be “empty” of a self and of what belongs to a self. All aspects of personal experience are impermanent and therefore “empty” of anything permanent. In contrast, self-notions are based on the assumption of permanency. Close interpretation then shows personal experience to be “empty of” such a permanent self. (2005 ad M 3:104; emphasis added)

In this connection, **Peter Skilling** noted an unfortunate error in IB Horner's translation of this sutta, that is,

the unwarranted description of emptiness as a concept: “abiding in (the concept of) emptiness.” The sūtra shows that emptiness is here an exercise in deliberate awareness of what is absent and what is present: an attainment, an experience, gained by progressive refinement of mind, leading direct experience of liberation, here called the unsurpassed emptiness. This is clear not only from the two Sūnyatā Sūtras [M 121, 122], but also from the Piṇḍapāta, pārisuddhi-sutta (M 151).

(1997:347; citation normalized)

8 “The signless” (*animitta*)

According to the Pali Cūḷa Suññata Sutta, the practitioner, keeping up his meditation on emptiness, gains the formless attainment, and then “attends to the oneness dependent on the signless concentration of

¹⁷ For def of *daratha*, see §4 n on “disturbances.”

¹⁸ On the importance of this passage in Mahāyāna thought, see Skilling 1997:350-351.

mind” [§10]. Other discourses, such as **the Mahā Vedalla Sutta** (M 43), show that the purpose in cultivating the signless meditation is not to attend to any sign (*nimitta*):¹⁹

“Friend, how many conditions are there for the attainment of the signless liberation of mind?”

“Friend, there are two conditions for the attainment of the signless liberation of mind: non-attention to all signs and attention to the signless element. These are the two conditions for the attainment of the signless liberation of mind.” (M 43.28/1:296)

The Majjhima Commentary here says that “the signless liberation of mind” (*animitta ceto, vimutti*) is the attainment of fruition. The “signs” are objects such as forms, etc; the “signless element” is nirvana, in which all signs of conditioned things are absent (MA 2:352). Hence, **Analayo** explains:

A “sign” in such contexts refers to those aspects, marks and characteristics by which one recognizes phenomena. According to the Pāli discourses, to meditate in signlessness can bring about the removal of lust, anger and delusion and thereby lead to the unconditioned. These passages make it clear why signless concentration of the mind comes as the climax of the gradual development of emptiness described in the three versions of the Cūlasuññata Sutta. (2005 ad M 3:107)

The Mahā Vedalla Sutta (M 43) and **the Godatta Sutta** (S 41.7) go on to state that the “unshakable liberation of mind” (*akuppa ceto, vimutti*) is the highest of all signless liberations of mind,²⁰ and both suttas declare that “lust is a sign-maker, hatred is a sign-maker, delusion is a sign-maker” (*rāgo kho nimitta, karaṇo, doṣo nimitta, karaṇo, moho nimitta, karaṇo*, id). The Commentaries (by Buddhaghosa) on both these suttas give an identical explanation of “sign-maker” (*nimitta, karaṇa*), that lust, hatred and delusion mark as lustful, as hating or as deluded.²¹ “Perhaps, though,” suggests **Bodhi**, “the statement means that lust causes the ‘sign of beauty’ (*subha, nimitta*) to appear, hatred the ‘sign of the repulsive’ (*paṭigha, nimitta*), and delusion the signs of permanence, pleasure and self” (S:B 1445 n316).

The Saṅgīti Sutta (D 33), **the Animitta Samādhi Sutta** (S 43.4) and **the Rāga Sutta** (A 3.163) briefly mention these three kinds of samadhi:²²

the emptiness samadhi	(<i>suññata samādhi</i>),
the signless samadhi	(<i>animitta samādhi</i>), and
the undirected samadhi	(<i>appaṇihita samādhi</i>).

The Rāga Sutta merely states that these three samadhis overcome lust, hate and delusion (that is, the three unwholesome roots). None of the other suttas or their Commentaries gives any explanation of these terms, except for the Dīgha Commentary, which says that

one who, at the stage of advanced insight, contemplates things as *not-self*, attains to the emptiness samadhi on arriving at the path and fruition (because he has seen things as empty of self);

one who contemplates things as *impermanent*, attains to the signless samadhi (because he has seen penetrated the sign of permanence);

one who contemplates things as *suffering [unsatisfactory]*, attains to the undirected samadhi (because he is not drawn to things that are painful). (DA 3:1003 f)

¹⁹ On the various defs of *nimitta*, see **The Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas** = SD 13.1(3.1d).

²⁰ M 43.37/1:298 = S 41.7/4:297. The Comys says that there are 13 signless liberations of mind: the 4 formless attainments (because the sign of form is absent in them); the four paths and four fruitions (because the defilements, the “makers of signs” are absent from them; and nirvana (MA 2:355 = SA 3:99).

²¹ MA 2:354 f = SA 3:99.

²² D 33.1.10(51)/3:119; S 43.4/4:360; A 3.163/1:299. For a general survey of these 3 kinds of samadhi, see Harvey 1986.

The Visuddhi, magga calls these three samadhis, “the three entrances to liberation” (*tīṇi wimokkha, mukhāni*).²³ It may also be said here that for one who has attained full awakening (that is, become an arhat), his undirected samadhi is so called because he does not need to direct his mind away from any object or towards mental focus; for he is always effortlessly fully aware and mindful.

All arhats by nature dwell in these three kinds of insight knowledge (*vipassanā ñāṇa*): the void abiding (*suññata vihāra*), the signless abiding (*animitta vihāra*) and the undirected [desireless] abiding (*appanīhita vihāra*). **The Paṭisambhidā Commentary** (ch 9: Knowledge of equanimity regarding formations, *saṅkhār’upekkhā, ñāṇa*) describes the nature of the arhat’s mental state in terms of insight knowledge thus:

With regard to “the abiding in emptiness, etc,” by the arhats who wish to abide in insight, without fruition-attainment,

(1) having seen danger in clinging to oneself (*attābhinivesa*), they are inclined to **the “abiding in emptiness”** [“empty abiding”] (*suññata vihāra*, that is, in the voidness of self): they see the fall (*vaya*) (of conditioned dhammas) by equanimity regarding formations under the aspect of the “abiding in emptiness”;

(2) having seen danger in the characteristics of conditioned realities (*saṅkhāra, nimitta*), they are inclined to **the “signless abiding”** (*animitta vihāra*): they see the fall (of conditioned dhammas) by equanimity regarding formations under the aspect of the “signless abiding”; and

(3) having seen danger in the steadfastness of clinging (*tanhā, paṇidhi*), they are inclined to **the “undirected abiding”** (*appanīhita vihāra*): they see the fall (of conditioned dhammas) by equanimity regarding formations under the aspect of the “undirected abiding.” (PmA 1:270)

9 Related suttas

The Cūḷa Suññata Sutta is placed just before **the Mahā Suññata Sutta** (M 122) in the Majjhima Nikāya because they are closely related. While the former relates to the Buddha’s own abiding (in terms of arhathood), the latter details the Buddha’s instruction on how to abide in emptiness (going through all the four stages of sainthood) (M 122/3:109-118).

The Piṇḍapāta Pārisuddhi Sutta (M 151) opens with the Buddha’s asking Sāriputta what abiding he practises such that his faculties are clear and the complexion pure and bright. Sāriputta replies that he constantly abides in emptiness (M 151.1/3:294), here referring to the arhat’s fruition attainment of emptiness (MA 5:106). The Buddha then declares that this abiding of emptiness is also known as “the abiding of a great person” (*mahā, purisa vihāra*) (M 151.2/3:294), so called because the Buddhas, Pratyeka Buddhas and the Tathagata’s great disciples constantly abide in it (MA 5:106).

The Vinaya records a warm conversation between the elders Revata and the 120-rains **Sabba, kāmī**²⁴ just before the convening of the Council of 700 at Vesālī. The elder Sabba, kāmī says that even before his monkhood, while still a householder, he abided in emptiness, and as such had developed it into fullness as a monk. Revata refers to this abiding as “the abiding of a great person” (*mahā, purisa vihāra*) (V 2:304).

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²³ See Vism 21.66-73/657-659.

²⁴ “Sabba, kāmī,” said to be the oldest monk on earth then. He is probably the **Sabba, kāmī** of the Thera, gāthā (Tha 453-458): see Tha:RD 226 n1 & VA 1:34. His took a vow to purify the teaching of some future Buddha during the time of Padumuttara Buddha (ThaA 2:190).

The Lesser Discourse on Emptiness

(M 121/3:104-109)

1 [104] Thus have I heard.

Abiding in emptiness

At one time the Blessed One was staying in the mansion of Migāra's mother in the Pubb'ārāma [the Eastern Monastery] near Sāvattihī.

2 Then, when it was evening, the venerable Ānanda rose from his retreat, went to the Blessed One, and, after saluting him, said this to the Blessed One:

3 "Venerable sir, once the Blessed One was living amongst the Sakyas where there is a Sakya town called Nagaraka. There, venerable sir, I heard and learned this from the Blessed One himself [face to face],²⁵ thus:

'Even now, Ānanda, I am one who is much devoted to abiding in emptiness.'²⁶

Have I heard this correctly, grasped [learned] this correctly, attended to this correctly, remembered this correctly?"²⁷

"Certainly, Ānanda, you have heard it correctly, grasped [learned] it correctly, attended to it correctly, remembered it correctly. As before, Ānanda, so do I now often abide in emptiness.

The perception of forest

4 (1) Ānanda, just as this mansion of Migāra's mother is empty of elephants, cattle, horses and mares, empty of gold and silver, empty of the gathering of women and men, and there is only this non-emptiness, namely, the oneness [unity]²⁸ dependent on the community of monks;²⁹ so, too, a monk—not attending to the perception of village, not attending to the perception of people—attends to **the oneness dependent on the perception of the forest.**³⁰

His mind plunges³¹ into that perception of forest, brightens with faith, becomes steady, and is resolute.³²

He understands thus:

"Whatever disturbances [disruptions]³³ there might be on account of the perception of village, there are none here; whatever disturbances there might be because of the perception of people, there are none here. There is only this much disturbance, namely, the oneness dependent on the perception of forest."³⁴

²⁵ *Bhagavato sammukhā*, lit "from the Blessed One's own mouth."

²⁶ *Suññatā, vihārenāham Ānanda etarahi bahulaṃ viharāmi ti*. Cf V 2:304; M 3:294. See Kvu:SR 142 n4; Dhs:RD 91 n2. On Vasubandhu's polemics based on this passage, see Intro (3) above.

²⁷ *Kacci me taṃ bhante sussutaṃ suggahitaṃ sumanasikataṃ sūpadhāritā ti*. On this episode, see Intro (3).

²⁸ "Oneness" (*ekatta*) = *eka, bhāva* (MA 4:151); one-pointedness of mind (*ek'agg'attā*) (CPD), which makes it syn with *samādhi*.

²⁹ It is important to note here that spiritual practice begins with noticing the "oneness dependent on the community of monks."

³⁰ Comy: He attends to the perception of the forest dependent on the single forest itself, thinking: "This is a forest, this is a tree, this is a mountain, this is a grove." (MA 4:151). Cf **Nagita S** (A 6.42), where Nagita the forest-dweller declares: "I will attend to the oneness that is the perception of forest (*arañña, saññaṃ yeva manasikarissati ekattaṃ*, A 6.42/3:343). In **Thera, gāthā**, the elder **Usabha** similarly declares that he is "one who perceives the forest" (*arañña, saññaṃ*, Tha 110).

³¹ "Plunges," *pakkhandati*, "leaps forward." Comy glosses: *otarati* (goes down into) (MA 4:151), *okkhanditvā pakkhanditvā* (descending into, entering) (MA 1:238; Vism 636). Usu fig: "rejoices in, finds pleasure or satisfaction in, he takes to." See Intro (4).

³² *Tassa arañña, saññāya cittaṃ pakkhandati pasīdati santitthati adhimuccati*. On the underscored, see M 1:186; S 3:133; cf Miln 326; A 2:165, 3:245, 4:442; It 43. Here the last reading *adhimuccati* (found in Be Ce Se & Comy) is preferable to PTS *vimuccati* (he is liberated). This applies throughout the sutta. See Intro (4).

He understands thus:

‘This field of perception³⁵ is empty of the perception of village. This field of perception is empty of the perception of people. There is only this non-emptiness, namely, the oneness dependent on the perception of forest.’

Thus he regards³⁶ what is not there as empty, but as to what remains there, he knows [105] what that is, thus: ‘There is this.’³⁷

Thus, Ānanda, this is his truly real, undistorted, utterly pure descent into emptiness.³⁸

The perception of earth

5 (2) Furthermore, Ānanda, a monk—not attending to the perception of people, not attending to the perception of forest—then attends to **the oneness dependent on the perception of earth**.³⁹

His mind plunges into that perception of earth, and he brightens with faith, steadies his mind and becomes resolute.

SIMILE OF THE BULL’S HIDE. Just as a bull’s hide becomes free from crinkles when fully stretched with a hundred stakes,⁴⁰ even so, Ānanda, a monk—not attending to any of the highs [dry areas] and hollows [swampy areas]⁴¹ of this earth, nor to rivers that are difficult to ford, nor to sharp stumps and thorns, nor to rugged mountains⁴²—attends to the oneness dependent on the perception of earth.

His mind plunges into that perception of earth, brightens with faith, becomes steady, and is resolute.

He understands thus:

³³ “Disturbances,” *darathā*, also: discomfort, troubles, anxiety, care, distress, unease. Syn: *pariḷāha* (fever) (SnA 1:24); cf PmA 3:560. In subsequent usages, “disturbance” has a progressively more refined sense, commensurate to the spiritual level of the practitioner. **Peter Skilling** discusses *daratha* at length, and prefers tr it as “discomfort” or “pain” (1997:352-355), esp since it can be either physical or mental, as attested by the Comy: *pavatta, darathā vā kilesa, darathā vā*, “disturbances due to “goings-on,” events [“existence,” Skilling], or disturbances due to defilements” (MA 4:151). Be that as it may, “disturbance” has both physical and mental senses. Moreover, “discomfort” lacks the forcefulness of “disturbance.”

³⁴ Comy & Sub-Comy (Tīkā): The disturbance of defilements, that of attraction and repulsion—that arises through perception of people are not present here. However, there is still the trouble or disturbance caused by gross states due to lack of the necessary calm (MA 1:151; MAṬ:Be 2:322).

³⁵ “Field of perception,” *saññā, gatam*. Here I follow M:ÑB’s tr throughout. The term appears in **Vatthūpama S** (M 7): *atthi idam atthi hīnam atthi pañitam atthi imassa saññā, gatassa uttarim nissaraṇan ti pajānati*, “He knows thus: ‘There is this, there is the inferior, there is the superior, and beyond there is an escape from this (whole) field of perception.’” (M 7.17/1:39). Comy here explains that this section shows the non-returner’s practice of insight meditation aimed at arhathood. The phrase “**there is this**” refers to the truth of suffering; “there is the inferior,” to the arising of suffering; “the superior,” to the truth of the path; and “the escape from this whole field of perception,” is nirvana, the ending of suffering (MA 1:176).

³⁶ “Regards,” *samanupassati*.

³⁷ *Iti yaṃ hi kho tattha na hoti, tena taṃ suññam samanupassati, yaṃ pana tattha avasiṭṭham hoti, taṃ santam idam atthi ti pajānāti*. Comy to **Vatthūpama S** (M 7.17/1:39) says that the phrase “**there is this**” (*idam atthi ti*) refers to the truth of suffering (MA 1:176): see above §4 n (“Field of perception”).

³⁸ *Evam pi’ssa esā Ānanda yathā, bhuccā avipallatthā parisuddhā suññatāvakkanti bhavati*. This is a refrain throughout the sutta. PTS has wr *suññatā vakkanti ti* throughout.

³⁹ Comy: He abandons the perception of forest and attends to the perception of earth because one cannot achieve any distinction in meditation through the perception of forest, neither access concentration nor full absorption. However, earth can be used as a preliminary object for *kaṣiṇa*, based upon which one produces dhyana, develops insight and attains arhathood (MA 4:153).

⁴⁰ *Seyyathāpi...usabha, cammam sanku, satena suvihataṃ vigata, vasikaṃ*; see J 6:112; Vism 153.

⁴¹ Amplifications based on MA 4:153.

⁴² “The highs...rugged mountains,” *ukkūla, vikūlam nadī, viduggam khānu, kaṇṭakā, dhāram pabbata, visamaṃ*, where *-dhāram* has vl *thānam* (Be). As at A 1:35 (where, however, for *-dhāram* read *-dhānam*, PTS).

‘Whatever disturbances there might be on account of the perception of people, there are none here; whatever disturbances there might be on account of the perception of forest, there are none here. There is only this much disturbance, namely, the oneness dependent on the perception of earth.’

He understands thus:

‘This field of perception is empty of the perception of people. This field of perception is empty of the perception of forest. There is only this non-emptiness, namely, the oneness dependent on the perception of earth.’

Thus he regards what is not there as empty, but as to what remains there, he knows what that is, thus: ‘There is this.’

Thus, Ānanda, this is his truly real, undistorted, utterly pure descent into emptiness.

The base of infinite space

6 (3) Furthermore, Ānanda, a monk—not attending to the perception of forest, not attending to the perception of earth—then attends to **the oneness dependent on the perception of the base of infinite space**.⁴³

His mind plunges into that perception of the base of infinite space, brightens with faith, becomes steady, and is resolute.

He understands thus:

‘Whatever disturbances there might be on account of the perception of forest, there are none here; whatever disturbances there **[106]** might be on account of the perception of earth, there are none here. There is only this much disturbance, namely, the oneness dependent on the perception of the base of infinite space.’

He understands thus:

‘This field of perception is empty of the perception of forest. This field of perception is empty of the perception of earth. There is only this non-emptiness, namely, the oneness dependent on the perception of the base of infinite space.’

Thus he regards what is not there as empty, but as to what remains there, he knows what that is, thus: ‘There is this.’

Thus, Ānanda, this is his truly real, undistorted, utterly pure descent into emptiness.

The base of infinite consciousness

7 (4) Furthermore, Ānanda, a monk—not attending to the perception of earth, not attending to the perception of the base of infinite space—then attends to **the oneness dependent on the perception of the base of infinite consciousness**.

His mind plunges into that perception of the base of infinite consciousness, brightens with faith, becomes steady, and is resolute.

He understands thus:

‘Whatever disturbances there might be on account of the perception of earth, there are none here; whatever disturbances there might be on account of the perception of the base of infinite space, there are none here. There is only this much disturbance, namely, the oneness dependent on the perception of the base of infinite consciousness.’

He understands thus:

‘This field of perception is empty of the perception of earth. This field of perception is empty of the perception of the base of infinite space. There is only this non-emptiness, namely, the oneness dependent on the perception of the base of infinite consciousness.’

Thus he regards what is not there as empty, but as to what remains there, he knows what that is, thus: ‘There is this.’

Thus, Ānanda, this is his truly real, undistorted, utterly pure descent into emptiness.

⁴³ Comy: Having used the perception of earth to attain the 4 dhyanas, he extends the earth-kasiṇa and the removes the kasiṇa-sign to attain the base of infinite space. See Vism 10.6-7.

The base of nothingness

8 (5) Furthermore, Ānanda, a monk—not attending to the perception of the base of infinite space, not attending to the perception of the base of infinite consciousness—then attends to **the oneness dependent on the perception of the base of nothingness**.

His mind plunges into that perception of the base of nothingness, brightens with faith, becomes steady, and is resolute.

He understands thus:

‘Whatever disturbances there might be on account of the perception of the base of infinite space, there are none here; whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of the base of infinite consciousness, there are none here. There is only this much disturbance, namely, the oneness dependent on the perception of the base of nothingness.’

He understands thus:

‘This field of perception is empty of the perception of the base of infinite space. [107] This field of perception is empty of the perception of the base of infinite consciousness. There is only this non-emptiness, namely, the oneness dependent on the perception of the base of nothingness.’

Thus he regards what is not there as empty, but as to what remains there, he knows what that is, thus: ‘There is this.’

Thus, Ānanda, this is his truly real, undistorted, utterly pure descent into emptiness.

The base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception

9 (6) Furthermore, Ānanda, a monk—not attending to the perception of the base of infinite consciousness, not attending to the perception of the base of nothingness—then attends to **the oneness dependent on the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception**.

His mind plunges into that perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, brightens with faith, becomes steady, and is resolute.

He understands thus:

‘Whatever disturbances there might be on account of the perception of the base of infinite consciousness, there are none here; whatever disturbances there might be because on the perception of the base of nothingness, there are none here. There is only this much disturbance, namely, the oneness dependent on the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.’

He understands thus:

‘This field of perception is empty of the perception of the base of infinite consciousness. This field of perception is empty of the perception of the base of nothingness. There is only this non-emptiness, namely, the oneness dependent on the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.’

Thus he regards what is not there as empty, but as to what remains there, he knows what that is, thus: ‘There is this.’

Thus, Ānanda, this is his truly real, undistorted, utterly pure descent into emptiness.

The signless concentration of mind

10 (7) Furthermore, Ānanda, a monk—not attending to the perception of the base of nothingness, not attending to the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception—then attends to **the oneness dependent on the signless concentration of mind**.⁴⁴

His mind plunges into that signless concentration of mind, brightens with faith, becomes steady, and is resolute.

He understands thus:

‘Whatever disturbances there might be on account of the perception of the base of nothingness, there are none here; whatever disturbances there might be because on the perception of the base of neither-

⁴⁴ “The signless concentration of mind,” *animittam ceto, samādhiṃ*. Comy explains this as the concentration of mind in insight (*vipassanā, citta, samādhi*), which, as it is without a permanent sign, is called “**signless**” (*animitta*), so called because it is devoid of the signs of permanence, etc. (MA 4:153)

perception-nor-non-perception, there are none here. There is only this much disturbance, namely, that connected with the six sense-bases dependent on this body and [108] conditioned by life.'

He understands thus:

'This field of perception is empty of the perception of the base of nothingness. This field of perception is empty of the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. There is only this non-emptiness, namely, that connected with the six bases dependent on this body and conditioned by life.'

Thus he regards what is not there as empty, but as to what remains there, he knows what that is, thus: 'There is this.'

Thus, Ānanda, this is his truly real, undistorted, utterly pure descent into emptiness.

Arhathood through the signless concentration of mind

11 (8) Furthermore, Ānanda, a monk, attending to neither the perception of the sphere of nothingness nor the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, attends to the oneness dependent on the signless concentration of mind.

His mind plunges into that **signless concentration of mind**,⁴⁵ brightens with faith, becomes steady, and is resolute.

He understands thus:

'This signless concentration of mind is conditioned and volitionally produced. And whatever is conditioned and volitionally produced is impermanent, subject to ending.'⁴⁶

When he understands thus and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the canker of sense-desire, from the canker of being, and from the canker of ignorance.

When it is liberated, there comes the knowledge: 'Freed am I!'

He understands thus: 'Destroyed is birth. The holy life has been lived. What needs to be done has been done. There is no more of this state of being.'

12 He understands thus:

'Whatever disturbances there might be on account of the canker of sense-desire, these are none here. Whatever disturbances there might be on account of the canker of being, these are none here. Whatever disturbances there might be on account of the canker of ignorance, there are none here.

There is only this much disturbance, namely, that connected with the six sense-bases dependent on this body and conditioned by life.'

He understands thus:

'This field of perception is empty of the canker of sense-desire. This field of perception is empty of the canker of being. This field of perception is empty of the canker of ignorance. There is only this non-emptiness, namely, that connected with the six sense-bases dependent on this body and conditioned by life.'

Thus he regards what is not there as empty, but as to what remains there, he knows what that is, thus: 'There is this.'

Thus, Ānanda, this is his truly real, **[109]** undistorted, utterly pure descent into supreme and unsurpassed⁴⁷ emptiness.

⁴⁵ Comy says that *animitta* (signless) is mentioned again to show "the counter-insight of insight" (*vipassanāya pativipassanaṃ*) (MA 4:154), ie "the application of the principle of insight to the act of consciousness that exercises the function of insight. On the basis of this he attains arahantship" (M:ÑB 1333 n1143). On the signless concentration of mind, see **Animitta Ceto,samādhi Pañha S** (S 40.9) = SD 24.19 Intro (2).

⁴⁶ *Yam kho pana kiñci abhisankhatam abhisañcetaṃ, tad aniccaṃ nirodha,dhamman ti.* This reflection is applied to all the 4 dhyanas so as to switch to "insight" (*vipassanā*) practice. In **Aṭṭhaka,nāgara S** (M 52/1:349-353) & **Dasama S** (A 11.17/5:343), this statement is applied to all the attainments (dhyana, the divine abodes, the formless attainments). Cf **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140.22/3:244).

⁴⁷ "Supreme and unsurpassed," *paramānuttaram*, has been added, which Comy says refers to the "freedom from defilement" (*nirupakkilesam*) and the "supremely free, all-perfect" (*uttara,virahita sabba,seṭṭham*) state of the arhat (MA 4:154).

Universality of abiding in emptiness

13 Ānanda, whatever recluses and brahmin⁴⁸ in the past who attained to and abided in the pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness, they all attained and abided in this same utterly pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness.

Ānanda, whatever recluses and brahmin in the future who will attain to and abide in the pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness, they all will attain to and abide in this same utterly pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness.

Ānanda, whatever recluses and brahmin in the present who attain to and abide in the pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness, they all attain to and abide in this same utterly pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness.

Therefore, Ānanda, you should train yourself thus:

‘We will attain to and abide in utterly pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness.’”

That is what the Blessed One said. The venerable Ānanda rejoiced and approved of the Blessed One’s word.

— evaṃ —

⁴⁸ Comy notes that while “recluses and brahmins” usually refers to outsiders, that sometimes also includes Buddhist monks, here it refers only to the Buddhas and his disciples (MA 4:153). This statement, Analayo points out, is supported by the fact that **Cūḷa Sīha,nāda S** (M 11/1:66) and its Chinese parallels (**MĀ 190** = T1.591a10 & **EĀ 27.2** = T2.644a16), which say that recluses and brahmins outside the Teaching do not really understand the problem posed by clinging to a self-view. As such, he concludes, “one would not expect the Cūḷasuññata Sutta to envisage that outside recluses and brahmins were able to realize emptiness” (2005 ad M 3:109 & n).

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050214 rev 060503; 070119; 081002a