

5

Vimutt'āyatana Sutta

The Discourse on the Grounds for Liberation | A 5.26¹

Theme: Can liberation be won other than through meditation?

Translated by Piya Tan ©2006

1 The joy of the Dharma**1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY****1.1.1 The 5 grounds**

This short remarkable Sutta presents 5 different ways whereby the mind can be cultivated to reach liberation. **The 5 grounds for liberation** (*vimutt'āyatana*) in terms of occasions are as follows:²

- | | |
|------------------------------|-------|
| (1) listening to the Dharma | [§2]; |
| (2) teaching the Dharma | [§3]; |
| (3) reciting the Dharma | [§4]; |
| (4) reflecting on the Dharma | [§5]; |
| (5) meditation | [§6]. |

Each of these exercises should lead us to “knowing the goal and the Dharma” [“knowing the spirit of the Dharma and the letter of the Dharma”] (*attha,paṭisaṃvedī ca hoti dhamma,paṭisaṃvedī ca*), that is, understanding the true purpose of the teaching and the wisdom it entails.

1.1.2 Two benefits

The Sutta mentions two benefits of any of these method, thus:

- (1) freeing the mind of the mental hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*),³ that is, to attain dhyana, or at least some samadhi;
- (2) freeing oneself of all the mental influxes (*āsava*),⁴ that is, total liberation or awakening as an arhat.

1.2 “KNOWING THE GOAL AND THE DHARMA”

1.2.1 The importance of the interesting phrase—“knowing the goal and the Dharma”—is found in at least four other discourses, such as **the Mahā Gopālaka Sutta** (M 33), where the two terms—*attha,veda* and *dhamma,veda*—appear in the same context, that of listening to the Dharma:⁵

*Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu Tathāgata-p,pavedite
dhamma,vinaye desiyamāne
labhati attha,vedam,
labhati dhamma,vedam,
labhati dhammūpasamhitam pāmujjam ...*

Here, bhikshus, a monk, when the Dharma and Vinaya of the Tathagata is being taught, gains inspired knowledge in the goal, gains inspired knowledge in the Dharma, gains gladness connected with Dharma; ...
(M 33,10/1:221,80, 33,22/1:224,2-3)

1.2.2 It is interesting to note that *veda*, which usually means “knowledge,” here has the sense of “gladness or inspiration” connected with spiritual knowing. As pointed out elsewhere,⁶ *attha,veda* (“inspired knowledge in the goal”) refers to a clear understanding of the purpose of the spiritual life or our purpose of life in general, that is, awakening: this is the quality the streamwinner who is a faith-follower (*saddhā'nu-*

¹ This tr with brief nn is also found at SD 3.2(5.2).

² These key points are also given in **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,2.1(25)/3:241).

³ On the 5 mental hindrances, see **Nīvaraṇa**, SD 32.1.

⁴ There are the 4 mental influxes (*āsava*), those of sensual desire (*kām'āsava*), existence (*bhav'āsava*), views (*diṭṭh'āsava*) and ignorance (*avijj'āsava*). These 4 influxes are also called “floods” (*ogha*) or “yokes” (*yoga*): D 16,10.4 n (SD 9). The set of 3 influxes (omitting views) is prob older: M 9; A 3.59, 3.67, 6.63 & SD 30.3 (1.3.2).

⁵ See (**Agata,phala**) **Mahānāma S** (A 6.10), SD 15.3.

⁶ See (**Agata,phala**) **Mahānāma S** (A 6.10), SD 15.3 (3.2).

sārī).⁷ In this Sutta, this refers to one who “knows the goal” (*attha,paṭisāvedī*). **Dhamma,veda** (“inspired knowledge in the Dharma”) refers to a deep understanding of reality, which characterizes the streamwinner who is a truth-follower (*dhammānusārī*).⁸ In this Sutta, this is one who “knows the Dharma” (*dhamma,-paṭisāvedī*).

2 The way to mental concentration

2.1 Mental mastery through meditation entails the gradual concentration of the mind—called the 5 grounds of liberation (*pañca vimutt’āyatana*), that is, the stages of mental liberation—that is, the attaining of dhyana—thus:⁹

knowing the goal and the Dharma [knowing the Dharma in the spirit and in the letter],	
<i>pāmujaṃ [pāmojjaṃ] jāyati</i>	<u>gladness</u> ¹⁰ arises in him;
<i>pamuditassa pīti jāyati</i>	because of gladness, <u>zest</u> arises;
<i>pīti,manassa kāyo passambhati</i>	because of zest, the body ¹¹ becomes <u>tranquil</u> ;
<i>passadha,kāyo sukhaṃ vedeti</i>	when the body is tranquil, he feels <u>happiness</u> ;
<i>sukhino cittaṃ samādhīyati</i>	a happy mind becomes <u>concentrated</u> . [§2.3]

2.2 The Aṅguttara Commentary explains that as we listen to the Dharma, we come to know about the dhyanas, insight, the paths and the fruits; and knowing about them, zest arises in us. On account of that zest, we are able to bring the meditation subject to the level of access concentration (*upacāra samādhī*),¹² develop insight, and attain arhathood. In this connection, it is said: “The mind becomes concentrated.” (AA 3:230)

2.3 The importance of this set of stages is attested by its presence in numerous places throughout the Nikāyas, where it usually alludes to the abandoning of the 5 mental hindrances:¹³

Sāmañña,phala Sutta ¹⁴	D 2,75.1/1:73
Paṭṭha,pāda Sutta ¹⁵	D 9/1:182
Subha Sutta	D 10/1:207
Te,vijja Sutta ¹⁶	D 13/1:250
Saṅgīti Sutta ¹⁷	D 33/3:241 (x2)
Das’uttara Sutta	D 34/3:279 (x5), 288
Vatth’upama Sutta	M 37/1:37 (x3), 38

⁷ One who is filled with resolution (*adhimokkha*) and, in considering the formations as impermanent, gains the faculty of faith, at the path-moment of streamwinning, is called faith follower. (Vism 21.74-78/659 f)

⁸ One who is filled with wisdom (*paññā*) and, in considering the formations as non-self, gains the faculty of wisdom, at the moment of streamwinning, is called a truth (or Dharma) follower. (Vism 21.74-78/659 f)

⁹ See **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,2.1(25)/3:241).

¹⁰ Comy explains *pāmuja* or *pāmojja* as “weak zest” (*taruṇa,pīti*) (AA 3:230).

¹¹ Comy glosses “body” (*kāya*) here as “the mental body” (*nāma,kāya*), ie, the mind or mental aggregates (feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness) (AA 2:230; ThĀ 160): see **Vīññāṇa**, SD 17.8a (5.2).

¹² “Access concentration” (*upacāra,samādhī*). In meditation, an entirely clear and immovable image (*nimitta*) arising at a high degree of concentration is called **counter-image** (*paṭibhāga,nimitta*). As soon as this image arises, the stage of neighbourhood (or access) concentration (*upacāra,samādhī*) is reached. For details, see SD 13.1 (3.1.4) (7); also see BDict: *kaṣiṇa,samādhī*.

¹³ See Gethin 2001:154 f.

¹⁴ SD 8.10.

¹⁵ SD 7.14.

¹⁶ SD 1.8.

¹⁷ SD 3.2; 21.5 (this tr).

Cūḷa Assa,pura Sutta	M 40/1:283
Pamāda Vihāri Sutta	S 35.97/4:78 (x2), 79 (x2)
Pāṭaliya Sutta	S 42.13/4:352 (x2), 353-358
Bhikkhuṇ'upassaya Sutta	S 47.10/5:156 (x2)
Nandiya Sakka Sutta	S 47.40/5:398 (x3), 399
Parisā Sutta	A 3.93/1:243 f
Vimutt'āyatana Sutta ¹⁸	A 5.26/3:21, 22 (x2), 23, 25
(Agata,phala) Mahā,nāma Sutta ¹⁹	A 6.10/3:285 (x2), 286, 287 (x2), 288
(Anussati) Mahā,nāma Sutta	A 11.12/5:329, 330 (x2), 331 (x2), 332, 334
Paṭisambhidā,magga	Pm 1:85, 86 (x3)

2.4 The first five suttas of **the Book of Tens** (*Dasaka Nipāta*) of the Āṅguttara Nikāya give an extended version of this sequence, one factor leading to the next right up to liberation itself, thus:²⁰

<i>kusalāni sīlāni</i>	wholesome moral conduct;
<i>avippaṭisāro</i>	non-regret;
<i>pāmuḷja</i>	<u>gladness</u> ;
<i>pīti</i>	<u>zest</u> ;
<i>passaddhi</i>	<u>tranquillity</u> ;
<i>sukha</i>	<u>happiness</u> ;
<i>samādhi</i>	<u>concentration</u> ;
<i>yathā,bhūta,ñāṇa,dassana</i>	the knowledge and vision of true reality;
<i>nibbidā,virāgo</i>	repulsion and dispassion;
<i>vimutti,ñāṇa,dassana</i>	the knowledge and vision of liberation.

2.5 The Paññā Sutta (A 8.2), is another discourse related to the Vimutt'āyatana Sutta, addressed to a monk who wishes to succeed in the theory and practice of the Dharma. Eight conditions conducive to such a cultivation are summarized, namely:

- (1) He lives near the teacher, cultivating moral virtue, and shows lovingkindness to the teacher.
- (2) He questions the teacher from time to time.
- (3) Having heard the Dharma, he practises solitude of body and of mind.
- (4) He is morally virtuous, keeping to the monastic training and rules.
- (5) He is learned in the Dharma and has a good memory.
- (6) He is assertive in the Dharma practice and duties.
- (7) He keeps in touch with the order, practises right speech, and enjoys noble silence.
- (8) He constantly observes the rise and fall of the five aggregates. (A 8.2/4:151-155), SD 44.13

3 The 3 wisdoms

3.1 Underlying the 5 grounds for liberation are **the 3 wisdoms** or 3 levels of knowledge, that is,

- (1) “wisdom through listening” (*suta,mayā paññā*), that is, knowledge arising through receiving teachings, especially a direct transmission from a living teacher;
- (2) “wisdom through thinking” (*cintā,mayā paññā*), that is, knowledge arising through recollection and reflection;
- (3) “wisdom through mental cultivation” (*bhāvanā,mayā paññā*), that is, the understanding arising through meditation, that is, a direct experience of true reality. (D 3:219; Vbh 324)

¹⁸ SD 21.5 (this tr).

¹⁹ SD 15.3.

²⁰ See eg (**Dasaka**) **Cetanā'karaṇīya S** (A 10.2/5:2-4), SD 41.6; also Gethin 2001:154 f.

Applying the 3 wisdoms model to the 5 grounds of liberation, we can classify them in this manner:

- | | | |
|------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| (1) listening to the Dharma | } | wisdom through listening; |
| (2) teaching the Dharma | | wisdom through thinking; |
| (3) reciting the Dharma | | |
| (4) reflecting on the Dharma | | |
| (5) meditation | | wisdom through cultivation. |

3.2 This categorization of the 5 grounds for liberation is not an hierarchical or progressive one, but one of *emphasis*. In every ground, there are aspects of the 3 wisdoms present. In the case of “listening to the Dharma,” for example, “wisdom through listening” would be predominant. But in every case, there is some level of thinking. In the case of “meditation,” however, there is a minimum of thinking, restricted mostly to the beginning of the practice, or after emerging from some level of concentration, to reflect on impermanence, or a related meditation.²¹

The Discourse on the Grounds for Liberation

A 5.26

1 Bhikshus, there are these 5 grounds²² for liberation by which the unliberated mind of a monk,²³ dwelling heedful and exertive, finds liberation; or by which the mental influxes,²⁴ not wholly destroyed, become wholly destroyed, where the unattained unsurpassed safety from the yoke is attained. What are the five?

(1) Listening to the Dharma: wisdom through listening

2 Here, bhikshus, the teacher or a certain colleague in the holy life [a certain fellow brahmachari], in the role of a teacher,²⁵ teaches the Dharma to a monk.²⁶

²¹ For a vertical or progressive treatment of the 3 wisdoms, see **Levels of learning**, SD 40a.4 (5.1).

²² *Āyatanāni* = *kāraṇāni* (AA 3:230), “cause, reason; ground; motive; means” (DP).

²³ What the **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10) comy explains of “a monk” (*bhikkhu*), applies here, too: it may refer to either an ordained monastic or anyone who is meditating (DA 3:756; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251). See **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10,3) + SD 13.1 (3.1.1).

²⁴ The term *āsava* (lit “inflow”) comes from *ā-savati* “flows in, flows out” (i.e. either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as taints (“deadly taints”, RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), influx, or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists 4 *āsava*: the influx of (1) sense-desire (*kāma’sava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence or becoming (*bhava’sava*), (3) views (*diṭṭha’sava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*) (D 16,2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These 4 are also known as “floods” (*ogha*) and “yokes” (*yoga*). The list of 3 influxes (omitting the influx of views) [43] is prob older and is found more frequently in the Suttas (D 33,1.10(20)/3:216.; M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these *āsava*s is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict under *āsava*.

²⁵ “In the role of a teacher,” *garu-t,ṭhāniya*, which **Paññā S** (A 8.2/4:151) glosses as “one who is respectable and esteemed, being a condition giving rise to respect” (*gārav’uppatti,paccaya,bhūtam garu,bhāvanīyam*, AA 4:71). Alt trs: “occasioning reverence” (ItA:M 396), or “in the standing of a teacher” (PED). I take *garu,bhāvanīya* (“respected and esteemed”) as dvandva (as at **M 6,3/1:33; A 3:111-114** ×14, 136 ×2, 195 f ×4, 262 ×2, **4:2** ×4, 32, 157 ×4, 361, 5:131): see **Piya Mitta S 2** (A 7.36), where they form 2 of the qualities of a worthy friend, viz: loving (*piya*), pleasant (*manāpa*), worthy of respect (*garu*), worthy of esteem (*bhāvanīya*), a speaker (*vatta*), one patient with words

2.2 Bhikshus, just as the monk listens to the Dharma taught by the teacher or the colleague in the holy life in the role of a teacher,

he knows the goal and he knows the Dharma [he knows the spirit of the Dharma and the letter of the Dharma].²⁷

2.3 Knowing the goal and knowing the Dharma,

<u>gladness</u>	arises in him;	<i>pāmuḍḍa</i> [<i>pāmoḍḍa</i>]
because of gladness,	<u>zest</u> arises;	<i>pīti</i>
because of zest,	the body becomes <u>tranquil</u>	<i>passadha</i>
when the body is tranquil,	he feels <u>happy</u> ;	<i>sukha</i>
a happy mind becomes	<u>concentrated</u> ;	<i>samādhīyati</i> ²⁸

2.4 This, bhikshus, is the first ground for liberation where the unliberated mind of a monk, dwelling heedful and exertive, finds liberation;

or where the mental influxes, not wholly destroyed, become wholly destroyed, where the unattained unsurpassed safety from the yoke is attained.

(2) Teaching the Dharma: wisdom through thinking

3 Furthermore, bhikshus, *neither the Teacher or a certain colleague in the holy life, in the role of a teacher, teaches the Dharma to a monk*;

3.2 but he himself teaches the Dharma in detail to others just as he has heard it, just as he has mastered it in theory.²⁹

3.3 Bhikshus, just as the monk [22] *teaches the Dharma in detail to others just as he has heard it, just as he has mastered it in theory,*

he knows the goal and he knows the Dharma.

3.4 Knowing the goal and knowing the Dharma,

gladness	arises in him;
because of gladness,	zest arises;
because of zest,	the (mental) body becomes tranquil;
when the body is tranquil,	he feels happy;
a happy mind becomes	concentrated.

3.5 This, bhikshus, is the second ground for liberation where the unliberated mind of a monk, dwelling heedful and exertive, finds liberation;

or where the mental influxes, not wholly destroyed, become wholly destroyed, where the unattained unsurpassed safety from the yoke is attained.

(*vacana-k, khama*), who converses profoundly (*gambhīraṇ ca kathāṃ kathā hoti*), and does not lead one in wrong [unreasonable] ways (*no c' aṭṭhane niyojeti*) (A 7.36/4:32).

²⁶ *Idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhuno satthā dhammaṃ deseti aññataro vā garu-ṭṭhāniyo sa, brahma, cārī*. Examples of those who attained the path by such a listening are Bāhiya Dāru.ciriya, who attains arhathood, as recorded in (**Arahatta**) **Bāhiya S** (U 1.10/6-9), SD 33.7; assassins hired by Deva, datta to kill the Buddha (Cv 7.3.6-8 @ V 2:192 f) & Suppabuddha (U 5.3/49), all of whom became streamwinners. On the possible arising of “dharma-restlessness” (*dhamm'uddhacca*) on such occasions, see SD 41.5 (5.1.2).

²⁷ *Yathā yathā, bhikkhave, tassa bhikkhuno satthā dhammaṃ deseti, aññataro vā garuṭṭhāniyo sa, brahm.acārī tathā tathā so tasmīṃ dhamme attha, paṭisaṃvedī ca hoti Dhamma, paṭisaṃvedī ca*. On *attha, paṭisaṃvedī... dhamma, -paṭisaṃvedī*, see (1).

²⁸ Here, Comy explains “mind becomes concentrated” (*cittāṃ samādhīyati*) as referring to the samadhi of having attained the fruit of arhathood (*arahatta, phala, samādhinā*, AA 3:230). However, it is clear from the closing para of each section that these methods are capable of making us “learners,” or “where the mental influxes, not wholly destroyed, become wholly destroyed,” arhats.

²⁹ *Api ca kho yathā, sutāṃ yathā, pariyattaṃ dhammaṃ vitthārena paresaṃ deseti. Yathā yathā, bhikkhave, bhikkhu yathā, sutāṃ yathā, pariyattaṃ dhammaṃ vitthārena paresaṃ deseti*. “Mastered it in theory,” *yathā, pariyattaṃ*. Cf **Saddhamma Sammosa S 2** (A 5.155, 3/3:177). A famous case here is that of the monk Nāgasena, who attains the fruit of streamwinning (*sotāpatti, phala*), reflecting on what he has just taught to a woman lay-follower (Miln 16).

(3) Reciting the Dharma: wisdom through thinking

4 Furthermore, bhikshus, *neither the Teacher or a certain colleague in the holy life, in the role of a teacher, teaches the Dharma to a monk;*

4.2 *nor he himself teaches the Dharma in detail to others just as he has heard it, just as he has mastered it in theory;*

4.3 but he himself recites the Dharma in detail to others, just as he has heard it, just as he has mastered it in theory.³⁰

4.4 Bhikshus, just as the monk recites the Dharma to others, he knows the goal and he knows the Dharma, [D 3:242]

he knows the goal and he knows the Dharma.

4.5 Knowing the goal and knowing the Dharma,
 gladness arises in him;
 because of gladness, zest arises;
 because of zest, the body becomes tranquil;
 when the body is tranquil, he feels happy;
 a happy mind becomes concentrated.

4.6 This, bhikshus, is the third ground for liberation where the unliberated mind of a monk, dwelling heedful and exertive, finds liberation;

or where the mental influxes, not wholly destroyed, become wholly destroyed, where the unattained unsurpassed safety from the yoke is attained.

(4) Reflecting on the Dharma: wisdom through thinking

5 Furthermore, bhikshus, *neither the Teacher or a certain colleague in the holy life, in the role of a teacher, teaches the Dharma to a monk;*

5.2 *nor he himself teaches the Dharma in detail to others just as he has heard it, just as he has mastered it in theory;*

5.3 *nor does he recites the Dharma in detail to others, just as he has heard it, just as he has mastered it in theory;*

5.4 but he himself applies his mind to the Dharma, [23] sustains the thought, mentally reflects on it, just as he has heard it, just as he has mastered it in theory.³¹

5.5 Bhikshus, just as this monk applies his mind to the Dharma, sustains the thought, mentally reflects on it,

he knows the goal and he knows the Dharma.

5.6 Knowing the goal and knowing the Dharma,
 gladness arises in him;
 because of gladness, zest arises;
 because of zest, the body becomes tranquil;
 when the body is tranquil, he feels happy;
 a happy mind becomes concentrated.

5.7 This, bhikshus, is the fourth ground for liberation where the unliberated mind of a monk, dwelling heedful and exertive, finds liberation;

or where the mental influxes, not wholly destroyed, become wholly destroyed, where the unattained unsurpassed safety from the yoke is attained.

(5) Meditating: wisdom through cultivation

6 Furthermore, bhikshus, *neither the Teacher or a certain colleague in the holy life, in the role of a teacher, teaches the Dharma to a monk;*

³⁰ *Api ca kho yathā,sutaṃ yathā,pariyattaṃ dhammaṃ vitthārena sajjhāyaṃ karoti.*

³¹ *Api ca kho yathā,sutaṃ yathā,pariyattaṃ dhammaṃ cetasā anuvitakketi anuvicāreti manasānupekkhati.*

6.2 *nor does he himself teach the Dharma in detail to others, just as he has heard it, just as he has mastered it in theory;*

6.3 *nor does he recite the Dharma in detail to others, just as he has heard it, just as he has mastered it in theory;*

6.4 *nor does he apply his mind, initiate his application, sustain his application, to the Dharma, just as he has heard it, just as he has mastered it in theory;*

6.5 but **he himself properly grasps some concentration-sign**,³² having properly considered it, having applied his mind to it, having well penetrated it with wisdom.³³

6.6 Bhikshus, just as this monk properly grasps some concentration-sign, having properly considered it, having applied his mind to it, having well penetrated it with wisdom, he knows the goal and he knows the Dharma.

6.7 Knowing the goal and knowing the Dharma,

gladness	arises in him;
because of gladness,	zest arises;
because of zest,	the body becomes tranquil;
when the body is tranquil,	he feels happy;
a happy mind becomes	concentrated.

6.8 This, bhikshus, is the fifth ground for liberation where the unliberated mind of a monk, dwelling heedful and exertive, finds liberation;

or where the mental influxes, not wholly destroyed, become wholly destroyed, where the unattained unsurpassed safety [24] from the yoke is attained.

7 These, bhikshus, are the 5 grounds for liberation by which the unliberated mind of a monk, dwelling heedful and exertive, finds liberation; or by which the mental influxes, not wholly destroyed, become wholly destroyed, where the unattained unsurpassed safety from the yoke is attained.

— evaṃ —

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³² **Analayo:** The last reads more literally: “having well grasped some sign of concentration, having well given attention to it, having well held it [in one’s mind], having well penetrated it with wisdom.” Though in some Pāli discourses the “sign of concentration” stands for the vision of a corpse in decay (D 3:226 & A 2:17), the original intention of the description of the fifth ground for liberation need not have been restricted to contemplating a corpse, but could be understood to comprise any sign of concentration that can be apprehended during meditation practice.

On each of these five occasions for liberation, what according to the description given in the Pāli discourses takes place is that one comes to have a direct grasp of the teachings in spirit and letter, due to which delight and joy arise, which in turn lead to tranquillity and concentration.

Judging from this description, it seems that, due to the direct grasp of the teachings arrived at by way of any of these 5 grounds for liberation, 3 qualities are brought into being that are also part of the standard listing of the factors of awakening: joy (*pīti*), tranquillity (*passaddhi*), and concentration (*samādhi*). (*Craving & Liberation*, 2008: 173 f) (MS).

³³ *Api ca khv-assa aññataraṃ samādhi, nimittaṃ sugghitaṃ hoti sumanasikataṃ sūpadhāritaṃ suppaṭividdhaṃ paññāya.*