1 Suddh’āvāsa

The (Nānā,karaṇa) Mettā Sutta (A 4.126) shows how the proper cultivation of the four divine abodes (lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity) results in rebirth in the Pure Abodes (suddh’āvāsa), that is, as non-returners. The Pure Abodes are the highest of the form world (rūpa dhātu), inhabited exclusively by non-returners, who live there in bliss of the fourth dhyāna to finish off the remnants of their karma before gaining nirvana. As such, this sphere is unique in being the only one that is supramundane (lok’uttara). The state of cessation of perception and feeling is also supramundane, but it is, strictly speaking, only a sphere (āyatana), that is, a meditative state, not a realm of existence.

The Suddh’āvāsa devas are of five kinds with very long life-spans lasting aeons. They are reborn in these five realms of the Pure Abodes, according to the predominance of their spiritual faculty, thus:

| akaniṁtha | The supreme [peerless] | 16,000 aeons | wisdom faculty |
| sudassī | The clear-visioned | 8,000 aeons | concentration faculty |
| sudassa | The clear-beauty | 4,000 aeons | mindfulness faculty |
| atappa | The serene [untroubled] | 2,000 aeons | effort faculty |
| aviha | The durable [non-declining] | 1,000 aeons | faith faculty |

(V 3:4 = D 3:51, 111 = It 99; D 1:14; A 2:142)

The (Bojjhaṅga) Sila Sutta (S 46.3) mentions two other kinds of non-returners who are not reborn in Suddh’āvāsa, that is, those attain non-return “early in this very life” (in our world), and those who attain non-return at the moment of death.² [2]

2 Non-return

2.1 Definition of Non-returner. A non-returner (anāgāmī) is so called because he (or she) is a saint who has overcome all those mental fetters that bind us to the sense-world, so that he “spontaneously arises” (is reborn) in the Pure Abodes, and is no more reborn (that is, does not return) to this world. The Aṭṭhaka, nāgara Sutta (M 52) explains:

Here, houselord, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from wholesome states, a monk attains to and dwells in the first dhyāna that is accompanied by initial application and sustained application, with zest and joy born of solitude.

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¹ See also D 3:237; M 3:103; Vbh 425; Pug 42-46.
For a cosmological map, see Kevaḍḍha S (D 11) = SD 1.7 Appendix; for world cycle, see Aggañña S (D 27) = SD 2.19.

² S 46.3.13/5:69 f. For full sutta, see (Bojjhaṅga) Sila S (S 46.3/5:69) = SD 10.15. See also (Nānā,karaṇa) Puggala S (A 4.124/2:128) = SD 23.8b.

³ These are called “the lower fetters” (oram,bhāgiya sāniyojana), ie the first 5 of the 10 fetters, which are: (1) personality view (sakkāya,diṭṭhi), (2) persistent doubt (vicikicchā), (3) attachment to rules and rites (sīla-b, bata,-parāmāsa), (4) sensual lust (kāma, rāga), (5) repulsion (patigha), (6) greed for form existence (rūpa, rāga), (7) greed for formless existence (arūpa, rāga), (8) conceit (māna), (9) restlessness (uddhacca), (10) ignorance (avijjā) (S 5:61, A 10.13/5:17; Vbh 377). In some places, no 5 (patigha) is replaced by illwill (vyāpāda). The higher fetters (ud-dham,bhāgiya sāniyojana) are (6-10), and so called because they bind us to rebirth in the form or formless realms. They are called “fetters” (sāniyojana) because they shackle one to the samsaric world of negative habits and suffering.

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He considers and understands thus: “This first dhyana is conditioned and volitionally formed. Whatever is conditioned and volitionally formed is impermanent, subject to ending.”

If he is steady in that, he reaches the destruction of the influxes. If he does not reach the destruction of the influxes because of the desire in dharmas [states], the delight in dharmas, then with the destruction of the five lower fetters, he becomes one who would reappear spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes) and there attain final nirvana without ever returning from that world.

(M 52.4/1:351) = SD 41.2

Here the context is the first dhyana, but the Sutta then follows up with each of the other spheres—the remaining three form dhyanas and the first three formless attainments—that is, right to the sphere of nothingness (ākāśāniññatā). After attaining each or any of these spheres and mastering it, the meditator examines it to be impermanent. If he is successful in doing this, he becomes an arhat; but if he still has some attachment to any of the meditative states (dhamma), he becomes a non-returner.

2.2 Five kinds of non-returners. A list of five kinds of non-returners is given in the (Bojjhaṅga) Sīla Sutta (S 46.3). The Sutta says that when we properly cultivate the seven awakening-factors, we can expect one of two wholesome results:

(1) we attain final knowledge early in this very life, or
(2) if not, then we attain final knowledge at the time of death, or we become one of these five kinds of non-returners, thus:

(3) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life or at the time of death, then with the utter destruction of the five lower fetters, one becomes an attainer of nirvana in the intermediate state (antarā, parinibbāyā) [D 3:237].
(4) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life, or at the time of death, or in the interval, then with the utter destruction of the five lower fetters, one becomes an attainer of nirvana upon landing (upahacca, parinibbāyā) [D 3:237].
(5) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life, or at the time of death, or in the interval, or upon landing,
then with the utter destruction of the five lower fetters, one becomes an attainer of nirvana without exertion (asankhāra,parinibbāyī) [D 3:237].  
(6) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life, or at the time of death, or in the interval, or upon landing, 
then with the utter destruction of the five lower fetters, one becomes an attainer of nirvana with exertion (sa,sankhāra,parinibbāyī) [D 3:237].  
(7) If one does not attain final knowledge early in this very life, or at the time of death, or in the interval, or upon landing, or with exertion, 
then with the utter destruction of the five lower fetters, one becomes one bound upstream, heading towards the Akanittha realm (uddhaṁsoto Akanittha,gāmi) [D 3:237].

(S 46.3.13/5:69 f)  

The (Bojjaṅga) Sila Sutta (S 46.3) discusses these five types of non-returners in the same order as the list in the Saṅgiṭi Sutta (D 33), listing them after those who become arhats “at the time of dying.” This order clearly implies that a decreasing rate of spiritual attainment. “This would certainly make it likely,” concludes Peter Harvey, “that the first of the five types of non-returners attains nibbāna “in between” death and rebirth.” The next three of the non-returners (nos 4-6 above) is seen as one who comes to attain nirvana sometime between halfway in his life-span there and his death. The fifth kind of non-returner is reborn in each of the five Pure Abodes until he attains nirvana in the highest abode. (Pug 17)

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The Second Discourse on (the Diversity of) Lovingkindness  
A 4.126

1 Bhikshus, there are these four persons to be found in the world. What are the four?

Lovingkindness and the Suddh’āvāsa devas

1.2 (1) Here, bhikshus, a certain person, with a heart of lovingkindness, dwells suffusing one quarter; so, too, the second; so, too, the third; so, too, the fourth; thus above, below, across, everywhere, and to everyone as well as to himself, he dwells suffusing all the world with lovingkindness.

10 Asankhāra,parinibbāyī (D 3:237). BDict: “Asankhārika-citta, an Abhidhamma term signifying a ‘state of consciousness arisen spontaneously,’ ie without previous deliberations, preparation, or prompting by others; hence: ‘unprepared, unprompted.’ This term and its counterpart (sasankhāra [see foll n]), probably go back to a similar distinction in the Suttas [A 4.171; ‘Path’ 184]. See Table I; examples in Vism 14.84 f.” (normalized)

11 Sa,sankhāra,parinibbāyī (D 3:237). BDict: “Sasankhārika-citta (in Dhs: sasankhārena): a prepared, or prompted, state of consciousness, arisen after prior deliberation (eg weighing of motives) or induced by others (command, advice, persuasion)—see Table I; exemplified in Vism 14.84 f.” (normalized).

12 S 46.3/5:69 f. For full sutta, see (Bojjaṅga) Sila S (S 46.3/5:69) = SD 10.15. For a list of suttas mentioning the 5 kinds of non-returners, see Is rebirth immediate? SD 2.17 (4.4).

13 D 33.1.9/3:237.

14 That is, no (3) in the above list.

15 P Harvey, Selfless Mind, Richmond, UK, 1955:100.
that is vast, grown great [exalted], immeasurable, without hate, without ill-will.

1.3 INSIGHT REFRAIN. Whatever states that are therein, by way of form, of feeling, of perception, of formations, of consciousness,

he regards them as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien [as being other], as breaking up, as empty, as not self.

1.4 NON-RETURN. After death, when the body breaks up, he is reborn in companionship with the gods of the Pure Abodes [Suddh’āvāsa devas]. This rebirth, bhikshus, is not shared with the worldling.

Compassion and the Suddh’āvāsa devas

2 (2) Further, bhikshus, here, a certain person,

with a heart of compassion, he dwells suffusing one quarter,

so, too, the second; so, too, the third; so, too, the fourth;

thus above, below, across, everywhere, and to everyone as well as to himself,

he dwells suffusing all the world with compassion

that is vast, grown great [exalted], immeasurable, without hate, without ill-will.

2.2 INSIGHT REFRAIN. Whatever states that are therein, by way of form, of feeling, of perception, of formations, of consciousness,

he regards them as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien [as being other], as breaking up, as empty, as not self.

2.3 NON-RETURN. After death, when the body breaks up, he is reborn in companionship with the gods of the Pure Abodes [Suddh’āvāsa devas].

This rebirth, bhikshus, is not shared with the worldling.

Gladness and the Suddh’āvāsa devas

3 (3) Further, bhikshus, here, a certain person,

with a heart of gladness, he dwells suffusing one quarter,

so, too, the second; so, too, the third; so, too, the fourth;

thus above, below, across, everywhere, and to everyone as well as to himself,

he dwells suffusing all the world with gladness

that is vast, grown great [exalted], immeasurable, without hate, without ill-will.

3.2 INSIGHT REFRAIN. Whatever states that are therein, by way of form, of feeling, of perception, of formations, of consciousness,

he regards them as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien [as being other], as breaking up, as empty, as not self.

16 The mind “grown great” (maha-g.gatā) or exalted perception refers to the mind in dhyana, ie in the form sphere (rūpāvacara). See Catuttha Jhāna Pañha S (S 40.4), SD 24.14 (4).

17 The recurrence of these last two phrases—“without hate, without ill will”—attests to the fact that lovingkindness is the basis for all the other three abodes, ie, they are actually a refinement of lovingkindness applied on deeper and broader levels.

18 These are the 5 aggregates (pañca-k, khandha): see SD 17.

19 “Impermanent...not self,” anicca dukkhatro rogato gandhato aghato abādhato parato palokato suññato anattato: as at M 1:435, 500; A 4:422 f; cf A 2:128; Miln 418. Comy says that the marks of suffering are sixfold (dukkhatro rogato gandhato aghato abādhato), the impermanence twofold (anicca palokato), the not-self threefold (parato suññato anattato) (MA 3:146). This refrain (and the rest) shows the attainment of calm (samatha), leading to the cultivation of insight (vipassanā), or “insight preceded by calm” (samatha, pubbangamā vipassanā), ie, on emerging from dhyana, one contemplates on it as an object of insight, reflecting it as having arisen through conditions, esp volition: see Mahā Māluṅkyā,putta S (M 649-16/1:435-437) = SD 21.10; see also Aṭṭhaka,nagara S (M 52.4/1:350) = SD 41.2, where Comy says that this is samatha, pubbangamā vipassanā; see (Yuganaddha) Paṭipadā S (A 4.170/2:157) = SD 41.5. See Intro (3.2).

20 Ayaṁ, bhikkhave, upapatti asādhāranā puthujjanehi.
3.3 NON-RETURN. After death, when the body breaks up, he is reborn in companionship with the gods of the Pure Abodes [Suddhāvāsa devas].
 This rebirth, bhikshus, is not shared with the worldling.

Equanimity and the Suddhāvāsa devas

4 (4) Furthermore, bhikshus, here, a certain person, a heart of equanimity, he dwells suffusing one quarter, so, too, the second; so, too, the third; so, too, the fourth; thus above, below, across, everywhere, and to everyone as well as to himself, he dwells suffusing all the world with equanimity that is vast, grown great [exalted], immeasurable, without hate, without ill-will.

4.2 INSIGHT REFRAIN. Whatever states that are therein, by way of form, of feeling, of perception, of formations, of consciousness,
 he regards them as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien [as being other], as breaking up, as empty, as not self.

4.3 NON-RETURN. After death, when the body breaks up, he is reborn in companionship with the gods of the Pure Abodes [Suddhāvāsa devas].
 This rebirth, bhikshus, is not shared with the worldling.

These, bhikshus, are the four kinds of individuals existing in the world.

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