

Ākāsānañc'āyatana Pañha Sutta

The Discourse on the Question of the Sphere of Infinite Space

[How to progress in the sphere of infinite space]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 40.5/4:266)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2008

Rūpārūp'ārammaṇa Sukha Sutta

The Discourse on the Happinesses of the Form and Formless Objects

[Two kinds of happinesses]

(A 2.7.13/1:82)

Bhikshus, there are these two happinesses. What are the two?
The happiness of having a visible object and the happiness of having a formless object.
These, bhikshus, are the two happinesses.
Of these two the happiness of having a formless object is the foremost.

Introduction

1 The formless attainments

The first nine suttas of **the Moggallāna Saṃyutta** (S 40.1-9) deals with the nine stages of Moggallāna's meditation leading to his arhathood, thus:

(1) Paṭhama Jhāna Pañha Sutta	S 40.1/4:262 f	SD 24.11
Also called (Savitakka) Paṭhama Jhāna Sutta		
(2) Dutiya Jhāna Pañha Sutta	S 40.2/4:263 f	SD 24.12a
Also called (Avitakka) Dutiya Jhāna Sutta		
(3) Tatiya Jhāna Pañha Sutta	S 40.3/4:264 f	SD 24.13
Also called (Sukhena) Tatiya Jhāna Sutta		
(4) Catuttha Jhāna Pañha Sutta	S 40.4/4:265 f	SD 24.14
Also called (Upekkhaka) Catuttha Jhāna Sutta		
(5) Ākāsānañc'āyatana Pañha Sutta	S 40.5/4:266	SD 24.15
(6) Viññānañc'āyatana Pañha Sutta	S 40.6/4:266 f	SD 24.16
(7) Ākiñcaññ'āyatana Pañha Sutta	S 40.7/4:267 f	SD 24.17
(8) N'eva,saññā,nāsaññ'āyatana Pañha Sutta	S 40.8/4:268	SD 24.18
(9) Animitta Ceto,samādhi Pañha Sutta	S 40.9/4:268 f	SD 24.19

Just as a dhyana lies latent within its preceding dhyana, the first formless attainment—the sphere of infinite space (*ākāsānañc'āyatana*)—lies within the fourth dhyana. In fact, as noted by Brahmavamso, all the four formless attainments have the following features, *carried over from the dhyanas*:

- The mind remains inaccessible to the world of the five senses and all knowledge of the body.
- The mind persists in rocklike stillness, incapable of forming any thought or making any plan, for long periods of time.
- Comprehension is so frozen that we can hardly make sense, at the time, of our experience. Comprehension is achieved after emerging.
- The pure equanimity and mindfulness of the fourth dhyana remains as a foundation for each formless attainment. (Brahmavamso, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, 2006: 169)

While the first three dhyanas take *different forms of bliss* as their object, and the fourth dhyana takes a *sublime state of pure peace* as its object, each of the formless attainments takes a *pure mental object*. These objects are known as “mind-bases” (*āyatana*), so called because the mind in these attainments rests on them. These profoundly still mind-bases are progressively more refined and more empty than the form dhyanas.

The formless attainments are so called because in all the four of them, form (*rūpa*) is perceived as being both infinite and empty, immeasurable and undefined. It is *form*, that is, our ideas of shape and colour, that limits space, but in the formless attainments, we transcend any such perception. Hence, they are called “formless” (*arūpa*).

2 The sphere of infinite space

2.0 TERMS. The Pali term *ākāsānañc’āyatana* (BHSD *ākāśānanty’āyatana*) or “sphere of infinite space” is resolved as *ākāsa* + *ananca* + *āyatana*. The word *ākāsa* means “sky, space,” but here clearly the meaning of *space* obtains. The word *ananca* (BHSD *anantya*), “boundlessness,” is the abstract noun of the adjective *ananta*, “without end, boundless.” And *āyatana* means “mind-base, (mental) sphere,” that is, a mental state in meditation.¹

The pericope for the sphere of infinite space is as follows:²

“By completely transcending the perceptions of form, with the disappearance of the perceptions of sense-reaction, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that “Space is infinite,” he attains and dwells in **the sphere of infinite space.**” [§4]

The **Poṭṭhapāda Sutta** (D 9) has the same pericope on the sphere of infinite space, but goes on to explain how to cultivate it, thus:

His former subtle but true perception of neutral feeling disappears. At that time there arises a subtle but true perception of infinite space, and he becomes conscious of infinite space.

Thus it is through training that a state of consciousness arises, and through training a state of consciousness passes away. (D 9.14/1:183)= SD 7.14

Let us now examine each of *the four key phrases* of the pericope for *the sphere of infinite space*, namely:

- (1) “By completely transcending the perceptions of form,”
- (2) “with the disappearance the perceptions of sense-reaction,”
- (3) “with non-attention to perceptions of diversity,” and
- (4) “Space is infinite.”

2.1 “BY COMPLETELY TRANSCENDING THE PERCEPTIONS OF FORM” (*sabbaso rūpa,saññānaṃ samatikkama*). Buddhaghosa says that the phrase “perceptions of form” (*rūpa,saññā*) means both the perception of form dhyana and their objects, the *kaṣiṇas* (Vism 273). As earlier noted,³ we progress from the first dhyana to the fourth by “factor-reduction,” that is, the first dhyana abandons the dhyana-factors (*jhān’aṅga*) of applied and sustained thoughts to transform into the second dhyana, and thenceforth, one dhyana-factor is shed to progressively become the next dhyana. All perceptions of material form belonging to the four dhyanas, and the objects of these perceptions (the form-dhyana counterpart signs), must be abandoned, before we can attain the sphere of boundless space.

2.2 “WITH THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF SENSE-REACTION” (*paṭigha,saññānaṃ atthaṅgamā*). Here, *paṭigha* means “sense-reaction,” that is, sense-stimulus or sensory impact (the meeting of sense-organ and sense-object). As such, this refers to the sensory perceptions of external sense-objects. It should be noted that *only* perceptions of the five physical senses are abandoned in the sphere of

¹ See A Wynne 2007: 21 f, 29.

² On the formless attainments, see **Paṭhama Jhāna Pañha S** (S 40.1) = SD 24.11 Intro (5).

³ See **Paṭhama Jhāna Pañha S** (S 40.1) = SD 24.11 Intro (4).

infinite space. There is still the perception of mind-objects (*dhamma,saññā*), albeit in a very subtle manner.

2.3 “WITH NON-ATTENTION TO PERCEPTIONS OF DIVERSITY” (*nānatta,saññānam amanasikārā*). The Vibhaṅga says that “perceptions of diversity” (*nanatta,saññā*) refers to the non-sensory perceptions of those who are not absorbed in a meditation attainment (Vbh 272). In other words, all perceptions based on the form spheres are abandoned (Vism 275).

2.4 “SPACE IS INFINITE” (*ananto ākāso*). As our mind completely settles in the absolute now, there is *no more perception of time* as we knew it in the worldly sense. On the one hand, there is a sense of timelessness, but on the other we have all the time in the world, as it were. Time is here undefined, empty and immeasurable—it is infinite (*ananta*) [2.0]. Time is simply our perception of space; so when time is seen as infinite, space, too, is experienced as infinite.⁴

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The Discourse on the Question of the Sphere of Infinite Space

(S 40.5/4:266)

Theory

3 “The sphere of infinite space, the sphere of infinite space,’ [‘the sphere of the infinity of space,’] it is said. What now is the sphere of infinite space?

4 Then, avuso, this occurred to me:

‘Here, bhikshu, by completely transcending the perceptions of form, with the disappearance the perceptions of sense-reaction,⁵ with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that “Space is infinite,” he attains and dwells in **the sphere of infinite space**.⁶ This is called the sphere of infinite space.’

Practice

5 Then, avuso, by completely transcending the perceptions of form, with the disappearance the perceptions of sense-reaction, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that ‘Space is infinite,’ I entered upon and dwelled in **the sphere of infinite space**.

While I dwelled therein, avuso, perception and attention accompanied by *form* assailed me.⁷

6 Then, avuso, the Blessed One approached me by means of psychic power and said this to me:

‘Moggallāna, Moggallāna! Do not be heedless, brahmin, regarding the sphere of infinite space:

steady your mind in the sphere of infinite space,	<i>ākāsānañc'āyatane cittaṃ saṅhapehi,</i>
unify your mind in the sphere of infinite space,	<i>ākāsānañc'āyatane cittaṃ ekodim karohi,</i>
concentrate your mind in the sphere of infinite space,	<i>ākāsānañc'āyatane cittaṃ samādaha.'</i>

⁴ See Ajahn Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, 2006: 169 f. See also Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, 2007: 25.

⁵ “Perceptions of sense-reaction,” *paṭigha,saññā*, also “sensory impact” (M:ÑB 267), “resistance-perception, reflex-perception” (BDict), said to be absent in the formless dhyanas. This is one of those terms that are only used contextually. See Vibh 245, §262; Vism 10.12-16.

⁶ *Idha bhikkhu sabbaso rūpa,saññānam samatikkamā paṭigha,saññānam atthaṅgamā nānatta,saññānam amanasikārā ananto ākāso'ti ākāsānañcāyatanam upasampajja viharati.*

⁷ *Tassa mayham, avuso, iminā vihārena viharato rūpa,sahagatā saññā,manasikārā samudācaranti.*

Realization

7 Then, avuso, on another occasion, by completely transcending the perceptions of form, with the disappearance the perceptions of sense-reaction, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that 'Space is infinite,' I entered upon and dwelled in **the sphere of infinite space**.

Spiritual friendship

8 Now, avuso, if one speaking rightly, were to say, 'He is a disciple who attained to greatness of direct knowledge with the help of the Teacher,'

it is of me that one speaking rightly would say, 'He is a disciple who attained to greatness of direct knowledge with the help of the Teacher.'"

— evaṃ —

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