

Viññāṇaṅc'āyatana Pañha Sutta

The Discourse on the Question of the Sphere of Infinite Consciousness

[How to progress in the sphere of infinite consciousness]
(Saṃyutta Nikāya 40.6/4:266 f)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2008

Introduction

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 Also called (Savitakka) Paṭhama Jhāna Sutta	S 40.1/4:262 f	SD 24.11
(2) Dutiya Jhāna Pañha Sutta Also called (Avitakka) Dutiya Jhāna Sutta	S 40.2/4:263 f	SD 24.12a
(3) Tatiya Jhāna Pañha Sutta Also called (Sukhena) Tatiya Jhāna Sutta	S 40.3/4:264 f	SD 24.13
(4) Catuttha Jhāna Pañha Sutta Also called (Upekkhaka) Catuttha Jhāna Sutta	S 40.4/4:265 f	SD 24.14
(5) Ākāśānaṅc'āyatana Pañha Sutta	S 40.5/4:266	SD 24.15
(6) Viññāṇaṅc'āyatana Pañha Sutta	S 40.6/4:266 f	SD 24.16
(7) Ākiñcaṅṅ'āyatana Pañha Sutta	S 40.7/4:267 f	SD 24.17
(8) N'eva,saññā,nâsaññ'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

In the first formless attainment, we perceive space as infinite. As we persist in doing this, that infinite space soon begins to lose its meaning. Space as we know it (as an external object or reality) thus disappears. Then, from attending to an *external* object, as it were, we turn *inward* to a more refined object, that is, to *consciousness* itself. We go on to attend it as “boundless consciousness,” or simply as “consciousness” (Vbh 262), cultivating the sign again and again, so that it is an absolute one-pointedness of consciousness.

The pericope for the sphere of infinite consciousness is as follows:¹

“By completely transcending the sphere of infinite space, aware that ‘Consciousness is infinite,’ he attains and dwells in **the sphere of infinite consciousness.**” [§4]

The object of this formless sphere is *consciousness*, which is itself infinite, is one of the aggregates (*khandha*) constituting the basic components of a being. The knowing, as it were, now knows itself.

Of interest in the name of this meditative state: *viññāṇaṅc'āyatana* is a haplology (syllable loss) of the grammatically form *viññāṇānaṅc'āyatana*, that is, *viññāṇa* (“consciousness”) + *ananca* (“boundlessness”) + *āyatana* (“mind-base, sphere”).² The word *ananca* (BHSD *anantya*), “boundlessness,” is the abstract noun of the adjective *ananta*, “without end, boundless.”

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¹ On the formless attainments, see **Paṭhama Jhāna Pañha S** (S 40.1) = SD 24.11 Intro (5).

² See Geiger (1994, 2000)§65.2. See also Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, 2007: 27.

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(S 40.6/4:266 f)

Theory

3 “‘The sphere of infinite consciousness, the sphere of infinite consciousness,’ [‘the sphere of the infinity of consciousness,] it is said. What now is the sphere of infinite consciousness? [266]

4 Then, avuso, this occurred to me:

‘Here, bhikkhu, by completely transcending the sphere of infinite space, aware that “Consciousness is infinite,” he attains and dwells in **the sphere of infinite consciousness**.’³

Practice

5 Then, avuso, by completely transcending the sphere of infinite space, aware that ‘Consciousness is infinite,’ I entered upon and dwelled in **the sphere of infinite consciousness**.

While I dwelled therein, avuso, perception and attention accompanied by *sphere of infinite space* assailed me.⁴

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 consciousness:

steady your mind

in the sphere of infinite consciousness,

viññāṇaṅc'āyatane cittaṃ saṅṭhapehi,

unify your mind

in the sphere of infinite consciousness,

viññāṇaṅc'āyatane cittaṃ ekodim karohi,

concentrate your mind

in the sphere of infinite consciousness,

viññāṇaṅc'āyatane cittaṃ samādaha.’

Realization

7 Then, avuso, on another occasion, by completely transcending the sphere of infinite space, aware that ‘Consciousness is infinite,’ I entered upon and dwelled in **the sphere of infinite consciousness**.

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 —

080922; 080930; 090812

³ *Idha bhikkhu sabbaso ākāsānaṅc'āyatanaṃ samatikkamma anantaṃ viññāṇaṅc'āyatanaṃ upa-sampajja viharati.*

⁴ *Tassa mayham, āvuso, iminā vihārena viharato ākāsānaṅc'āyatana, sahatatā saññāmanasikārā samudācāranti.*