

Ākiñcaññ'āyatana Pañha Sutta

The Discourse on the Question of the Sphere of Nothingness

[How to progress in the sphere of nothingness]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 40.7/4:267 f)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2008

1 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	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) Ākāśānañc'āyatana Pañha Sutta	S 40.5/4:266	SD 24.15
(6) Viññāṇañc'āyatana Pañha Sutta	S 40.5/4:266 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

The pericope for the sphere of nothingness is as follows:¹

“By completely transcending the sphere of infinite consciousness, aware that ‘There is nothing,’ he attains and dwells in **the sphere of nothingness**.” [§4]

Within the sphere of infinite consciousness, lies the sphere of nothingness. As we maintain a constant focus on the infinite consciousness, the consciousness begins to disappear. This leaves behind only the *infinity*, that is, of nothingness (*akiñcañña*). Only in letting go of the perception of infinite consciousness can we proceed to the next level. Otherwise, we could remain stuck to that particular state: what is meant to release becomes a noose, holding us back. Dhyana, in short, is about *supreme letting go*—until there is *nothing* more to let go of. Then we are ready for liberation.²

2 The two teachers

Traditionally, such as in the **Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), the Bodhisattva is said to have gone to two famous teachers before his practice of self-mortification.³ He is said to have learned to meditate up to *the sphere of nothingness* from Ājāra Kālāma, thus:⁴

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

² See **Pañcāla,caṇḍa S** (A 9.42/4:449-451) = SD 33.2.

³ M 26.15-16/1:153-166 = SD 1.11.

⁴ Buddhaghosa says that **Ājāra**, also called Dīgha,piṅgala; **Kālāma** was his family name (DA 2:569 = MA 2:171). The story of the Bodhisattva's first two teachers [15-16] is found in several places in the early Canons: **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36/1:240); **Saṅgarāva S** (M 100/2:212); **Madhyam'āgama** of the Sarvāstivāda (T26.776b5-777a4; **Vinaya** of the Dharmaguptakas (T1428.780bt-c19); cf J 1:66; DhA 1:85; ApA 71; BA 6; DhsA 34; MahvT 66.

Thus, bhikshus, Ālāra Kālāma, my teacher, placed me, his pupil, on an equal footing with himself and accorded me the highest honour.

But it occurred to me: 'This Dharma does not lead to revulsion (with the world), to cessation (of suffering), to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to nirvana, but only to rebirth in the sphere of nothingness.'⁵

Bhikshus, dissatisfied with that Dharma, I left. (M 26.15c(3)/1:165) = SD 1.11

According to the Majjhima Commentary, Ālāra taught him the seven attainments (of calmness meditation) ending with the sphere of nothingness, the third of the four formless attainments. Though these states are spiritually exalted, they are still mundane and do not in themselves lead to nirvana, but merely to rebirth in the realm of nothingness. The lifespan there is 60,000 aeons (world-cycles) but at the end of which one returns to a lower world. As such, one is still caught in Death's trap (MA 2:172).⁶

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⁵ However, see **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26) = SD 1.11 Intro (4.1) for Brahmavamso's views.

⁶ See M 26.15c(3)/1:165 n = SD 1.11.

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Theory

3 “‘The sphere of nothingness, the sphere of nothingness,’ it is said. What now is the sphere of nothingness?”

4 Then, avuso, this occurred to me:

‘Here, bhikshu, by completely transcending the sphere of infinite consciousness, aware that “There is nothing,” he attains and dwells in **the sphere of nothingness**.’⁷

Practice

5 Then, avuso, by completely transcending the sphere of infinite consciousness, aware that ‘There is nothing,’ I entered upon and dwelled in **the sphere of nothingness**.

While I dwelled therein, avuso, perception and attention accompanied by *sphere of infinite consciousness* assailed me.⁸

Realization

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 nothingness:

steady your mind in the sphere of nothingness, *ākiñcaññ’āyatane cittaṃ saṅṭhapehi*, [267]

unify your mind in the sphere of nothingness, *ākiñcaññ’āyatane cittaṃ ekodim’karoḥi*,

concentrate your mind in the sphere of nothingness, *ākiñcaññ’āyatane cittaṃ samādaha*.’

7 Then, avuso, on another occasion, by completely transcending the sphere of infinite consciousness, aware that ‘There is nothing,’ I entered upon and dwelled in **the sphere of nothingness**.

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; 081001; 090812

⁷ *Idha bhikkhu sabbaso viññāṇaṅc’āyatanaṃ samatikkamma n’atthi kiñcī ti ākiñcaññ’āyatanaṃ upasampajja viharatī.*

⁸ *Tassa mayhaṃ, āvuso, iminā vihārena viharato viññāṇaṅc’āyatana, sahaḡatā saññā, manasikārā samudācaranti.*