

N'eva,saññā,nāsaññ'āyatana Pañha Sutta

The Discourse on the Question of the Sphere of Neither-perception-nor-non-perception

[How to progress in the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception]
(Saṃyutta Nikāya 40.8/4:268f)
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1 Introduction

2.2 RELATED SUTTAS. The first nine suttas of the **Moggallāna Saṃyutta** (S 40.1-9) deals with the nine stages of Moggallāna's meditation leading to this 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 24.12
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) Ākāsañāṇic'āyatana Pañha Sutta	S 40.5/4:266	SD 24.15
(6) Viññāṇāṇic'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

2.2 TERMS. The Pali term *n'eva,saññā,nāsaññ'āyatana* (BHSD *naiva,samjñā,nāsamjñāyatana*) or “sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception” is resolved as *na* (“not”) + *eva* (emphasis) + *samjñā* (“perception, consciousness”) + *na* (“not”) + *asamjñā* (“non-perception, nonconsciousness”) + *āyatana* (mind-base, sphere).¹

The pericope for the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception is as follows:²

“By completely transcending the sphere of nothingness, he enters and dwells in the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.” [§4]

As our experience of “nothingness” (*ākiñcañña*) steadily deepens, we begin to understand that underlying it is *a perception that goes beyond nothingness*. If our mind is refined enough to see this, then the perception of nothingness disappears and is replaced by that of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. The consciousness here is so refined that *it cannot be said whether there is perceiving or not*. In other words, our consciousness is at its most subtle.

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 neither-perception-nor-non-perception* using Rāma's method as handed down through his son, Uddaka Rāma,putta, thus:⁴

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 M 26.15-16/1:153-166 = SD 1.11.

⁴ On Ālāra Kālāma, see **Ākāsañāṇic'āyatana Pañha S** (S 40.7) = SD 24.17 Intro (2).

Thus, bhikshus, Uddaka Rāma,putta, my companion in the holy life, placed me in the position of a teacher and accorded me the highest honour.

But, bhikshus, 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 neither-perception-nor-non-perception*.’

Bhikshus, dissatisfied with that Dharma, I left.

(M 26.16c(3)/1:166) = SD 1.11

3 Beyond the confines of consciousness

However, as declared by the Buddha [2], even the attainment of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception does not bring about awakening. The reason is clearly stated in **the (Pañcāla,caṇḍa) Sambādha Sutta** (A 9.42), thus:

Furthermore, avuso, a monk, having completely transcended the sphere of nothingness, attains and dwells in the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

Even to this extent, too, avuso, it has been spoken of by the Blessed One in terms of⁵ finding an opening in the confined.

For, therein, there is still a confinement [restriction]. And, what is that confinement therein?

It is this very sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception that has not ceased there, that is the confinement.

Furthermore, avuso, a monk, having completely transcended the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, attains and dwells in the cessation of perception and feeling.

And, having seen it with wisdom, his influxes are thoroughly ended.

But to this extent, indeed, avuso, it has been spoken by the Blessed One *not in terms of*⁶ finding an opening. (A 9.42.10-11/4:451) = SD 33.2

The form dhyanas and the formless attainments, spiritually profound and liberating as they may be, they are all still “confining” (*sambādha*), in that, they still keep us within the confines of samsara: we will still be reborn and continue to suffer the vicissitudes of life. Only with the transcending of even the highest of all meditative or spiritual mental states—the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception—can we become fully liberated.

However, it is within the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception that is found *the perception that ends all perception*. When the mind fully masters this “non-perception,” then the mind really stops; and when the mind starts again, *and if we have let go of all notions of self or soul*, we would surely have become either a non-returner or an arhat.⁷

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⁵ “In terms of,” *nippariyāyena*, ie in a restricted or provisional sense. See *Pariyāya Nippariyāya* = SD 68.2; also R Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 2001: 136-138.

⁶ “Not in terms of,” *nippariyāyena*, ie in a final or absolute sense. See prec n.

⁷ Immediately at the arising of the state, however, there arises in the non-returner, the fruition of non-return (*anāgāmi,phala*), and in the arhat, the fruition of arhathood (*arahatta,phala*) (PmA 1:41, 321). See also Ajahn Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond*, 2006: 171. See also Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, 2007: 25.

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Theory

3 “‘The sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception,’ it is said. What now is the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception?”

4 Then, avuso, this occurred to me:

‘Here, bhikshu, by completely transcending the sphere of nothingness, he enters and dwells in **the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception**.’⁸

Practice

5 Then, avuso, by completely transcending the sphere of nothingness, I entered and dwelled in **the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception**.

While I dwelled therein, avuso, perception and attention accompanied by *sphere of nothingness* assailed me.⁹

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 neither-perception-nor-non-perception:

steady your mind in the sphere of

neither-perception-nor-non-perception, *nevasaññānāsaññ'āyatane cittaṃ sañṭhapehi,*

unify your mind in the sphere of

neither-perception-nor-non-perception, *nevasaññānāsaññ'āyatane cittaṃ ekodim karohi,*

concentrate your mind in the sphere of

neither-perception-nor-non-perception, *nevasaññānāsaññ'āyatane cittaṃ samādaha.’*

7 Then, avuso, on another occasion, by completely transcending the sphere of nothingness, I entered and dwelled in **the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception**.

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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⁸ *Idha bhikkhu sabbaso ākiñcaññ'āyatanaṃ samatikkamma n'eva,saññā,nāsaññ'āyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati.*

⁹ *Tassa mayhaṃ, āvuso, iminā vihārena viharato ākiñcaññ'āyatana,sahagatā saññā,manasikārā samudācaranti.*