

Animitta Ceto,samādhī Pañha Sutta

The Discourse on the Question of the Signless Concentration of Mind

[How to progress in the signless concentration]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 40.9/4:268 f)

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1 Moggallāna's seven weeks of struggle

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) Ākāsañāṇa'āyatana Pañha Sutta	S 40.5/4:266	SD 24.15
(6) Viññāṇa'āyatana Pañha Sutta	S 40.6/4:266 f	SD 24.16
(7) Ākiñcaṇṇa'āyatana Pañha Sutta	S 40.7/4:267 f	SD 24.17
(8) N'eva,saññā,nāsaññā'āyatana Pañha Sutta	S 40.8/4:268	SD 24.18
(9) Animitta Ceto,samādhī Pañha Sutta	S 40.9/4:268 f	SD 24.19

The Animitta Ceto,samādhī Sutta (S 40.9) is the last of the nine discourses relating to Moggallāna's struggle for awakening which records Moggallāna's attainment of "signless concentration of mind" (*animitta ceto,samādhī*). **Analayo** notes that while the preceding stages of Moggallāna's practice in S 40.1-8 do not seem to have Chinese counterparts, his attainment of signless concentration of mind is recorded in the parallel to S 40.9 at SĀ 503.¹

2 The signless concentration of mind

The term, "signless concentration of mind" (*animitta ceto,samādhī*) is not fully explained in the Nikāyas, "but its placement after the eighth formless attainment [of S 40.9] suggests it is a *samādhī* qualitatively different from those attained in *samatha* meditation." (S:B 1140 n180). The term, however, occurs in the explanation of the "signless liberation of mind" (*animitta ceto,vimutti*) in **the Go,datta Sutta** (S 41.7), thus:

And what, bhante, is the signless liberation of mind?

Here, with non-attention to all signs, a monk enters and dwells in *the signless concentration of mind*.

This is called the signless liberation of mind. (S 41.7/4:297,3-6)²

¹ SĀ 503 = T2.132b18. (Analayo, *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima Nikaya*, MS 2005 ad M 3:107 n). A significance of this might be that the Pali redactors or reciters had composed the first 8 discourses (S 40.1-8) only after the time of the composition of the Āgama suttas.

² Comy here explains that there are 13 kinds of signless liberation of mind: insight—because it removes the signs (*nimitta*) of permanence, happiness, and self; the 4 formless attainments—because they lack the sign of form; and the 4 paths and fruits—because of their lack of defilements, the "sign-makers." (SA 3:99)

However, we should not, from this context alone, jump into the conclusion that the signless *liberation* of mind and the signless *concentration* of mind are synonymous. We will see below [3], where **the Mahā,-vedalla Sutta** (M43) actually says that they are *not* synonymous.

“The signless concentration of mind” is explained by the Majjhima Commentary as the concentration of mind in insight (*vipassanā,citta,samādhi*), which, as it is without a permanent sign, is called “**signless**” (*animitta*), so called because it is *devoid of the signs of permanence*, etc. (MA 4:153)

Let us now compare the above statement on the signless liberation of mind with **the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta** (D 9.17) passage on the attainment of cessation, which runs thus:

So, Poṭṭhapāda, from the time that the monk is *one who masters his own consciousness*³ here (the 1st dhyana), he goes from one state to another in stages⁴ until he reaches *the peak of consciousness*.⁵

And when he is established at the peak of consciousness, it occurs to him: “Mental activity is bad for me. It would better for me not to be thinking. Were I to go on thinking and planning, these states of consciousness I have reached, would pass away, and other coarser ones, might arise. So let me neither think nor plan any more.” And so he neither thinks nor plans.

And to him, neither thinking nor planning, the states of consciousness he has passes away, and no other gross consciousnesses⁶ arise (in him).

So he attains cessation.

(D 9.17/1:184) = SD 7.14

Both the passages are talking about essentially the same thing: while the Animitta Ceto,vimutti Pañha Sutta passage states it briefly, the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta passage puts it *in greater detail*.

However, the signless concentration of mind is a vital step towards spiritual liberation and can be useful in itself, as attested elsewhere. **The Tissa Brahmā Sutta** (A 7.53), for example, speaks of the signless concentration of mind as being *the goal of those who have renounced the world*.⁷ In **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), the Buddha describes the nature of his aged body to Ānanda, telling him that his frail frame is only free from discomfort while he is in the signless concentration of mind.⁸ And in **the Animitta Samādhi Sutta** (S 43.4), the signless concentration (*animitta samādhi*) is called “the path leading to the unconditioned” (*asaṅkhata,gāmi magga*), that is, the way to nirvana.⁹

2 The signless liberation of mind

In **the Mahā,vedalla Sutta** (M 43), at the end of the definition of “liberation of mind” (*ceto,vimutti*), we find “the signless liberation of mind” (*animitta ceto,vimutti*), in close connection with the signless concentration of mind, thus:

And what, avuso, is the signless liberation of mind?

Here, avuso, a monk, not attending to any of the signs, attains and dwells *the signless concentration of mind*.

This, avuso, is called the signless liberation of mind.¹⁰

³ “Is one who masters his own consciousness,” *saka,saññī hoti*, lit “becomes own-perceiving.” From the 1st dhyana onwards, one has some control over one’s perceptions.

⁴ “He goes from one state to another in stages,” *so tato amutra tato amutra anupubbena*.

⁵ “Peak of consciousness,” *saññ’aggamī*, here refers to the sphere of nothingness (*ākiñcaññ’āyatana*) (DA 2:373). Whichever mental state or dhyanas that one turns towards spiritual liberation, that state is called *saññ’agga*, ie, it is a name for liberating insight here: see Intro (5).

⁶ “Gross consciousnesses,” *olārikā saññā*, ie he is beyond worldly, material consciousness.

⁷ A 7.53/4:78,27.

⁸ D 16.2.25/2:100,18 = SD 9.

⁹ S 43.4/4:360.

¹⁰ Comy says that the signless (*animitta*) is nirvana (*nibbānam pi animittam eva*, MA 2:335). Of the 4 liberations of mind—the immeasurable, through nothingness, through emptiness, and the signless—as mentioned in §30 of

This, avuso, is the way of explaining by which these states are different in meaning and different in name.¹¹ (M 43.34/1:298) = SD 35.1

The Cūla,suññata Sutta (M 121) gives the clearest explanation of the connection between the signless concentration of mind and arhathood.¹² The Sutta mentions a series of meditation, that is, “the oneness dependent on” the perceptions of “the community of monks,” “the forest,” “earth,” followed by the four formless attainments, and then explains that the meditator, (A) attending to neither the perceptions of the third formless sphere nor the fourth formless sphere, *attends to the oneness dependent on the signless concentration of mind*. His mind then enters that signless concentration of mind and is focussed. He understands that since the state is *conditioned and volitionally constructed*, it is as such impermanent and subject to ceasing. (B) Immediately after that comes the passage on the attainment of arhathood, thus:

(A) Furthermore, Ānanda, a monk, attending to neither the perception of the sphere of nothingness nor the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, *attends to the oneness dependent on the signless concentration of mind*.

His mind plunges into that signless concentration of mind,¹³ brightens with faith, becomes steady, and is resolute.

He understands thus:

“This signless concentration of mind is conditioned and volitionally produced. And whatever is conditioned and volitionally produced is impermanent, subject to ending.”¹⁴

(B) When he understands thus and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the influx of sense-desire, from the influx of being, and from the influx of ignorance.

When it is liberated, there comes the knowledge: “Freed am I!”

He knows thus: “Destroyed is birth. The holy life has been lived. What needs to be done has been done. There is no more of this state of being.” (M 121.11/3:108 = SD 11.3

This is, of course, the famous “liberation through wisdom” (*paññā,vimutti*). It is evident from this important passage that the “signless concentration of mind” (*animitta ceto,samādhi*) is the concentrated mind, emerging from which the meditator (here, Moggallāna), applies insight onto his erstwhile meditative state, regarding it as impermanent as stated above. And so he attains arhathood.

3 *Animitta* and its contexts

3.1 *NIMITTA*. In our discussions here we can safely limit our definition of *nimitta* to “mental sign.”¹⁵ **The Sa,nimitta Sutta** (A 2.8.1), a discourse of two lines, declares:

the Sutta, only *the signless liberation of mind* is supramundane. The first three—the divine abodes (*brahma,vihāra*), the third formless attainment, and insight into the emptiness of formations—all pertain to the mundane level (M:ÑB 1240 n451).

¹¹ *Ayaṃ kho, āvuso, pariyāyo yaṃ pariyāyaṃ āgamma ime dhammā nānāthā c’eva nānā,vyañjanā ca*. According to Comy, all the four liberations (prec n) are one in meaning in that they refer to the fruition attainment of arhathood. They are all synonymous because the terms—the immeasurable (*appamāṇa*), nothingness (*ākiñcañña*), emptiness (*suññata*), and the signless (*animitta*)—are all names for nirvana, the object of the fruition attainment of arhathood (MA 2:355). Here the two different terms—the signless liberation of mind and the signless concentration of mind—are also different in meaning. The former is the *liberation*, while the latter is the *means* to that liberation.

¹² M 121.4-10/3:107 f = SD 11.3.

¹³ Comy says that *animitta* (signless) is mentioned again to show “the counter-insight of insight” (*vipassanāya pativipassanaṃ*) (MA 4:154), ie “the application of the principle of insight to the act of consciousness that exercises the function of insight. On the basis of this he attains arahantship” (M:ÑB 1333 n1143).

¹⁴ M 121.11/3:108 = SD 11.3: *Yaṃ kho pana kiñci abhisaṅkhatam abhisañcetaṃ, tad aniccaṃ nirodha,-dhamman ti*. This reflection is applied to all the 4 dhyanas so as to switch to “insight” (*vipassanā*) practice. In **Aṭṭhaka,nāgara S** (M 52/1:349-353) & **Dasama S** (A 11.17/5:343), this statement is applied to all the attainments (dhyana, the divine abodes, the formless attainments). Cf **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140.22/3:244).

¹⁵ For a fuller discussion, see *Nimitta* = SD 19.7.

Bhikshus, evil unwholesome states arise in connection with mental signs, not without them.
Thus, with the letting go of mental signs itself, those evil unwholesome states will not exist.

(A 2.8.1/1:82)

However, since the signless concentration of mind is *mind-made* or volitionally constructed, it is possible, as pointed out by **the Citta Hatthi,sāriputta Sutta** (A 6.60), that lust (*rāga*) may rise again. To illustrate this point, Mahā Kotṭhita (the Sutta’s protagonist) uses the simile of the crickets that remain silent when the forest is disturbed by people, by the chirping returns once the forest is deserted again. Even so, those who have attained the signless concentration of mind may be assailed by lustful thoughts when they are not mindful.¹⁶

However, according to **the (Nissaraṇā) Mettā Sutta** (A 6.13), when the signless concentration of mind is *fully mastered*, it is impossible that the mind would fall under the power of a mental sign again.¹⁷ As such, says **the (Brahmā) Tissa Sutta** (A 7.53), a monk who dwells in a suitable place, associating with spiritual friends, and controlling his faculties, and who cultivates the signless concentration of mind, will be able to realize the goal of the spiritual life.¹⁸ As such, despite its impermanent nature, the signless concentration of mind is declared in **the Suññata Samādhi Sutta** (S 43.4) to be the path to nirvana.¹⁹

3.2 NIMITTA AND NIRODHA.²⁰ **Sujato** thinks the basic idea is that the “sign” (*nimitta*) refers to the level of knowing things that is primarily linguistic, as stated in **the Mahā,nidāna Sutta** (D 15), as follows:

If, Ānanda, there were no qualities, traits, signs and indicators²¹ through which there is a description [definition] (*paññatti*) of the mental body [mind-group]²²—then would conceptual impression²³ manifest in the physical body?²⁴ (D 15.20/2:62) = SD 5.17

¹⁶ A 6.60/3:392-399 = SD 51.3.

¹⁷ A 6.13/3:292 = SD 60.2.

¹⁸ A 7.53/4:78 = SD 54.5.

¹⁹ S 43.4/4:360.

²⁰ This section and the next are based on a consultation with **Bhante Sujato** (email, 24 Sep 2008).

²¹ *Yehi ākārehi yehi lingeḥi yehi nimittehi yehi uddesehi*. Comy: The mutually dissimilar nature of feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness, are called “qualities” (*ākāra*). They are also called “traits” (*liṅga*) because, when carefully looked at, they betray the hidden meanings (of their base) (*līnam-attha*). They are also called “signs” (*nimitta*) because they are the causes of perceiving (*sañjānana,hetuto*); and they are also called “indicators” (*uddesa*) because they are to be indicated (“pointed out”) (*uddisitabbo*) [through these the meaning is signalled or inferred]. (DA 2:500 f; DAṬ within square brackets). For further explanation, see SD 18.3(1.1).

²² *Nāma,kāya*, the “mind-group” comprises the 4 formless groups of existence (*arūpino khandhā*): feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), formations (*saṅkhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). It is distinguished from *rūpa,-kāya*, the body-group, comprising form (*rūpa*), ie the 4 elements (*dhātu, mahā,bhūta*) [see SD 17.1 & 2]. We have here the first canonical occurrence of this term and also at **Pm 1:183** (where it is def as “feeling, perception, intention, contact, attention and naming are the mental body, and also what are called mind-formations, *vedanā saññā cetanā phasso manasikāro nāmañ ca, nāma,kāyo ca, ye ca vuccanti citta,saṅkhārā*) but *nāma,kāya* is mentioned by itself at **Sn 1074**. The twofold grouping (*nāma,kāya* and *rūpa,kāya*) is common in Comys. In **Dhamma,saṅgāṇī**, all phenomena are classified as 3 groups: consciousness (*citta*) (*khandha* 5), mental factors (*cetasika*) (*khandhā* 2-4) and form (*rūpa = khandha* 1).

²³ “Conceptual impression,” *adhivacana,samphassa*, lit “designation-contact,” referring to verbal (ie mental or conceptual) impression. Comy: “Conceptual impression is synonymous with mind-contact, which arises in the mind-door taking the four (mental) aggregates as its basis [because it is apprehended by means of designation and description]” (DA 2:501 with Subcomy). U Thittila, in his **Vbh 6** tr, renders it as “analogical contact” (Vbh: T §17/7) with the n, “Mind and mental objects do not impinge but are explained by the analogy (*adhivacana*) of physical states.” On *adhivacana* and *pañiḥa*, see **Mahā,nidāna S** (D 15) = SD 5.17 Intro (5.2).

²⁴ *Yehi Ānanda ākārehi yehi lingeḥi yehi nimittehi yehi uddesehi nāma,kāvassa paññatti hoti, tesu ākāresu tesu liṅgesu tesu nimittesu tesu uddesesu asati, api nu kho rūpa,kāye adhvavacana,samphasso vā pañiḥa,samphasso vā paññāyethā ti*. On *rūpa,kāya*, see **Mahā,nidāna S**, D 15.20(1) n = SD 5.17 here. See also SA 3:97.

If we take the Mahā, nidāna passage seriously, and if it does indeed relate to the *animitta samādhi* (not certain!), then the ending of nimittas is also the ending of sense-contact or sense-stimuli (*phassa*). This is implied in a partial way in the beginning of the formless spheres (*ārūpa*), where “perception of sense-reaction” (*paṭigha, saññā*) ends,²⁵ which surely should be connected with “sense-impression” (*paṭigha, samphassa*) of the Mahā, nidāna Sutta. If so, then it would not be arbitrary to connect the “conceptual impression” (*adhivacana, samphassa*) of the Mahā, nidāna Sutta with the ending of nimittas, that is, the linguistic basis of consciousness ends.²⁶

This would place it very close to the cessation of perception and feeling (*saññā, vedanā, nirodha*), but there is no textual evidence that they are identical. Although they both come after simple samadhi states, that does not mean they are the same. The Commentary says that “signless” (*animitta*) is essentially “insight” (*vipassanā*), while “cessation” (*nirodha*) is the full balancing of both calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) (MA 4:153). Another distinction would be that all arhats (perhaps, other ariyas, too) would get the “signless concentration (*animitta, samadhi*), but not all will attain “cessation” (*nirodha*).²⁷

3.3 NIMITTA, SAMĀDHI, VIMUTTI. The meaning of the terms *animitta*, *samādhi* and *vimutti* depend on their contexts, and may be used in different ways to signify different levels of practice. There are essentially three possible usages of these terms, that is, in the contexts of (1) insight (*vipassanā*); (2) a samadhi of realization for an arhat (and possibly of other saints, too); and (3) nirvana (*nibbāna*).

We can provisionally translate *animitta* as “the signless.” As “insight” (*vipassanā*), the “signless” (*animitta*) follows on from the calmness (*samatha*) stages, and correlates with the “empty” (*suññatā*) and the “undirected” (*appaṇihita*) (which, in the Commentaries, are related with realization of the three universal characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self).²⁸

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²⁵ *Paṭigha, saññā* here can also be variously tr as “perception of sense-impact,” “resistance-perception,” or “reflex-perception.” This is said to be absent in the formless spheres.

²⁶ On *paṭigha, samphassa* and *adhivacana, samphassa*, see **Mahā, nidāna S** (D 15) = SD 5.17 Intro (5).

²⁷ See **Kiṭṭa, giri S** (M 70), which clarifies that while some arhats have attained the liberations (*vimokkha*)—which include cessation attainment (*nirodha samāpatti*)—others have not. (M 70.12/1:477) = SD 11.1. See also Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995: 187 f.

²⁸ As in *suññato... animitto... appaṇihito samādhi* (S 4:360,17 = D 3:219,22 (*rāga, nimittādīnaṃ abhāvā appaṇihito*, DA); V 3:92,37 f (= *rāga, dosa, moha, paṇidhīnaṃ abhāvato appaṇihito*, VA 2:493,26 ≠ MA 2:367,9 ≠ DhsA 222,23 ≠ DA 3:1004,15) = V 4:25,32 f; Pm 2:35,1, qu DhsA 223,5 ≠ Vism 658,9; DhA 2:172,12 ; Pm 2:36,12, 41,12, 59,10, 65,15; Abhdhs 44.6. For further details on *animitta*, see **Cūḷa Suññata S** (M 121) = SD 11.3 Intro (8).

The Discourse on the Question of the Signless Concentration of Mind

(S 40.9/4:268 f)

Theory

3 “‘The signless concentration of mind, the signless concentration of mind,’ it is said. What now is the signless concentration of mind?”²⁹

4 Then, avuso, this occurred to me:

‘Here, bhikkhu, [269] by non-attention to all signs, he enters and dwells in **the signless concentration of mind**.’³⁰

Practice

5 Then, avuso, by non-attention to all signs, I entered and dwelled in **the signless concentration of mind**.

While I dwelled therein, avuso, my consciousness followed the signs.³¹

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 signless concentration of mind:

steady your mind in

the signless concentration of mind, *animitte ceto,samādhismim cittam saṅṭhapehi,*

unify your mind in

the signless concentration of mind, *animitte ceto,samādhismim cittam ekodim karohi,*

concentrate your mind in

the signless concentration of mind, *animitte ceto,samādhismim cittam samādaha.’*

7 Then, avuso, on another occasion, by non-attention to all signs, I entered and dwelled in **the signless concentration of mind**.

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 —

²⁹ Comy says that this refers to insight concentration (*vipassanā,samādhi*), which occurs when one has abandoned the sign of permanence, etc. (SA3:90)

³⁰ *Idha bhikkhu sabbanimittānaṃ amanasikārā animittaṃ cetosamādhim upasampajja viharati.*

³¹ *Tassa mayham, āvuso, iminā vihārena viharato nimittanūsāri viññānaṃ hoti.* Comy says that this occurred while his insight knowledge was flowing along sharply and strongly as he dwelt in insight concentration. Just as when a man is cutting down a tree with a sharp axe, if he constantly examines the blade, he would not accomplish his task of cutting down the tree, even so the elder “developed a liking for insight” (*vipassanaṃ ārabha nikanti uppajjati*), and thus did not accomplish his task. (SA 3:90)

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