

(Iddhi) Moggallāna Sutta**The Discourse on Moggallāna (on Psychic Powers)**

[The bases of spiritual power]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 51.31/5:288 f)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2009

Introduction

The (Iddhi) Moggallāna Sutta (S 51.31) is about Moggallāna’s mastery of the four paths of spiritual power or four bases of success (*iddhi, pāda*). The word *iddhi* is derived from the verb *ijjhati* (to prosper, succeed, flourish). It originally means success, but by the Buddha’s time “had already acquired the special nuance of spiritual success or, even more to the point, spiritual power” (S:B 1939 f n246). The term here has two senses:

- (1) success in the exercise of the psychic powers (*iddhi, vidha*),¹ and
- (2) success in the effort to win liberation.

The two converge in arhathood, which, as *āsava-k, khaya, ñāṇa*, is both the sixth *abhiññā* (in continuity with the psychic powers) and the final fruit of the noble eightfold path. The *iddhi, pādā* (bases of spiritual power), as such, are the supporting conditions for the exercise of psychic powers (*iddhi*).

The *iddhi, pādā* are explained in the **Chanda Sutta** (S 51.13/5:268 f). The term is elaborated according to the Sutta method in the Vibhaṅga (Vbh 216-220), and according to the Abhidhamma method at Vbh 220-224, where they are the factors of the supramundane paths.² The Commentaries resolve *iddhi, -pāda* as *iddhiyā pādāṃ*, “bases for spiritual power” and as *iddhi, bhūtaṃ pādāṃ*, “bases which is spiritual power.”³ As such, the best translation denoting both senses would be “bases of spiritual power.”⁴

These paths are defined more fully here in the (Iddhi) Moggallāna Sutta, but the better known abridged pericope runs thus, and is found below:⁵

Cattāro iddhi, pādā. Katame cattāro?

Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu

- (1) *chanda, samādhi-p, padhāna, saṅkhāra, samannāgataṃ iddhipādaṃ bhāveti;*
- (2) *virīya, samādhi-p, padhāna, saṅkhāra, samannāgataṃ iddhipādaṃ bhāveti;*
- (3) *citta-p, padhāna, saṅkhāra, samannāgataṃ iddhipādaṃ bhāveti;*
- (4) *vīmaṃsā, samādhi-p, padhāna, saṅkhāra, samannāgataṃ iddhipādaṃ bhāveti.*

The four paths of spiritual power [the four bases of success]. What are the four?

Here, bhikshus, a monk

- (1) cultivates the path to spiritual power [basis of success] *endowed with concentration gained through desire [will to act] (chanda) and through striving;*⁶
- (2) cultivates the path to spiritual power [basis of success] *endowed with concentration gained through energy (virīya) and through striving;*
- (3) cultivates the path to spiritual power [basis of success] *endowed with concentration gained through the mind (citta) and through striving;*

¹ S 51.11/5:263-66, 51.14/5:269-71 51.17/ 5:274 f.

² See also Vism 385/12.50-53 & VbhA 303-308.

³ DA 3:1007; MA 2:69; SA 3:250; AA 2:50.

⁴ For details, see **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16) = SD 9 (9b.3).

⁵ See Gethin 2001: 81; for Skt refs, see 92-94 (ch 3.6)

⁶ *Chanda, samādhi, padhāna, saṅkhāra, samannāgataṃ iddhipādaṃ bhāveti*. Here BDict renders the 4 *iddhi, pādā* as “[1] concentration of Intention (*padhāna-saṅkhāra-samannāgata*), [2] concentration of Energy (*virīya-s...*), [3] concentration of Consciousness (*citta-s...*), and [4] concentration of Investigation (*vīmaṃsā-s...*) accomplished by effort of will.” But here I am influenced by the translations of U Thittila (Vbh:Th 283) & Gethin 2001: 81. See **Cakka, vatti Sīha, nāda S** (D 26.28/3:77) = SD 36.10.

- (4) cultivates the path to spiritual power [basis of success] *endowed with concentration gained through mental investigation (vīmaṃsā) and through striving.*

Jana,vasabha Sutta	(D 18.22/2:213 f)
Cakka.vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta	(D 26.28/3:77)
Saṅgīti Sutta	(D 33.1.11(3)/3:221)
Ceto,khila Sutta	(M 16.26/1:103)
Mahā Sakul’udāyī Sutta	(M 77.17/2:11)
Asaṅkhata Sutta	(S 43.12(17-20)/4:365)
Iddhi,pāda Saṃyutta (various suttas)	(S 51/5:254-293 passim) with detailed definitions
Iddhi,pāda Sutta	(A 1.20.18/1:39)
Paṭipadā Suta 2	(A 3.152/1:297)
Rāga Abhiññā Sutta	(A 4.271.3//2:256)
(Pañca,dhamma) Iddhi,pāda Sutta 2	(A 5.67/3:81 f)
(Vinibandha) Iddhi,pāda Sutta	(A 9.92.4/4:464)
Iddhi	(Pm 1.525-527/1:111)
Ceto,pariya,ñāṇa	(Pm 1.535-537/1:113)
Paññā,vagge Iddhi,kathā	(Pm 22.6/2:205)
Iddhi,pāda Vibhaṅga	(Vbh 432/216) followed by detailed definitions

Detailed definitions of the four paths of power are given in **the Iddhi,pāda Saṃyutta** (S 51) and **the Vibhaṅga** (Vbh 432/216). The Iddhi,pāda Saṃyutta defines each of the four paths in terms of *concentration*, as follows:

- (1) If a monk gains concentration, gains one-pointedness of mind, depending on desire [will to act] (*chanda*), this is called *chanda,samādhi*.
- (2) If a monk gains concentration, gains one-pointedness of mind, depending on energy (*vīriya*), this is called *vīriya,samādhi*.
- (3) If a monk gains concentration, gains one-pointedness of mind, depending on the mind (*citta*), this is called *citta,samādhi*.
- (4) If a monk gains concentration, gains one-pointedness of mind, depending on mental investigation (*vīmaṃsā*), this is called *vīmaṃsā,samādhi*.
(S 51.13.2-5/5:268 f)

Bhante Sujato gives a helpful analogy of the four paths of spiritual power:

The manner in which these qualities work together may be compared to **an electric light**. Enthusiasm is like the voltage in the circuits. Energy is like the current of electricity which flows when the switch is turned on. The mind is like the globe lighting up. And when the room is lit, it is easy to see what is there. Anyone who has ever had to search [inquiry] for something in a dark room would know that the quickest way, if one must grope in the dark, is to grope first of all for the light switch.
(Sujato, *A Swift Pair of Messengers*, 2001:47 f)

The Iddhi,pāda Saṃyutta analysis clearly shows that a “path of success” or “basis of success” is here understood as involving an interactivity of three basic components:

- (1) meditative concentration (*samādhi*),
- (2) striving (*saṅkhāra*) (identified with the 4 right strivings, ie effort), and
- (3) the specific means gaining the concentration, namely, an *iddhi,pāda*.

As such, as **Gethin** points out, “An *iddhi-pāda* is not so much any of these three things in particular as the interaction between them.” (2001: 82)

— — —

The Discourse on Moggallāna (on Psychic Powers)

(S 51.31/5:288 f)

2 Then the Blessed One addressed the monks,

Moggallāna the mighty saint

3 “What do you think, bhikshus, by having cultivated, having developed what things has the monk Moggallāna become so powerful, so mighty?”

“Bhante, our teachings are rooted in the Blessed One, guided by the Blessed One, has the Blessed One as refuge. It would be good indeed if the Blessed One were to explain its meaning. Having heard the Blessed One, the monks would remember it.”⁷

“Then, listen, bhikshus, pay close attention to it, I will speak.”

“Yes, bhante!” the monks answered the Blessed One in assent.

The 4 paths of spiritual power

The Blessed One said this:

4 “Bhikshus, it is by having cultivated, having developed the four paths of spiritual power [the four bases of success] (*cattāro iddhi, pāda*) that the monk Moggallāna has become so powerful, so mighty.

What are the four?

5 (1) ENTHUSIASM-BASED CONCENTRATION. Here, bhikshus, the monk Moggallāna has cultivated the path to spiritual power [basis of success] *endowed with concentration gained through desire*⁸ (**chanda**) *and through striving*,⁹ thinking,

‘Thus my desire will be neither too slack nor too tense, and it will neither be constricted internally nor distracted externally.’

And he is one who dwells perceiving what is after and what is before, thus:

‘As before, so after; as after, so before. As below, so above; as above, so below. As by day, so at night; as at night, so by day.’¹⁰

Thus with a mind that is open and uncovered, he cultivates a mind filled with light.

6 (2) ENERGY-BASED CONCENTRATION. He has cultivated the path to spiritual power [basis of success] *endowed with concentration gained through energy* (**vīriya**) *and through striving*, thinking,

‘Thus my energy will be neither too slack nor too tense, and it will neither be constricted internally nor distracted externally.’

And he is one who dwells perceiving what is after and what is before, thus:

⁷ *Bhagavam, mūlakā no bhante dhammā, bhagavam nettikā, bhagavam paṭisaraṇā. Sādhu vata bhante bhagavatañ-ñ’eva paṭibhātu etassa bhāsitassa attho. Bhagavato sutvā bhikkhū dhāressantī ti.* This is stock (M 1:309 f, 317, 465, 3:115; S 2:80 f; A 1:199, 4:158, 351, 5:355).

⁸ Here, it has a neutral, even positive, sense; alt tr: “will to act; enthusiasm.”

⁹ *Chanda, samādhi, padhāna, saṅkhāra, samannāgataṃ:* see Intro.

¹⁰ This is stock: *Pacchā, pure, saññī ca viharati – yathā pure tathā pacchā, yathā pacchā tathā pure; yathā adho tathā uddham, yathā uddham tathā adho; yathā divā tathā rattim, yathā rattim tathā divā. Iti vivaṭena cetasā apariyonaddhena sappabhāsam cittaṃ bhāveti: Pubba S (S 51.11/5:263 ×2), Maha-p-phala S (S 51.12/5:267 f), (Iddhi, pāda) Vibhaṅga S (S 51.20/5:277 ×2, 278), Magga S (S 51.21/5:281), (Iddhi) Moggallāna S (S 51.31/5:288 ×4), Tathāgata S (S 51.32/5:289 ×2). Simply, “as before, so after,” refers to evenness of practice, while “as above, so below,” refers to meditation on the 31 parts. On the meaning of terms here, see (Iddhi, pāda) Vibhaṅga S (S 51.20/5:277) = SD 28.14. Cf *Idh’āvuso, bhikkhu āloka, saññaṃ manasi karoti, divā, saññaṃ adhiṭṭhāti yathā divā tathā rattim, yathā rattim tathā divā. Iti vivaṭena cetasā apariyonaddhena sappabhāsam cittaṃ bhāveti: Saṅgīti S (D 33.1.11(5)/3:223*, where it is one of the four cultivations of concentration (*samādhi bhāvanā*); *Samādhi Bhāvanā S (A 4.44/2:44) = SD 24.1*, for context of the meditation; (*Anussati-ṭ, ṭhāna*) *Udāyi S (A 6.29/3:322 = SD 24.8*. Cf Pm 1:114.*

‘As before, so after; as after, so before. As below, so above; as above, so below. As by day, so at night; as at night, so by day.’

Thus with a mind that is open and uncovered, he cultivates a mind filled with light.

7 (3) MIND-BASED CONCENTRATION. He has cultivated the path to spiritual power [basis of success] *endowed with concentration gained through the mind (citta) and through striving*, thinking,

‘Thus my *mind* will be neither too slack nor too tense, and it will neither be constricted internally nor distracted externally.’

And he is one who dwells perceiving what is after and what is before, thus:

‘As before, so after; as after, so before. As below, so above; as above, so below. As by day, so at night; as at night, so by day.’

Thus with a mind that is open and uncovered, he cultivates a mind filled with light.

8 (4) INVESTIGATION-BASED CONCENTRATION. He has cultivated the path to spiritual power [basis of success] *endowed with concentration gained through mental investigation (vīmaṃsā) and through striving*, thinking,

‘Thus my *concentration* will be neither too slack nor too tense, and it will neither be constricted internally nor distracted externally.’

And he is one who dwells perceiving what is after and what is before, thus:

‘As before, so after; as after, so before. As below, so above; as above, so below. As by day, so at night; as at night, so by day.’

Thus with a mind that is open and uncovered, he cultivates a mind filled with light.

The various psychic powers

9 Bhikshus, it is by having cultivated, having developed these four paths of spiritual power [the four bases of success] that the monk Moggallāna has become so powerful, so mighty.

10 Indeed, bhikshus, it is by having cultivated, having developed these four paths of spiritual power [the four bases of success] that the monk Moggallāna has the various psychic powers, that is to say,¹¹

- (1) Having been one he becomes many; having been many he becomes one.
- (2) He appears, and vanishes.
- (3) He goes unhindered through walls, through ramparts, and through mountains as if through space.
- (4) He dives in and out of the earth as if it were water.
- (5) He walks on water without sinking as if it were earth.
- (6) Sitting cross-legged, he flies through the air like a winged bird.
- (7) With his hand he touches and strokes even the sun and the moon, so mighty, so powerful.
- (8) He has power over his body up to as far as the Brahmā world. [289]
[...etc...]¹²

4 The destruction of the mental influxes

11 Indeed, bhikshus, it is by having cultivated, having developed these four paths of spiritual power [the four bases of success] that the monk Moggallāna enters and dwells in the destruction of the

¹¹ *Eko’pi hutvā bahudhā hoti, bahudhā’pi hutvā eko hoti; āvibhāvaṃ tiro, bhāvaṃ tiro, kuṭṭam tiro, pākāram tiro, pabbataṃ asajjamāno gacchati seyyathā’pi ākāse. Pathaviyāpi ummujj’animujjam karoti seyyathā’pi uduke. Uduke’pi abhijjamāne gacchati [Ce Ke abhijjamāno] seyyathā’pi pathaviyā. Ākāse’pi pallaṅkena kamati seyyathā’pi pakkhī sakuṇo. Ime’pi candima, sūriye evam mah’iddhike evam mahā’nubhāve pāṇinā parāmasati parimajjati. Yāva brahma, lokāpi kāyena vasaṃ vatteti.* i Vism 12.69 takes āvibhāvaṃ tiro, bhāvaṃ tiro to be a distinct power, giving a list of 8 powers. The syntax of the Nikāya, Gethin notes, might be read as suggesting only 7 distinct powers. (*The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 2001: 82 n6)

¹² This elision (*peyyāla*) refers to the other 4 mundane superknowledges (*abhiññā*), viz (2) clairaudience (divine ear) (*dibba, sota*), (3) mind-reading (*ceto, pariya, ñāṇa*), (4) the knowledge of the recollection past lives (*pubbe, nivās-ānussati, ñāṇa*), (5) the knowledge of death and rebirth (*cut’upapāta, ñāṇa*) or “divine eye” (*dibba, cakkhu*): see **Miracles** = SD 27.5a(9). This is confirmed by Comy, which says that in this Sutta and the one foll it in the Iddhi, -pāda Saṃyutta, “the six superknowledges are discussed” (SA 3:261)

influxes,¹³ having realized for himself through direct knowledge, upon attaining the liberation of mind and the liberation by wisdom¹⁴ that are influx-free with the destruction of the mental influxes!”

— evaṃ —

Bibliography

Gethin, Rupert

2001

The Buddhist Path to Awakening: A study of the Bodhi-pakkhiyā Dhammā. [Leiden: EJ Brill, 1992.] 2nd ed sb Oxford: Oneworld, 2001.

090406; 090408; 091201

¹³ “**Mental influxes**,” *āsava*. The term *āsava* (lit “inflow, outflow”) comes from *ā-savati* “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as influxes, taints (“deadly taints,” RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists 4 *āsava*: the influx of (1) sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) wrong views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*) (D 16.2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These 4 are also known as “floods” (*ogha*) and “yokes” (*yoga*). The list of 3 influxes (omitting the influx of views) [43] is probably older and is found more frequently in the Suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these *āsavas* is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict: *āsava*.

¹⁴ “Liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom,” respectively, *ceto, vimutti* (or, liberation by concentration, ie through destruction of the mental hindrances) and *paññā, vimutti* (liberation through insight) (A 1:60). One who is “liberated by wisdom” “may not have reached the 8 liberations (*vimokkha*) in his own body, but through seeing with wisdom, his mental influxes are destroyed” (M 70.16/1:478). All arhats are perfectly liberated in the same way from ignorance and suffering, but are distinguished into 2 types on the basis of their proficiency in concentration. Those who can attain the 8 liberations (*aṭṭha, vimokkha*), which include the 4 formless attainments and the attainment of cessation, are called “liberated both ways,” ie, liberated from the physical body by means of the formless dhyanas, and from all defilements by the path of arhathood. Arhats like Sāriputta and Moggallāna are “liberated both ways” (*ubhato, bhāga, vimutta*). The differences between the two types of liberation are given in **Mahā, nidāna S** (D 2:70 f) and **Kiṭṭāgiri S** (M 1:477 f). For full list of the 8 deliverances, see **Mahā Nidāna S** (D 15.35/ 2:70 f) = SD 5.17.35. See also D 3:262, 228; **Vimokkha S**, A 8.66/4:306; also M 120.37/3:103 = SD 3.4.37.