

# 5b

## Ways of Attaining Dhyana

*Dasa kasina, aṭṭha abhibh'āyatana, aṭṭha vimokkha*  
The 10 kasinas, the 8 bases of mastery and the 8 liberations  
An introduction by Piya Tan ©2015

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### 0 Introduction

**0.1 A SPECIAL STUDY.** This essay originally formed Section 4-6 of the introductory notes to **the Mahā Sakul'udāyi Sutta** (M 77), SD 49.5a. However, as these notes on the 8 bases (*aṭṭha vimokkha*), the 8 bases of mastery (*aṭṭha abhibh'āyatana*), and the 10 kasina-bases (*dasa kasiṇ'āyatana*) grew in size in an already lengthy annotated translation of M 77, we find it expedient to transfer these 3 interesting sections on dhyana-related teachings into a file of its own, that is, SD 49.5b, for easier reference and future revision and expansion as our understanding of them grows through study and practice.

### 0.2 THE SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

#### 0.2.1 The 5 “reasons” for respecting the Buddha and Dharma: M 77 (SD 49.5a)

|   |   |                             |           |   |
|---|---|-----------------------------|-----------|---|
| 1   | Higher moral virtue                             | <i>adhisīla</i>             | [§36]     |   |
| 2   | Knowledge and vision                            | <i>ñāṇa, dassana</i>        | [§37]     |   |
| 3   | Higher wisdom                                   | <i>adhipaññā</i>            | [§38]     |   |
| 4   | The 4 noble truths                              | <i>catu ariya, sacca</i>    | [§§39-40] |   |
| 5   | <u>The path to awakening</u> [§§41-59]          |                             |           |   |
| (1)   | the 4 focuses of mindfulness                    |                             | [§41]     | } the “7 sets” <sup>1</sup> =<br>the 37 limbs of awakening<br>( <i>bodhi, pakkhiya dhamma</i> ) |
| (2)   | the 4 right strivings                           |                             | [§42]     |   |
| (3)   | the 4 paths of spiritual power                  |                             | [§43]     |   |
| (4)   | the 5 spiritual faculties                       |                             | [§44]     |   |
| (5)   | the 5 spiritual powers                          |                             | [§45]     |   |
| (6)   | the 7 awakening-factors                         |                             | [§46]     |   |
| (7)   | the noble eightfold path                        |                             | [§47]     |   |
| (8)   | <b>the 8 liberations</b>                        | <i>aṭṭha vimokkha</i>       | [§48; 3]  | } <b><u>Dhyana-based practices</u></b>  |
| (9)   | <b>the 8 bases of mastery</b>                   | <i>aṭṭha abhibh'āyatana</i> | [§49; 4]  |   |
| (10)  | <b>the 10 kasina-bases</b>                      | <i>dasa kasiṇ'āyatana</i>   | [§50]     |   |
| (11)  | the 4 dhyanas                                   |                             | [§51]     | } The “comprehensive dhyana pericope,” <b>Sāmaññaphala Sutta</b> (D 2,76-88), SD 8.10           |
| (12)  | insight knowledge of the conscious body         |                             | [§52]     |   |
| (13)  | knowledge of the mind-made body                 |                             | [§53]     | } the 6 superknowledges<br>( <i>cha-ḷ-abhiññā</i> )   |
| (14)  | psychic powers                                  |                             | [§54]     |   |
| (15)  | the divine ear (clairaudience)                  |                             | [§55]     |   |
| (16)  | mind-reading                                    |                             | [§56]     |   |
| (17)  | knowledge of the recollection of past lives     |                             | [§57]     |   |
| (18)  | the divine eye (knowledge of karma)             |                             | [§58]     |   |
| (19)  | knowledge of the destruction of mental influxes |                             | [§59]     | } “Fruits of recluship pericope”<br><i>sāmañña-phala</i> (D 2,76-100)                           |
| Total number of <u>individual teachings</u> : 75. |   |                             |           |   |

**Table 0.2** The Sutta context of the liberations, bases of mastery and kasinas

<sup>1</sup> See *Bodhi, pakkhiya, dhamma*, SD 10.1.

### **0.2.2 Their context**

These three dhyana-related sets of teachings—the 8 liberations, the 8 bases of mastery and the 10 kasina-bases—are a set of 3 lists given in **the Mahā Sakul'udāyi Sutta** (M 77),<sup>2</sup> where they form items (8), (9) and (10) of the “path to awakening.” As a set they form the 5<sup>th</sup> of the 5 reasons on account of which the Buddha's followers respect him and follow his teaching.

The 5 reasons given by the Buddha actually refer to a total of 23 sets of teachings, with the fifth (“the path to awakening”) forming the main bulk of them, with a total of 19 teachings, covering more than half the Sutta itself [Table 0.2].

### **0.3 THEORY AND PRACTICE SEQUENCES**

#### **0.3.1 Sutta arrangement**

0.3.1.1 The Mahā Sakul'udāyi Sutta lists the 3 sets in order of importance, thus listing “liberation” (*vimokkha*) first, then the “mastery” aspect (*abhibhu*), and finally the kasina bases (*kasīna*). However, in practical terms—how we should cultivate them—we should list them in just the reverse manner, that is, as the tools, the means and the goals. Hence, in this study, we will begin examining the 10 kasina-bases [1]; then, the 8 bases of mastery [2], and finally, the 8 liberations [3].

0.3.1.2 The listing in the Mahā Sakul'udāyi Sutta follows the style of the Dīgha suttas, where teachings are presented to impress outsiders and newcomers. Hence, the goals (the liberations) are listed first, followed by the means (the bases of mastery), and then the tools (the kasina-bases). Someone who is not a Buddhist or new to Buddhism is likely to ask, “What are the benefits of being a Buddhist or of Buddhist meditation?”

#### **0.3.2 Sequence of teachings**

0.3.2.1 On the other hand, a practitioner is more interested in “How do I start my practice? How do I put this into practice? How do I know the results?” As we give a high priority to Dharma practice, it would surely be beneficial to begin with the most basic aspect, that is, the tools of this practice, and then learn about the means, and finally have a good idea of the goals for which we are aiming.

0.3.2.2 **Caveat.** Before we start on the 10 kasinas, the 8 bases of mastery and the 8 liberations, we must have proper coaching by an experienced Dharma-based meditation teacher. We should have mastered at least the two foundational meditations of the mindfulness of the breath (*ānāpāna,sati*)<sup>3</sup> and the cultivation of lovingkindness (*mettā,bhāvanā*).<sup>4</sup> These two meditations are simple and safe, and when well cultivated serve as the “safe bases” to which we return for resting or re-charging ourself, or when we are not progressing in our meditation.

0.3.2.3 **The Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) lists the 8 bases of mastery first, followed by the 8 liberations (but does not list the 10 kasinas as a set).<sup>5</sup> In **the Aṅguttara Nikāya**, too, first lists the 8 bases of mastery and then the 8 liberations. The Book of Ones (*ekaka nipāta*) has **the (Ekaka) Abhibh'āyatana Sutta** (A 1.18, §§47-54) and then **the (Ekaka) Vimokkha Sutta** (A 1.18, §§55-62). In the Book of Eights (*aṭṭhaka nipāta*), we have **the (Aṭṭhaka) Abhibh'āyatana Sutta** (A 8.65), and immediately following it is **the (Aṭṭhaka) Vimokkha Sutta** (A 8.66).<sup>6</sup>

0.3.2.4 Buddhaghosa, in his *Visuddhi,magga*, too, explains the kasinas first. Then, he discusses the bases of mastery,<sup>7</sup> followed by the liberations.<sup>8</sup> Again here, we have the sequence of the 8 bases of mastery followed by the 8 liberations.<sup>9</sup> However, while the bases of mastery only allude to the attaining of the form

<sup>2</sup> M77,48-50/2:12-15 (SD 49.5a).

<sup>3</sup> See **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118), SD 7.13. For an overview on meditation, esp mental concentration, see **Samadhi**, SD 33.1a.

<sup>4</sup> See **(Karaṇīya) Metta S** (Sn 1.8 = Khp 9), SD 28.3.

<sup>5</sup> D 16,3.2+3,3 (SD 9) respectively.

<sup>6</sup> The refs for these 4 Aṅguttara suttas respectively as follows: A 1.18,46-53/1:40; A 1.18,55-62/1:40 f; A 8.65/-4:305 f (SD 49.5b(2.1)); A 8.66/4:306 (SD 95.11).

<sup>7</sup> Only in passing, *Vism* 5.28/175. The liberations are explained as occurring after this: *Vism* 5.32/176.

<sup>8</sup> *Vism* ch 4-5. The earth kasina is explained in detail in ch 4 (*Vism* 118-169); then, basing on this lengthy ch, he explains the other 3 kasinas (water, fire and wind), ch 5 (*Vism* 170-177).

<sup>9</sup> On a few problems regarding these 3 sets of teachings, see SD 49.5a (3).

dhyanas (without specifying them), the liberations, allude to the form dhyanas without mentioning them, but mentions the 4 formless attainments, and the cessation of perception and feeling.<sup>10</sup>

### **0.3.3 Practice sequence**

0.3.3.1 In practice, both the 8 bases of mastery [2] and the 8 liberations [3] describe the same meditation in terms of kasina practices for the purpose of attaining dhyana and beyond. Note that every base of mastery ends with the sentence, “I know, I see” (*jānāmi passāmīti*), which is the reviewing of the dhyana or state that has been attained. However, none of the liberations mentions this reviewing, because each refers to the “liberated” (*vimutta*) mind itself (especially the 8<sup>th</sup> stage, cessation). As a meditator, we, of course, still have the option of reviewing such liberated states if we are inclined to.

0.3.3.2 If we wish to practise this meditation—the kasina meditation—we naturally must start with a proper understanding of the **kasina bases** (*kaṣiṇ’āyatana*) themselves. Hence, it is wise to start with reading through that section [1], and following up the cross-references to the Visuddhi, magga. Do not be concerned if some of the passages we read seem problematic. Sometimes it is a problem in translation, sometimes it may mean something other than what we construe it to be.<sup>11</sup>

0.3.3.3 A good grounding in **the suttas**—especially those related to meditation—will further help us sort out such difficulties, and our practice (with the help of a mentor who is a spiritual friend), we should be able to progress in time. Meditation is not a separate experience in our life. So we learn to see everything, both within and without, in terms of what we have learned in our meditation theory and practice. In this sense, a good meditator is like an artist (in the broad sense) who sees beauty and truth in everything, and in time will be able to communicate this beauty and truth to others, too.<sup>12</sup>

0.3.3.4 A careful study of **the two sets**—the bases of mastery and the liberations—will show that the bases of mastery are, as the name suggests, the bases for the *mastery* of **liberation**. The bases of mastery begin with the calming of the mind (*samatha*), and in due time, move on to seeing into the true nature of the experience (seeing impermanence, etc). The basic steps are given in the section on the bases of mastery [2].

0.3.3.5 After trying out the various bases of mastery (BM), we may choose the one that suits us best, and build on that practice. For example, for some of us, an internal BM practice (such as BM 2); or for others, a particular colour works better than the others. In fact, once we master any of these BMs, it serves as the key to all the other BMs, and in due course to first liberation.

There is some **overlapping** between the 8 bases of mastery and the 8 liberations. The 1<sup>st</sup> liberation [3.3.1], for example, comprises the first two bases of mastery; the 2<sup>nd</sup> liberation [3.3.2], bases of mastery 3 and 4, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> liberation [3.3.3], bases of mastery 5, 6, 7 and 8. In fact, liberations 1-3 serve as a sort of refresher for the 8 bases of mastery, or a kind of upgrading and refining of them.

As we practise, we will see how this overlapping works. In other words, only theoretically (to facilitate explanation), the kasina, the bases of mastery and the liberations are listed in a near sequence. In practice, however, there is much dynamic overlapping, and we will naturally realize how to proceed once we have attained a particular stage. [3.3.3.4 para 2]

0.3.3.6 The purpose of the BM (base of mastery) practice is to attain the 1<sup>st</sup> dhyana. The 4 form dhyanas are not mentioned by name in the 8 liberations, but the 4 formless attainments are [3]. The reason is clear enough, we need, first and foremost, to attain the 1<sup>st</sup> dhyana. For this, there are many suttas that address the 4 dhyanas, and how they are attained.<sup>13</sup>

However, once we have mastered the first dhyana, the subsequent dhyanas will not be difficult to attain with the right understanding, right effort and right conditions. The formless attainments are more difficult, so they are listed and described in some detail. Even then, we still need to master the basics and progress gradually, never giving up, like an infant learning to walk.

<sup>10</sup> Further see the “rationale of the sequence”: SD 49.5a (2.2.2).

<sup>11</sup> See also ̐hitapuñño, CKM, nd: SD 15.1 (9.2.3).

<sup>12</sup> On beauty and truth in Buddhist practice, see SD 40a.1 (8.1.2); as aesthetics SD 46.5 (2.4.2).

<sup>13</sup> See **Dhyana**, SD 8.4.

0.3.3.7 It is important to note that, at the start, we need not complete all the liberations, even if all our best efforts fail. However, we should certainly try all the bases of liberations to find the right one that works best for us. Once we have mastered a particular base of mastery and attained dhyana (or even some level of samadhi, if we are unable to progress any further), this is called “freedom of mind” (*ceto, vimutti*) and we are mentally liberated (*ceto, vimutta*), at least momentarily, from the mental hindrances.<sup>14</sup>

Then, emerging from that state, we make it a habit of seeing its impermanence, and so on. In other words, we see with insight into the experience. In due course, we will attain the “freedom through wisdom” (*paññā, vimutti*): we are freed through wisdom (*paññā, vimutta*). If we are able to complete all the 8 liberations, and fully awaken, then we are said to have attained “freedom both ways” (*ubhato, bhāga, vimutti*): we are “freed both ways” (*ubhato, bhāga, vimutta*), that is, we have also mastered the formless attainments. The best way to succeed in this last enterprise is to live the life of a true renunciant as taught by the Buddha.

#### 0.4 HOW DO WE KNOW THINGS WHILE IN DHYANA?

**0.4.1** Kasina, the bases of mastery and the liberations are all about dhyana. But how do we know that we have attained dhyana? Here is an attempt from my understanding of the suttas and teachings of living teachers, to describe, as far as language permits.

Recall a time when we were profoundly happy (such as seeing awe-inspiring nature, or winning a hard fought game, or gaining a great windfall), how we are simply at a loss for words. We simply *feel* happy. We are conscious of what is going on around us, for the most part anyway, but that’s all we can really “know.” This is the liberating bliss of the present meditative moment, the rapture of the mind liberated from the body.

**0.4.2** In the dhyanas, too, we feel the same way, but more profoundly. It is pure feeling, with clear knowing but not being able to do anything about it. There is some kind of clear knowing (in a broad sense), but we are not able to do anything about it. There is no “two minds” about this. **The “two minds” explanation** is, in fact, helpful here. In our daily life, especially when we are caught up in the “flow” of the world, our “doing” mind (the doer) is taking charge and dictating us to act (or not) in response to the situation.

In a dhyana situation, the doer is put to a full rest, or transformed into a “knowing mind” (**the knower**), which then takes over, in full charge of the situation. The knower, however, does not “act,” but simply “knows” what is going on, or rather *feels* it. The proper technical term is *paṭisaṃvediyati* or *paṭisaṃvedeti* (“to know completely and feel reflectively”), which includes both the cognitive and the affective aspects of knowing.<sup>15</sup> During dhyana, we are only fully conscious in an affective way.<sup>16</sup> What does this mean?<sup>17</sup>

**0.4.3** In dhyana, it is as if we have suspended our cognitive consciousness, that is, the workings of the 5 physical senses fully cease to function. Only the affective aspects of mind, as it were, remain active. However, without cognitive consciousness, **the affective consciousness** only experiences the joy and clarity of the immediate dhyanic state.

The language here is predominantly conditional because we are only *theoretically* describing the dynamic present moment of dhyana. We have to experience this state ourself to understand the difficulty of describing it in theoretical terms. Such an experience is not only possible, but necessary, if we are to live fully.

**0.4.4** In an important sense, we have been doing this. Profoundly creative people, the “Artists”—the writer, the poet, the painter, the musician, the dancer, the spiritual, the mystic, even the scientist in moments of great imagination and deep insight, even when we are deeply and truly in love—experience these moments when “the Muses” touch us. The Artist immortalizes beauty and truth in his works, actions and words—which we call “works of art.”

<sup>14</sup> On “freedom of mind,” “freedom through wisdom” and “freedom both ways,” see *Ceto, vimutti paññā, vimutti* and *ubhato, bhāga, vimutti*, SD 4.25.

<sup>15</sup> On *paṭisaṃvedeti*, see SD 17.3 (1.2).

<sup>16</sup> I’m not using “affective” here in any technically psychological sense, but as a helpful term for the early Buddhist notion of “feeling.”

<sup>17</sup> On the doer and the knower in meditation, see SD 15.1 (1.5) & *Saṅkhāra*, SD 17.6 (8.4).

The true Artist, then, is able to experience moments of deep and direct feelings, when the movement and structure of time and space break down, as it were, and he disintegrates and merges with that eternal *now*, right here and forever (beyond time, as it were), fully alive in the immediate reality of truth and beauty.<sup>18</sup>

**0.4.5** The Buddha’s “**Ātumā experience**,” recounted by the Buddha himself in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), is instructive. Once, when the Buddha is staying in a threshing-house near Ātumā, there is a great thunderstorm with bright bursts of lightning, when 2 brothers and 4 oxen were struck down. The Buddha, deep in dhyana, “being both conscious and awake, neither saw anything nor heard a sound!”<sup>19</sup>

Note the phrase, “being both conscious and awake” (*saññī samāno jāgaro*): this refers to the nature of the Buddha’s consciousness in the context of dhyana. This is clearly not being “conscious and awake” in the ordinary sense. The mind is only *affectively* alert, but has *cognitively* shut down. The physical senses are all fully at rest, so that the mind is utterly free from data input, except for an awareness of the dhyanic state.

Scholars and meditation teachers who fail to notice or understand this distinction may claim that thinking and external awareness continue during dhyana. The point is that we are not able to examine our mind in dhyana since it is cognitively at rest or, simply, thoughtfree. We can only evaluate our meditation after we emerge from it, when reviewing our practice.<sup>20</sup> [0.4.3]

**0.4.6** The apophatic (or negative) language<sup>21</sup> that attempts to describe the *experience* of nirvana (though not nirvana itself), here spoken by the arhat Mahā Cunda to the dying Channa, as recorded in **the Chann’ovāda Sutta** (M 114) and echoed elsewhere, reads thus:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| When there is no inclination, <sup>22</sup> | there is neither coming nor going.          |
| When there is neither coming nor going,     | there is neither dying and arising.         |
| When there is neither dying nor arising,    | there is no here nor beyond nor in between. |
| —This is the end of suffering.”             | (M 114,11 = S 35.87,11; U 81) <sup>23</sup> |

A Dharma-hearted meditator’s experience of dhyana, even just a moment’s glimpse of it, is a vision of nirvana. We could borrow William Blake’s immortal words, and say of it that here we have seen a world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wild flower; we have held infinity in the palm of our hand and eternity in an hour.<sup>24</sup>

## 0.5 SUPPORTING MEDITATIONS

**0.5.1** If we are new to meditation, we should not go straight into the kasina practices, as it is most likely that we will not be able to do them, much less master them. As already mentioned at the start, we should first master, or at least be familiar with, **the foundation meditations** of the mindfulness of the breath and the cultivation of lovingkindness [0.3.2.2]

**0.5.2** Next, it is highly advisable and especially beneficial for us to be familiar with, even master, **the element-like meditations**—at least the element that we plan to practise on—as already explained in the section on the 2<sup>nd</sup> base of mastery [2.3.2.2]. These supporting meditations are helpful to us when we face

<sup>18</sup> See Reflection, “The Artist,” R419, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> D 16,4.32/2:132 (SD 9).

<sup>20</sup> See **The Buddha discovered dhyana**, SD 22.1b (6.2); thus subsection recurs in (6.2.5.4).

<sup>21</sup> On apophasis in Buddhism, see SD 40a.1 (6.3).

<sup>22</sup> “Inclination,” *nati* (rare). This term usu refers to a negative state, but its sense is not restricted to that. It simply denotes “an inclination, a habit or bias”: see **Dvedhā Vitakka S** (M 19/1:115,22), SD 61.1; **Chann’ovāda S** (M 144,-11/3:266,7), SD 11.12; **Cetanā S 3** (S 12.40/2:67,4), SD 7.6c; U:Be+Ce 81,7 (UA 398,18).

<sup>23</sup> M 144,11 = S 35.87 (SD 11.12); U 81 (SD 50.1); UA 398; Nett 65; cf S 12.40/2:67. On the nature of dhyana, see SD 33.1b (6.2.1.1).

<sup>24</sup> From William Blake, “To see a world ...” (from *Auguries of Innocence*, 1803?). For details, see explanation of the dhyana-factors (*jhān’āṅga*), SD 8.4 (6).

difficulty in the actual practice of the earth kasina. We can then go back to one of these supporting meditations to rest or re-energize ourselves, before resuming our kasina practice.<sup>25</sup>

## 1 The 10 kasina-bases

### 1.0 Kasīna

| MEDITATION METHOD    | PERSONALITY                | DHYANA LEVEL                              |
|----------------------|----------------------------|---|
| <b>10 kasinas</b>    |                            |   |
| (1) earth            | <i>paṭhavī</i>             | } 1 <sup>st</sup> -4 <sup>th</sup> dhyana |
| (2) water            | <i>āpo</i>                 |   |
| (3) fire             | <i>tejo</i>                |   |
| (4) wind             | <i>vāyo</i>                |   |
| (5) blue             | <i>nīla</i>                |   |
| (6) yellow           | <i>pīta</i>                |   |
| (7) red              | <i>lohita</i>              |   |
| (8) white            | <i>odāta</i>               |   |
| (9) light            | <i>āloka</i> <sup>26</sup> |   |
| (10) space (limited) | <i>ākāsa</i>               |   |
| [ ] consciousness    | <i>viññāna</i>             | [1.10]                                    |

**Table 1. The 10 kasina-bases** [SD 15.1 (Fig 8.1)]

#### 1.0.1 Definitions

1.0.1.1 The term *kasīna* (Skt \**kṛtsna*) literally means “totality” or “universal.” In the suttas, it is often called *kaṣiṇ'āyatana* (Skt \**kṛtsn'āyatana*), “kasina-base.” The extended meaning of *kasīna* is a “visualization device” or “kasina device” that serves as the meditative base for the “totality” of the mind’s attention to an object of concentration. This base is known as *kaṣiṇ'āyatana*. More technically, it refers to the result of kasina meditation, when the visualization has been fully mastered.

1.0.1.2 There are traditionally 10 kasinas, which are related to the theory and practice of dhyana in such works as **the Vimutti,magga** and **the Visuddhi,magga**.<sup>27</sup> Theoretically, this set is located by way of numerical progression, following the “7 sets,” the 8 liberations and the 8 bases of mastery [1.0.1.4]. These last 2 sets and the 10 kasina-bases form a set of teachings closely connected with dhyana. In practice, however, we need to understand what the 10 kasinas are, before we begin the practice proper.

1.0.1.3 The 10 kasinas are generally enumerated comprising visualization devices that are constructed from the 4 primary physical elements (*mahā,bhūta*) of earth, water, fire, and wind; the colours blue, yellow, red, and white; and light and space. The earth device, for example, might be constructed from a circle of clay of even texture; the water device from a tub of water; and the red device from a piece of red cloth or a painted red disc.

<sup>25</sup> If this is the first time you are reading about kasinas, it would help now to read SD 15.1 (9) on the meditation signs and stages of zest (incl a summary of the kasinas).

<sup>26</sup> In the suttas, *āloka kasīna* is replaced by *viññāna kasīna* (consciousness kasina), eg A 10.29.4 (SD 16.15).

<sup>27</sup> **Vimutti,magga** (Vimm), “the path to freedom,” is an Indian Abhidhamma text, attr to Upatissa, who composed it between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> cent CE, prob in northern India. Today it is only extant in its Chin tr (解脫道論 *Jiě tuō dào lùn*, T1648 @ T32.399c-461c), by Saṅghapāla of Funan (Tan 2004:§11.1) in 505. Parts of it were tr into Tib (D 306; Q 972). Although it is known by its putative Pali title, its orig language is unknown. The work was known to Buddhaghosa, who used it for his **Visuddhi,magga** (Vism) (5<sup>th</sup> cent), without credit, following its structure of the 3 trainings. Vism, however, is a more comprehensive work, presenting the view of the Mahāvihāra tradition in Sri Lanka, while the Vimm represent the Abhayagiri view. See Ency Bsm: Vimuttimagma.

1.0.1.4 **The last two kasinas**—those of light (*āloka*) and space (technically, “limited space” (*paritta ākāsa*)—are a later sequence introduced by Buddhaghosa in his *Visuddhi,magga*.<sup>28</sup> The original sequence—as listed in **the Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta** (M 77)—is that of the space kasina [1.9] and consciousness kasina (*viññāṇa kasina*) [1.10]. When fully developed, they are the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> “freedoms” (*vimutti*), that is, those of “infinite space” [3.3.4] and “infinite consciousness” [3.3.5], the first two formless attainments.

Buddhaghosa, in modifying the list—replacing the kasinas of space and consciousness with those of light and space—has really changed nothing but has facilitated the actual practice of the kasinas. In other words, “space” and “consciousness” are the shorthands for the first formless attainments, which are goals of dhyana practice. Hence, it will be difficult, even impossible, for a practitioner who has not mastered the 4<sup>th</sup> form dhyana to attain them.

Light and space should, in fact, be first practised as **perceptions** (*saññā*), that is, the perceptions of light (*āloka,saññā*) [1.11] and the perception of space (*ākāsa,saññā*). Because of their “open” nature, they are delightfully safe meditation practices that are suitable for any kind of personal temperament, even for the beginner.<sup>29</sup> These two perceptions, when properly cultivated can lead up to the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana, when they become the bases for their respective mental freedoms, that is, the first two formless attainments—those of infinite space, and of infinite consciousness, respectively. [3.3.4; 3.3.5]

### 1.0.2 Creating the device

1.0.2.1 The practice of the earth kasina is a very specialized one, employing a meditation tool, called the “earth device” (also terms *paṭhavī,kasina*). The earth device needs to be properly constructed first, and we should approach an experienced teacher for instructions here. The earth device, says Buddhaghosa, should be made from clay of the right colour [1.5.2], such as that of the river Ganges, said to be of the “colour of dawn.”<sup>30</sup>

1.0.2.2 The device is usually the size of a bushel (*suppa*) or a saucer (*sarāva*).<sup>31</sup> It may be portable or it can be properly set up in an open place, away from any distraction (such as non-meditators). Its rim should be well-defined so that we have a good idea of its shape and extent. The place of meditation, too, should be suitable for the practice.

1.0.2.3 **Ṭhitapuñño** gives the following dimensions for the kasina device: coloured diameter is 9 inches (23 cm); the circle centred on square whose sides are each 27 inches (68.5 cm). The black border for the circle is at least  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (2 cm) wide. He adds that these measurements are derived from the standard 9 inch [23-cm] diameter circle described in the texts. The square side length for the plate or flat surface (plywood or other suitable rigid material) is obtained by multiplying 9 inches [22.86 cm] by 1.618 (the golden ratio or golden proportion) 3 times and dividing the product by the square root of 2. The border thickness (actually 0.81 ins = 2.06 cm) results from dividing 9 ins [22.86 cm] by 1.618 (5 times). Creating the device based on these proportions results in a harmonious-looking figure that is pleasing to the eye. (CKM p3; metric measurements added.)

### 1.0.3 The 4 faults of a kasina

1.0.3.1 When making an earth kasina-device and using it, we need to guard against **the “4 faults of a kasina** (*cattāro kasina,dosa*), that is, intrusion on account of the colours blue, yellow, red or white (the signs for the colour kasina). In general, a kasina device should not be made in an open public or busy place, where we can be easily distracted. A good spot will be a secluded area of the monastery, and a special area screened off from others, or even under an overhanging rock or in a leaf-hut.<sup>32</sup>

1.0.3.2 The kasina-device may be fixed or portable. A portable one should be made by tying rags of leather or matting onto four sticks and fixing on it an earth-disc, using clay clean of grass, roots, gravel,

<sup>28</sup> Vism 5.21-26/175.

<sup>29</sup> For their placing in the list of 40 meditation methods, see *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1 (Fig 8.1);

<sup>30</sup> Vism 4.24/124 f.

<sup>31</sup> Vism 4.22/123; see Vism:Ñ 126 n4 for the Old Comy on the earth kasina..

<sup>32</sup> On the 4 faults of the earth kasina, see Vism 3.131/117, 4.24/124; on those of the water kasina, Vism 171.

and sand, and well kneaded. When doing the preliminary practice, it should be laid on the ground and gazed at, noting “Earth, earth.”

A fixed kasina-device should be made by knocking stakes into the ground in the form of a lotus calyx, and then lashing them over with creepers. If the clay is insufficient, then other kinds of clay should be inserted underneath, and a disk a span<sup>33</sup> and 4 fingers (about 11” or 28 cm) across should be made on top of it with the pure dawn-coloured clay. As already mentioned, the measurement should be *either the size of a bushel or of a saucer* [1.0.2.2].

1.0.3.3 The phrase “that is bounded or not” [1.0.2.1] refers to the delimitation of the device. After making sure of its delimitation—a distinct circumference—he should scrape it down with a stone trowel: a wooden trowel should not be used as it turns to be of a bad colour. The clay should be spread until it is even like the surface of a drum. Then, he should tidy the place and wash himself.

1.0.3.4 On returning, he should seat himself on a well-covered stool or chair with legs a span and 4 fingers high (about 11” or 28 cm), prepared in a place that is two and a half cubits (that is, two and a half times the elbow to finger-tip, that is, about 4 ft or 1.2 m) from the kasina disc.

The kasina does not appear clearly to us if we sit farther than that, and if we sit nearer than that, the faults in the kasina become evident. If we sit on a higher level, we have to bend our neck down to look at it; and if we sit on a lower elevation, our knees will ache.<sup>34</sup>

1.0.3.5 It is appropriate here to add a 5<sup>th</sup> “**fault**” to guard against, that is, the suitability of the kasina, whether it is an element kasina (earth, water, fire, or wind) or a colour kasina (blue, yellow, red, or white). Ideally, we should try out each of these kasinas to see if it suits our temperament. Indeed, it is the skill of a meditator, mentor or therapist in selecting the right element or colour for a student or client that makes him effective as a teacher or healer. This is called “the rule of right practice.”

The most important point is that we are able to select for our own practice—with the help of a teacher or on our own—the right element of colour. The last two kasinas—those of light and space—are suitable for all kinds of temperament, and should be, as such, practised by all practitioners. A further skill is to try out, in due course, different combinations of the kasinas to help us gain dhyana, remain in it, and emerge from it, in a skillful manner.<sup>35</sup>

1.0.3.6 In summary, then, we have the following tips to avoid the 4 faults of the kasina and the rule of right practice:

- (1) It should be of an undistracting colour, the size of a saucer or plate (depending on our need).
- (2) Whether it is portable or fixed, it should be placed securely at eye level, 4’ or 1,2 m away.<sup>36</sup>
- (3) Make sure that the shape of the kasina disc is well defined and the texture smooth.
- (4) Position yourself comfortably from a suitable distance to see the kasina clearly but not its defects.
- (5) The rule of right practice. Each method should be tried out, and also in different combinations, to determine their effectiveness in bringing about dhyana.

#### **1.0.4 Practice and concentration**

1.0.4.1 A meditator begins kasina meditation by looking at the kasina device or an external physical sign. The perception of the device is called the “preliminary sign” or “**preparatory sign**” (*parikamma nimitta*).<sup>37</sup> Once the object is clearly perceived, he then memorizes the object so that it is seen as clearly in his mind as if with his eyes. This perfect mental image of the device is called the “eidetic sign” or “**learning sign**” (*uggaha nimitta*), and serves subsequently as the object of concentration.

1.0.4.2 As the internal visualization of this eidetic sign deepens and the 5 mental hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇa*) to dhyana (*jhāna*) cease temporarily, a “representational image” or “**counterpart sign**” (*paṭi-*

<sup>33</sup> A span (*vidatthi*) is the distance between the tips of the thumb and the little finger both extended.

<sup>34</sup> *Vism* 4.24-26/123 f.

<sup>35</sup> This refers to the fivefold mastery (*pañca vāsī*) of dhyana, ie, (1) focussing the mind, (2) attaining of dhyana, (3) remaining in it, (4) emerging from it at the right time, and (5) reviewing the dhyana-factors: see SD 24.3 (2); SD 33.1a (2.1.3).

<sup>36</sup> Thitapuñño suggests the distance should be between 1.5 to 3 m away: see SD 15.1 (9.2.3).

<sup>37</sup> On *parikamma, nimitta, uggaha, nimitta* and *paṭibhāga, nimitta*, see SD 33.1a (3.1) & SD 15.1 (9.3).



*bhāga nimitta*) will emerge from out of the eidetic image, as if, the texts say, a sword is being drawn from its scabbard or the moon is emerging from behind clouds.<sup>38</sup>

The counterpart sign is a mental representation of the visualized image, which does not duplicate what was seen with the eyes but represents its abstracted, essentialized quality. The earth disc may now appear like the moon, the water device like a mirror suspended in the sky, or the red device like a bright jewel. Whereas the eidetic sign is an exact mental copy of the visualized preparatory sign, the counterpart sign has no fixed form but may be manipulated at will by the meditator.

1.0.4.3 Sustained attention to the counterpart sign will lead to the first dhyana, and subsequently all the other three form dhyanas. Perhaps because of the complexity of preparing the kasina devices, and the lack of experienced teachers willing to teach them, kasina meditation is rarely practised today.<sup>39</sup> Their practice, however, is quite clearly laid out in the *Visuddhi, magga*.<sup>40</sup> If we have a good grounding in the mindfulness of the breath and the cultivation of lovingkindness (and both meditations are essential and need to be mastered), and with the mentorship of experienced teachers as spiritual friends, we will easily master the kasina meditations. However, the attaining of the formless dhyanas needs a lot of personal diligence and the nurturing wisdom of the suttas—and some level of renunciation; in other words, commitment to the Dharma and to the spiritual life. [1.0.4.4]

1.0.4.4 In **dhyana meditation** (meditation with the aim to attaining dhyana)—also called calmness (*samatha*) meditation—we should be familiar with the two kinds of concentration, that is to say, access concentration and full concentration. When cultivating dhyana, the mind first attains “access” (*upacāra*) when it is in the proximity or “neighbourhood” of dhyana—hence, this is called “neighbourhood concentration” or “access concentration” (*upacāra, samādhi*). When the mind, free from the 6 senses, is fully absorbed in itself, it is said to have attained dhyana, that is, “full concentration” (*appanā, samādhi*).<sup>41</sup>

1.0.4.5 The mind becomes concentrated on the level of access by the abandonment of the mental hindrances,<sup>42</sup> that is, when the mind is completely free (at least temporarily) of the body.<sup>43</sup> The mental hindrances are the demanding and distracting activities of the 6 senses (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind). When the mind is fully free of the body, the physical senses also cease their activities, so that the mind, too, stops conceiving, that is, generating ideas with the sense-faculties. The mind itself, then, basically only perceives, without conceiving.<sup>44</sup> In aesthetic terms, we can say that, in dhyana, the mind only and fully *feels* without thinking.<sup>45</sup>

Dhyana is said to have arisen when all the dhyana-factors—initial application, sustained application, zest, joy, and one-pointedness<sup>46</sup>—are attained, the mind is said to have attained full concentration or attainment (*appanā*), that is, the first dhyana.<sup>47</sup> In practice, it is difficult to distinguish between the two, as they are really the two sides of the same coin of the concentrated mind in deep meditation.

1.0.4.6 Technically, the differentiation between access concentration and full concentration—which are commentarial terms—helps us teach and understand the nature of deep concentration in meditation.

<sup>38</sup> Vism 4.31/125 f.

<sup>39</sup> However, its notion of a purely mental object being somehow a purer “representation” of the external sense-object viewed by the eye has compelling connections to later Yogācāra notions of the world being a projection of the mind. From the Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism: *kaṣiṇa*.

<sup>40</sup> Vism 170-177 (ch 5).

<sup>41</sup> For further details on *upacāra samādhi* and *appanā samādhi*, see **Samadhi**, SD 33.1a (3.1).

<sup>42</sup> The 5 mental hindrances (*pañca, nīvaraṇa*) are (1) sensual lust (*kāma-c, chanda*), (2) ill will (*vyāpāda*), (3) sloth and torpor (*thīna, middha*), (4) restlessness and worry (*uddhacca, kukkuccha*), and (5) doubt (*vicikicchā*): see **Nīvaraṇa**, SD 32.1.

<sup>43</sup> In meditation lingo, the “body” in such contexts, refers esp to the 5 physical senses.

<sup>44</sup> On perceiving (*sañjānana*), or better, perception (*saññā*), see **Saññā**, SD 17.4. On conception (*maññanā*), see **Mūla, pariyaṇa S** (M 1,3) n, SD 11.9; **Ejā S I** (S 35.90), SD 29.10 (3). See also SD 31.10 (2.6); SD 43.3 (4.2.3.5).

<sup>45</sup> On the usage of “feeling” in meditation, see Reflection R418, “Feeling meditation,” 2015.

<sup>46</sup> These dhyana-factors (*jhān’āṅga*) are also fivefold, respectively: (1) *vitakka*, (2) *vicāra*, (3) *pīti*, (4) *sukha*, and (5) *ek’aggata*: see SD 8.4 (6).

<sup>47</sup> On the dhyanas, see **Dhyana**, SD 8.4.

Buddhaghosa, however, tries to distinguish them in technical terms. In access concentration, the dhyana-factors are not strong. Since the factors are still weak (some rudimentary thinking exists), when access has arisen, the mind is able to take the meditation sign as its object, and then now sinks back into the life-continuum (*bhav'āṅga*).<sup>48</sup> This is just as when a young child is lifted up and stands on its feet, but repeatedly falls down to the ground.

However, the dhyana-factors are strong during full concentration. On account of their strength, dhyana arises. The mind experiences an interrupted flow of the life-continuum, flowing on with a stream of wholesome impulsion (*jāvana*)<sup>49</sup> that can last for a whole night and a whole day—just as a healthy man, after rising from his seat, can stand for a whole day.<sup>50</sup>

1.0.4.7 The most difficult task we have to accomplish once we are sitting in meditation preparing for dhyana is the arising of the counterpart sign (*paṭibhāga,nimitta*) [1.0.4.4-1.0.4.6]. We should understand that the counterpart sign is not really something we “attain.” Rather, it is the result of what we let go of—of our *renouncing* any kind of attachment, even memory, of a sense-experience.

Our mind must be fully and joyfully with the meditation object, in this case, “earth” (it could be any other element, or any of the colours, or breath, or one of the divine abodes), that is our mental object. In “breath meditation,” for example, we see the breath (that is, its mental object) as the most precious thing that we have and are: *life* itself: so we rejoice at it by smiling at it, and show our gratitude to it by attending to it with all our attention.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, here, we need to guard and treasure the mental sign (the “earth”) as if it were the embryo of the great man (*mahā,purisa*), that is, one who will become either a wheel-turning monarch or the fully self-awakened world teacher, the Buddha.<sup>52</sup> If there are still subtle thoughts that linger on or there is still no focus, we should then rejoice in the mental sign (such as of a kasina) by smiling at it, and so attend to it joyfully. Once we attain the sign, we simply let it grow and let it extend itself to radiantly and blissfully pervade our whole being.

### 1.0.5 Guarding the sign

1.0.5.1 Buddhaghosa lists **7 ways of guarding** (*rakkhaṇa,vidhi*) the meditation sign, that is, by way of (1) abode, (2) resort, (3) speech, (4) person, (5) food, (6) climate, (7) and posture. Buddhaghosa only briefly mentions them in the Visuddhimagga (as if he had left them unfinished), giving only a few successful cases of meditators.<sup>53</sup> Here, we will briefly examine how they can each be helpful in connection with kasina meditation.<sup>54</sup>

1.0.5.2 **Abode.** If a monastery has ample quarters, we should choose the one that suits our temperament best in terms of meditation. A stock passage in the suttas mentions the following places as being conducive to meditation, that is, “a secluded dwelling: a forest, the foot of a tree, a mountain, a glen, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a jungle grove, the open air, a heap of straw.”<sup>55</sup> Although all the 10

<sup>48</sup> On the life-continuum (a commentarial and Abhidhamma concept); in the Pali canon, it is found only in **Sampasādanīya S** (D 28,7/3:105), SD 14.14: see SD 17.2b esp (3); also SD 26.1 (4).

<sup>49</sup> On impulsion (*jāvana*) and the human thought-processes, see SD 8.3 (11).

<sup>50</sup> Vism 4.32 f/126.

<sup>51</sup> For places conducive to meditation, see **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39,12) n (with refs), SD 10.13; **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,67), SD 8.10. Oldest refs are at **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26,17), SD 1.11; **(Deva) Saṅgārava S** (M 100,13), SD 10.9; **Pacalā S** (A 7.58,10.6), SD 4.11.

<sup>52</sup> In this imagery, Buddhaghosa highlights only the world monarch (*cakka,vatti*), but not the world teacher. On the great man (*mahā,purisa*) and his destinies, see **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 39,1.1.2) + SD 36.9 (3).

<sup>53</sup> Vism 4.34-41/126-128.

<sup>54</sup> Vism 4.34-41/126.

<sup>55</sup> This stock is found, with minor variations at: **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,67.2/1:71); **(Ānanda) Subha S** (D 10,2.-6.2/1:207); **Mahā Govinda S** (D 19,46/2:242); **Udumbarikā Siha,nāda S** (D 25,16/3:49, 50, 51); **Cūḷa Hatthi,pad-ōpama S** (M 27,17/1:181); **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 38,37.2/1:269); **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39,12/1:274); **Kandaraka S** (M 51,18/1:346); **Bhaddali S** (M 65,14+15/1:440, 441); **Ghoṭa,mukha S** (M 94,20/2:162); **Deva,daha S** (M 101,36/2:226); **Gaṇaka Moggallāna S** (M 107,8/3:3); **Mahā Suññata S** (M 122,22.2+23.2+24.3+24.5/-3:115, 116×2, 117); **Attan Tapa S** (A 4.198/2:210); **Yodh'ājīva S 1** (A 5.75/3:92); **Yodh'ājīva S 2** (A 5.76/3:100);

kasinas, including light (but excluding consciousness), can be done in the open, most of them need to be done in a safe confined space suitable for long-term meditation.

1.0.5.3 **Alms-resort.** For renunciants living in the forest, there should be a suitable village not too far away and yet not too near so that its noises can be heard or villagers may intrude upon the monk's residence. In our times, we may resort to some remote lodging provided with sufficient basic support (such as food and medical supplies) and safety and wholesome comfort.

1.0.5.4 **Silence.**<sup>56</sup> Kasina meditation is best done alone. However, we may be part of a small group of 3-4 seasoned or serious meditators who understand the significance of silence.<sup>57</sup> **The (Anuruddha) Upak-kilesa Sutta** (M 128) is a beautiful example of 3 companion monks living together in silence for their meditation practice.<sup>58</sup> Speech may be used but only when very necessary. Then, it should be brief and mindful, and in no way disrupt the spirit and mood of the retreat.<sup>59</sup>

1.0.5.5 **Company.**<sup>60</sup> For effective meditation, we should avoid frivolous company and those who tend to talk frivolously. Our retreat companions should be those who love silence, too, or are well versed in and about meditation, as noted in **Samādhi Samāpatti Sutta** (S 34.1), that is, those who are good in both the theory and the practice of meditation.<sup>61</sup>

1.0.5.6 **Food.** Health and proper simple meals are essential for meditators. As there is little physical exertion during such a period, we do not need to take much food. We might observe the “untimely” rule of abstaining from solid food during the “untimely period” (*vikāla*), that is, taking meals (usually breakfast and lunch) from dawn to before noon only. If we are up to it, we might even observe the single-meal rule.

1.0.5.7 **Climate** should be suitable for our meditation. Cool climate (say, averaging 26° C) should be suitable. As a rule, cooler climate conduces more to meditation than a warmer one. If we are meditating in very cool climate, we must have proper warm clothings with us. The temperature tends to be cooler at night up to dawn. If we are meditating in the open, it is wise to sit facing the east to catch the warmth of the rising sun. However, it is also wise to avoid the wind in cooler weather.

1.0.5.8 **Postures.** The 4 postures—standing, walking, sitting, and reclining—are all suitable for the cultivation of lovingkindness. But sitting is the best posture for the breath meditation and kasina meditation. However, after a long sitting, we will need to stretch ourselves by walking meditation. The Buddha is also known to attain have dhyana while standing.<sup>62</sup> Some hatha yoga, or isotonic (muscle-tightening) exercises, or simple stretching exercise (approved by a physiotherapist)—or a combination—all mindfully practised as the “contemplation of the body” (*kāyānupassana*), by way of “clear comprehension” (*sampajañña*),<sup>63</sup> will help if we have the need for such a respite.

### **1.0.6 Adjusting the practice**

1.0.6.1 Helpful as all such specifications and instructions may be, the final test is whether they work for us or not, after all the proper preparations and observances. As we progress in our practice, especially after a long experience, with constant and careful review of our practice, we may notice where our difficulties lie and where we can improve our practice, or even make adjustments to our kasina devices.

(**Navaka**) **Nāga S** (A 9.40/4:437); (**Durabhisambhava**) **Upāli S** (A 10.99/5:207); **Nm** 1:26, 1:140, 2:341; **Vbh** 244 (more elaborate), 251 (abbreviated); **Pug** 29, 68. For a meaning analyses of *suññāgāra*, see SD 48.9 (9.1). On other lists of places suitable for meditation, see **M 10,4.2**: n on “an empty place,” SD 13.3.

<sup>56</sup> Here, Buddhaghosa has “speech” (*bhassa*), but this is also dealt with in the foll one.

<sup>57</sup> **Wrong speech** should certainly be avoided. These incl 26 kinds of “animal talk”: **Mahā Sakul’udāyi S** (M 77,4), SD 49.5a, and **Mahā Suññata S** (M 122,12.1), SD 11.4; Comy lists 32 kinds of wrong speech (MA 3:233), and the list grows in our own times!

<sup>58</sup> M 128,14 (SD 5.18).

<sup>59</sup> **The 10 bases of wholesome talk** are mentioned in **Ratha,vinīta S** (M 24,2), SD 28.3, and **Mahā Suññata S** (M 113,12.2), SD 11.4.

<sup>60</sup> Here, Buddhaghosa has “person” (*puggala*), but this point seems to continue from the prec one.

<sup>61</sup> S 34.1/3:263 f (SD 41.12).

<sup>62</sup> See eg accounts of the 7 weeks after the great awakening: SD 26.1 (5.2.2).

<sup>63</sup> See **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10,8/1:57), SD 13.3.

1.0.6.2 Ultimately, we have to rise above our own kasina devices to the level of full mental absorption into the kasina-base itself, that is, to the attaining of dhyana. This depends significantly on whether we are attached to a “perfect” kasina or to using it as a window or portal into the inner space of stillness and dhyana. The more easily we let go of our dependence of external stimuli and objects, the faster we get into samadhi and dhyana. The kasina-device, ironically, serves us best when we are able to let it go, like a springboard, and land ourselves in inner stillness.

## THE 4 ELEMENT KASINAS

### 1.1 THE EARTH KASINA

#### 1.1.1 The key elements

1.1.1.1 The perception of the earth element is described in the *Māha Rāhul'ovāda Sutta* (M 62), thus:

8 Rāhula, whatever that is hard, solid [solidified]<sup>64</sup> and clung to,<sup>65</sup> within oneself, separately,<sup>66</sup> namely,<sup>67</sup>

|   |                        |
|---|------------------------|
| head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth,                                 | skin; <sup>68</sup>    |
| flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow,                                  | kidneys; <sup>69</sup> |
| heart, liver, membranes (around the lungs), <sup>70</sup> spleen,   | lungs; <sup>71</sup>   |
| large intestines, small intestines, stomach-contents, <sup>72</sup> | dung; <sup>73</sup>    |

or whatever else<sup>74</sup> that is hard, solid and clung to, within oneself, separately—this, Rāhula, is called internal earth element.

8.2 Now both the internal earth element and the external earth element are simply **earth element** [hardness].<sup>75</sup> And that should be seen, according to reality, with right wisdom thus:

<sup>64</sup> “Solid, rigid [solidified],” *kakkhaḷam kharigatam*. The former is the element’s characteristic (*lakkaṇa*) and the latter its mode (*ākāra*) (Vism 286). In the Abhidhamma, the hardness (*kakkhaḷatta*) itself is the earth element (VismṬ 362 f). See Karunadasa 1967:17 f.

<sup>65</sup> “Clung to,” *upādīṇa*. In the Abhidhamma, this is a technical term applicable to bodily phenomena that are produced by karma. Here, in Mahā Rāhulovāda S (M 62), as well as **Mahā Hatthipadōpama S** (M 28), it is used in the general sense as applicable to the entire body insofar as it is grasped as “mine” and misapprehended as a self.

<sup>66</sup> *Ajjhattam paccattam*. The idea here, I think, is to regard these body-parts as “within” (ie, internal parts of ourselves), and they are to be reflected on “separately” (ie one by one, on their own), so that the general effect is the understanding that we are a patchwork of these parts. This may also include reflecting on a particular external object or an aspect of the object as meely being an element.

<sup>67</sup> These sets of body parts are named after the last item, eg, the first is called the “skin pentad” (*taca,pañcaka*).

<sup>68</sup> The meditation on these 5 parts “with skin as the fifth” or “skin pentad” (*taca,pancake kamma-ṭ,thāna*) (Vism 242=8.50) forms the basic spiritual practice first taught to novices on their initiation.

<sup>69</sup> *Maṁsam nahāru aṭṭhi aṭṭhi,miñjā vakkam*.

<sup>70</sup> “Membranes,” alt tr “pleura,” *kilomaka*, ie a pair of membranous sacs surrounding the lungs.

<sup>71</sup> *Hadayam yakanam kilomakam pihakam papphasam*.

<sup>72</sup> *Udariyam*, lit “that which is in the *udara* (stomach),” sometimes tr as “gorge” (Vism:Ñ 8.120/-122/258 f); technically, this includes chyme (food half-digested by gastric juices, expelled into the duodenum).

<sup>73</sup> *Antam anta,gunam udariyam karisam*. See M 3:90; KhpA 38. Later traditions add the 32<sup>nd</sup> part—*matthake mattha,luṅgam* (lit “the brain in the head”) (Kh 3, Pm 1:6 f; Vism 8.42-144/239-266): “brain” is not listed at S 4:111). Although “brain” is usually listed last, Comys list it as no 20, after “dung” (KhA 60; Vism 8.126/260) in the set headed by “large intestines,” since they have similar or related appearances. For a fascinating discussion on how ancient ascetics obtain such knowledge of the human anatomy, see Zysk, *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India: Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery*, 1998:34-37.

<sup>74</sup> The phrase “whatever else” (*aññam pi kiñci*) is intended to include the earth element as comprised in those parts of the body not included in the above enumeration. According to the Abhidhamma the four elements are primary qualities of matter in which they are all inseparably present in varying degrees of strength. Thus “each element is also included, though in a subordinate role, in the bodily phenomena listed under the other three elements” (M:ÑB 1221 n329). See also BDict: Dhātu.

“This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self”<sup>76</sup>

When one sees it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed by<sup>77</sup> the earth element and the mind becomes dispassionate towards<sup>78</sup> the earth element.<sup>79</sup> (M 62,8), SD 3.11

The perception of earth as presented here in the Māha Rāhul’ovāda Sutta is the “vipassana” aspect of the element meditation. The perception begins with our identification of the element so that we are familiar with it. Then, we locate it as it occurs within our body, after which we note that it is the same as the earth element found outside of us. In other words, we are intimately connected with everything else around us: we *are* the world.

We cannot really discern any point at which we *are* the earth element. It is all a flux of the “earth” element, manifesting itself as weight, resistance, roughness, softness, and so on. Hence, there is no “essential” earth; it is all changing, becoming other. We may comprise the earth element, but we do not own it. Hence, we can say of the earth element, “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”

For the earth kasina practice, we need only to focus on §8.1 here (on the definitions of the earth element), and omit §8.2 until we are ready for it. However, note that this is only the internal earth element. Reflecting on the nature of this internal earth element, we relate it to the external earth element. This type of meditation belongs to the practice related to the 3<sup>rd</sup> liberation, which is defined as “one is fully liberated after contemplating the idea of the beautiful.” [3.3]

1.1.1.2 **The Cūḷa Suññata Sutta** (M 121) is an important text which explains the delightful “forest” meditation, the perception of earth, the 4 formless attainments, the signless concentration of mind, and the abiding in emptiness—all of which are directly related to the attaining of the liberations [4]. This teaching on the perception of earth helps us to further understand the nature of the earth kasina.

Let us then look at the Sutta’s beautiful description of **the perception of earth**, which is directly related and helpful to our practice of the earth kasina [1.1.1.2], thus:

His mind plunges into that perception of earth, brightens up, steadies and frees itself.<sup>80</sup>

Just as a **bull’s hide** becomes free from crinkles when fully stretched with a hundred stakes,<sup>81</sup> even so, Ānanda, a monk—not attending to any of the highs [dry areas] and hollows [swampy areas]<sup>82</sup> of this earth, nor to rivers that are difficult to ford, nor to sharp stumps and thorns, nor to rugged mountains<sup>83</sup>—

attends to the oneness dependent on the perception of earth.

His mind plunges into that perception of earth, brightens up, steadies and frees itself.

He understands thus:

“Whatever disturbances there might be on account of the perception of people, there are none here;

<sup>75</sup> Comy to Mahā Hatthi’padōpama S ad loc says that this statement is made to emphasize the insentient nature (*acetanā, bhāva*) of the internal earth element by yoking it to the external earth element, thus making its insentient nature more apparent (MA 2:223 f). The Vibhaṅga lists more examples: iron, copper, tin, lead, etc. (Vbh 82). According to Abhidhamma, it is characterized by hardness (*thaddha, lakkhaṇa*).

<sup>76</sup> See §3n.

<sup>77</sup> “Is revulsed by” (*nibbindati*), n *nibbidā*. The full *nibbidā* formula or the 7 criteria of the true Dharma-Vinaya reads, “it leads to utter revulsion, to dispassion, to ending (of suffering), to peace [stilling], to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to nirvana” (*etaṃ ekanta, nibbidāya virāgāya nirodhāya upasamāya abhismāya abhiññāya sambodhāya nibbānāya samvattanti*, D 1:189; S 5:82, 179, 255, 361; A 3:83, 4:143, 5:216): see *Nibbidā*, SD 20.1.

<sup>78</sup> “Becomes dispassionate towards,” *cittam virājeti*.

<sup>79</sup> “Earth,” *paṭhavī*. On the 4 elements, see *Khandha 1 Rūpa*, SD 17a.2a (2).

<sup>80</sup> For a note on the Chin tr, see M 121,5 n (SD 11.3).

<sup>81</sup> *Seyyathāpi...usabha, cammaṃ saṅku, satena suvihataṃ vigata, vasikam*; see J 6:112; Vism 153.

<sup>82</sup> Amplifications based on MA 4:153.

<sup>83</sup> “The highs...rugged mountains,” *ukkūla, vikūlaṃ nadī, viduggaṃ khāṇu, kaṇṭakā, dhāraṃ pabbata, visamaṃ*, where *-dhāraṃ* has vl *ṭhānaṃ* (Be). As at A 1:35 (where, however, for *-dhāraṃ* read *-dhānaṃ*, PTS).

whatever disturbances there might be on account of the perception of a forest, there are none here.

There is only this much disturbance, namely, the oneness dependent on the perception of *earth*.”

He understands thus:

“This field of perception is empty of the perception of people.

This field of perception is empty of the perception of a forest.<sup>84</sup>

There is only this **non-emptiness**, namely, the oneness dependent on the perception of *earth*.”

Thus he regards what is *not* there as empty,

but regarding what *remains* there, he knows what that is, thus: ‘There is this.’ (M 121,5), SD 11.3

1.1.1.3 The Visuddhimagga explains the earth kasina (*paṭhavī,kasīna*) in one of its longest chapters (ch 4). This is understandable because it is the first of the 4 primary elements or 5 elements (if we include the space element). Almost all of the explanations for meditation on the earth kasina apply, mutatis mutandis, to the practice of the other primary element kasinas.<sup>85</sup> So here, we will only highlight some key points in terms of basic practice.

### **1.1.2 Practising the earth kasina**

1.1.2.1 The actual practice of the earth kasina is described in the Visuddhimagga, as follows:

When a monk [that is, a meditator] has thus overcome all the lesser impediments,<sup>86</sup> then, after returning from his almsround, having taken his meal and having removed the after-meal drowsiness, he should sit down comfortably in a secluded place and apprehend the sign of earth that is either made up or not made up.<sup>87</sup>

For, this is said:<sup>88</sup> “One who is learning the earth kasina apprehends the sign of earth that is either made up or not made up; bounded or not [1.0.2.3]; either limited or not; with a periphery or not; circumscribed or not; either the size of a bushel (*suppa*) or the size of a saucer (*sarāva*) [1.0.2.2].

He ensures that the sign is well apprehended, well attended to, well defined. Having done that, and seeing its advantages, and perceiving it as a treasure, building up respect for it, making it dear to him, he anchors his mind to that object, thinking, “Surely in this way I shall be freed from decay and death!”  
(Vism 4.21-22/122 f)

1.1.2.2 Although these instructions are for monastics, elsewhere Buddhaghosa states in such a circumstance (practising meditation), the term “monk” (*bhikkhu*) refers to all meditators, monastic or lay.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, the details given here should be adapted to fit our own situation when we are meditating. Kasina practice is, as a rule, very private effort even when done in a group or community.

Hence, we should prepare well for the duration and conditions of such a routine. This will include dressing simply, comfortably and neatly; preparing and having simple meals; making sure we have all the necessary medications; keeping all phones, computers and communication devices switched off or locked

<sup>84</sup> For the perception of the forest, see M 121,4/3:104 (SD 11.3).

<sup>85</sup> Vism 4/118-169, a total of 51 pages, while its translation by Ñāṇamoli takes up a total of 54 pages (Vism:Ñ 122-176)! The main reason for its length is because it gives a detailed explanation of the 4 dhyanas and related instructions, such as a bit of what we might call personality psychology (that is, which meditation would suit which kind of person).

<sup>86</sup> *Khuddaka palibodha*, ie, having groomed oneself proper, attending to personal hygiene, repairing and cleaning of robes and bowl, tidying up the premises, etc (Vism 4.20/122). Essentially, this is attending to what needs to be done so that we would not be distracted in any way once we begin to meditate.

<sup>87</sup> *Katāya vā akatāya vā*. Here meaning either constructed (as in an earth kasina-disc) or natural (such as an open ground).

<sup>88</sup> In the Old Comy: see Vism:Ñ 126 n4 for further details.

<sup>89</sup> *Bhikkhū* as addressing all, see SD 4.9 (5.3).

away; and so on. Reading of books should be avoided altogether, except perhaps (if we are inclined to) only sutta texts for reflecting and inspiration when needed. [1.1.2]

1.1.2.3 If we are erstwhile meditating monastics, or are familiar with some meditation, even familiar with spiritual experience related to the earth element, or in some way familiar with the earth element (such as working in a field, or mountain-climbing), then we may use a natural earth kasina, one that is “not made up” (*akata*).

Such earth-kasina objects, according to Buddhaghosa, may be a ploughed area or a threshing floor. In other words, if we are familiar with the earth element—such as a vast rocky mountain cliff for a rock climber, or the flat landing field for a pilot, or any plot of land for a land surveyor, and so on—such places, if they can be clearly visualized in the still mind, can be used in the earth kasina meditation.

1.1.2.4 With the kasina disc in proper position, at a suitable distance, and comfortably on our eye level, we are ready to begin. As we gaze at the kasina disc, our eyes should not be too wide or too narrow. If our eyes are opened too wide, it quickly smarts and also tires easily. If our eyes are too narrow, we will not see the disc clearly, and then we easily get drowsy.

So, keeping the eyes moderately open, we comfortably gaze at the kasina disc. We should neither note the disc colour nor its features. This is like when we are looking at our own reflection in a mirror: we neither bother about the mirror’s colour or its attending features.<sup>90</sup> We gaze only at the image. With proper practice and with the fruition of past merit,<sup>91</sup> the meditation sign arises in us.<sup>92</sup>

## 1.2 THE WATER KASINA

### 1.2.1 The perception of the water element

1.2.1.1 The perception of the water element is described in the **Māha Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62), thus:

**9** And what, Rāhula, is **the water element** [cohesion]?<sup>93</sup>

The water element may be either internal or external.

And what, Rāhula, is the internal water element?

Rāhula, whatever that is water, watery and clung to, within oneself, separately, namely,  
*bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat;*<sup>94</sup>

*tears, skin-grease [tallow], saliva, snot, oil of the joints, urine.*<sup>95</sup>

or whatever else that is water, watery and clung to, within oneself, separately—this, Rāhula, is called internal water element.

9.2 Now *both the internal water element and the external water element* are simply water element. And that should be seen, according to reality, with right wisdom, thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

When one sees it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed by the water element and the mind becomes dispassionate towards the water element. (M 62,9), SD 3.11

1.2.1.2 The perception of water as presented here in the Māha Rāhul’ovāda Sutta is the “vipassana” aspect of the element meditation. The perception begins with our identification of the element so that we are familiar with it. Then, we locate it as it occurs within our body, after which we note that it is the same as the water element found outside of us. In other words, we are intimately connected with everything else around us: we *are* the world.

<sup>90</sup> VismA 121; Vism:Ñ 129 n7.

<sup>91</sup> “The fruition of past merit” here is a traditional way of saying that we should keep our precepts and live a life of compassion and wisdom, so that we are well prepared for such a contemplative exercise or life.

<sup>92</sup> For further details regarding the earth kasina practice, see Vism 4.27-30/124 f.

<sup>93</sup> “Water,” *āpo*. Abhidhamma characterizes it by cohesion (*ābandhana*).

<sup>94</sup> *Pittam semham pubbo lohitaṃ sedo medo*.

<sup>95</sup> *Lasikā*, ie synovial fluid.

<sup>96</sup> *Assu vasā kheḷo siṅghāṇikā lasikā muttam*. Here there are a total of 31 parts of the body. See here (4) n.

We cannot really discern any point at which we *are* the water element. It is all a flux of the “water” element, manifesting itself as flowing, wetness, cohesiveness or stickiness, and so on. Hence, there is no “essential” water; it is all changing, becoming other. We may comprise the water element, but we do not own it. Hence, we can say of the water element, “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”

1.2.1.3 For the water kasina practice, we need only to focus on §9.1 here (on the definitions of the water element), and omit §9.2, until we are ready for it. However, note that this is only the internal water element. Reflecting on the nature of this internal water element, we relate it to the external water element. This type of meditation belongs to the practice related to the 3<sup>rd</sup> liberation, which is defined as “one is fully liberated after contemplating the idea of the beautiful.” [3.3.1.3]

**1.2.2 The Visuddhimagga** explains the water kasina (*āpo,kasīna*) (and the remaining kasinas, except for the consciousness kasina) in chapter 4.<sup>97</sup> According to Buddhaghosa, for the water kasina, a bowl of water should be used. In our own times, we may use a clear-glassed goldfish bowl filled full with clean water. For our practice, we should, as in the case of the earth kasina [1.1.2], seat oneself comfortably neither too far nor too near it, and apprehend the sign of water that is either made up or not made up, etc, as before [1.1.2.3]. The same procedure, in fact, applies to all the other kasinas (except the consciousness kasina).

**1.2.3** An experienced meditator, especially one who is familiar with water, such as a seaman, a fisherman, or a swimmer, may easily concentrate on a natural body of water, that is, one “not made up,” such as a pool, a lake, a lagoon, or even the ocean. The Visuddhimagga mentions the case of a monk who, sailing from Sri Lanka to north India, while gazing at the ocean, experienced the counterpart sign of the ocean in his mind.<sup>98</sup>

**1.2.4** Someone new to kasina meditation should guard against the 4 faults of a kasina [1.0.3] and not apprehend the water as one of the colours, blue, yellow, red or white. He should fill a bowl or a four-legged water-pot (*kuṇḍika*) to the brim with clean water, filtered with a clean cloth strainer, if necessary, or with any other clear clean water.

Then, we should place it in a screened place on the outskirts of the monastery, as already described [1.0.3.2], and seat oneself comfortably. We should neither review its colour nor note its characteristics. Apprehending the colour as belonging to its physical support, we should mentally focus on only the concept or name, especially by noting, “water, water,” or any other suitable word, such as “rain-water” or “dew,” in a language natural to us.

**1.2.5** As we cultivate the kasina in this way, the two signs (the learning sign and the counterpart sign) eventually arise in the way already described [1.0.4.4]. Here, however, the learning sign appears to be shimmering or shaking. If the water has bubbles or froth in it, the learning sign, too, will show it, but as a fault in the kasina.

The counterpart sign, however, appears inactive, like a crystal fan fixed mid-space, like the disc or mirror made of jewels. When this sign arises and remains stable, we have reached dhyana as described in the suttas.<sup>99</sup> When this happens, we should, in due course, familiarize oneself with the nature of dhyana and its moral context so that we sustain the experience and progress mentally in a wholesome manner.

### 1.3 THE FIRE KASINA

#### **1.3.1 The perception of the fire element**

1.3.1.1 The perception of the fire element is described in **the Māha Rāhul'ovāda Sutta** (M 62), thus:

**10** Rāhula, what is **the fire element** [heat]?

The fire element may be either internal or external.

And what, Rāhula, is the internal fire element?

Rāhula, whatever that is fire, fiery, and clung to, within oneself, separately, namely,

<sup>97</sup> Vism 5.1-4/170 f.

<sup>98</sup> Vism 5.5/171.

<sup>99</sup> On these 4 dhyanas, see, eg, **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,76-84), SD 8.10.



*that by which one is warmed, ages, and burns,<sup>100</sup> and that by which what is eaten, drunk, chewed and tasted<sup>101</sup> gets completely digested,*

or whatever else that is fire, fiery and clung to, within oneself, separately—this, Rāhula, is called internal fire element.

10.2 Now *both the internal fire element and the external fire element* are simply **fire element**. And that should be seen, according to reality, with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

When one sees it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed by the fire element and the mind becomes dispassionate towards the fire element. (M 62,10), SD 3.11

The perception of fire as presented here in the Māha Rāhul’ovāda Sutta is the “vipassana” aspect of the element meditation. The perception begins with our identification of the element so that we are familiar with it. Then, we locate it as it occurs within our body, after which we note that it is the same as the fire element or heat and decay found outside of us. In other words, we are intimately connected with everything else around us: we *are* the world.

We cannot really discern any point at which we *are* the fire element. It is all a flux of the “fire” element, manifesting itself as warmth, cold, oxidation, digestion, burning, decay, and so on. Hence, there is no “essential,” or some Platonic “Form,” of fire; it is all changing, becoming other. We may comprise the fire element (among other elements), but we do not own it. Hence, we can say of the fire element, “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”

For the fire kasina practice, we need only to focus on §10.1 here (on the definitions of the earth element), and omit §10.2 until we are ready for it. However, note that this is the *internal fire element*. Reflecting on the nature of this internal fire element, we relate it to the *external* fire element. This type of meditation belongs to the practice related to the 3<sup>rd</sup> liberation, which is defined as “one is fully liberated after contemplating the idea of *the beautiful*.” [3.3]

**1.3.2 The Visuddhimagga** explains the fire kasina (*tejo,kasiṇa*) in chapter 4.<sup>102</sup> If we wish to cultivate the fire kasina, we should apprehend the sign of fire. Here, when we are spiritually prepared, with previous experience, the sign arises in us in some form of natural fire, just as we look at the flame of a lamp or a furnace or a place for baking bowls or in a forest fire. Buddhaghosa mentions the case of a monk who, taking the flame of a lamp in the convocation-hall as his mental object, attains the fire kasina.<sup>103</sup>

**1.3.3** A constructed fire kasina should be made as follows: find a suitable wind-free place, such as at the foot of a sheltering tree or a shed. Pile up some dry pieces of heartwood (as if for baking a clay bowl, says Buddhaghosa), and, if you are a monastic, have someone light it up for you. For safety, the fire can be made in a small earth-coloured enclosure. A barrier frame should be made of cloth, or some suitable opaque material (preferably fire-proof), with a circular hole, measuring a span<sup>104</sup> and 4 fingers (about 11” or 28 cm) in diameter. The frame should stand or hang between the fire and where we are sitting, as described before [1.1.2.4].

**1.3.4** Without giving any attention to the grass and sticks below or the smoke above, we should apprehend the sign in the heart of the flame. We should not review the flame colour as blue or yellow, etc, nor attend to its characteristic, such as heat, etc. Instead, we should take the colour as belonging to its physical support, and focus our mind on only the name or concept “fire” that we are most naturally familiar with, such “flame,” “blaze,” “conflagration” in any language we are most natural with, including imageries of fire, where it is helpful. The most obvious words we should focus on is, of course, simply, “Fire, fire.”

<sup>100</sup> These preceding three terms—*santappati*, *jiriyati*, *pariḍayhati*—refer to our bodily metabolism. In fact, the whole section refers to the body’s metabolism.

<sup>101</sup> *Asita*, *pīta*, *khāyita*, *sāyitā*. These are the 4 modes of consuming food, namely: *eat* food; *drink* liquids; *chew* solid food, a toothstick, betel-nut, chewing gum; *taste* (or lick) sweets, ice-cream.

<sup>102</sup> Vism 5.5-8/171 f.

<sup>103</sup> Vism 5.5/171.

<sup>104</sup> A *span* (*vidatthi*) is the distance between the tips of the thumb and the little finger both extended.

**1.3.5** As we cultivate it in this way, the two signs [1.0.4.4] eventually arise in us. Here, the learning sign appears like fire sinking down as the flame keeps detaching itself. But when we apprehend it in a kasina that is natural (not made up), any fault in the kasina is evident in the learning sign, and the fire-brand, or pile of embers or ashes, or smoke, appears in it.

The counterpart sign, however, appears still but of a pure radiant colour, depending on the colour of the flame we have meditated on. When this sign arises, we have reached dhyana as described in the suttas.<sup>105</sup>

## 1.4 THE WIND KASINA

### 1.4.1 The perception of the wind element

1.4.1.1 The perception of the wind element is described in the **Māha Rāhul'ovāda Sutta** (M 62), thus:

**11** Rāhula, what is **the wind element** [motion]?<sup>106</sup>

The wind element may be either internal or external.

And what, Rāhula, is the internal wind element?

Rāhula, whatever that is wind [air], wind-like [air-like] and clung to, within oneself, separately, namely,<sup>107</sup>

<sup>108</sup>*up-going winds, down-going winds, winds in the belly, winds in the chest,*<sup>109</sup> *winds that course through the limbs,*<sup>110</sup> *in-breath and out-breath,*

or whatever else that is wind, wind-like and clung to, within oneself, separately—this, Rāhula, is called internal wind element.

11.2 Now both the internal wind element and the external wind element are simply **wind element**. And that should be seen, according to reality, with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

When one sees it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed by the wind element and the mind becomes dispassionate towards the wind element. (M 62,11), SD 3.11

1.4.1.2 The perception of wind as presented here in the Māha Rāhul'ovāda Sutta is the “vipassana” aspect of the element meditation. The perception begins with our identification of the element so that we are familiar with it. Then, we locate it as it occurs within our body, after which we note that it is the same as the wind or air element found outside of us. In other words, we are intimately connected with everything else around us: we *are* the world.

We cannot really discern any point at which we *are* the wind element. It is all a flux of the “wind” element, manifesting itself as movement. Hence, there is no “essential” wind; it is all changing, becoming other. We may comprise the wind element, but we do not own it. Hence, we can say of the wind element, “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”

<sup>105</sup> On these 4 dhyanas, see, eg, **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,76-84), SD 8.10.

<sup>106</sup> “Wind,” *vāyo*, or “air” element, that is, motion, in Abhidhamma, is said to be “strengthening” or “supporting” (*vitthambhana, lakkhaṇa*). On how winds cause pains, see **Dhānañjāni S** (M 97,28-29/2:193), SD 4.9.

<sup>107</sup> See **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118), SD 7.13 (2.1.1).

<sup>108</sup> According to **Visuddhi,magga**, “winds” are responsible for the various internal motions of the body, namely, “up-going winds” (*uddhañ, gamā vātā*) for vomiting and belching, “down-going winds” (*adho, gamā vātā*) for the expelling of faeces and urine (Vism 350). “Wind” here clearly refers to elemental “motion,” not to the object moved.

<sup>109</sup> *Koṭṭha* means “the stomach or abdomen” (PED); and, *kucchi* is “stomach.” As such, here I take *koṭṭhasayā* to be cognate with or related to Skt *koṣṭhya* (mfn), meaning “proceeding from the chest, emitted (as a sound) from the centre of the lungs” (SED), which makes clear sense here.

<sup>110</sup> “Winds that course through the limbs,” *aṅgam-aṅgānusārino vātā*. In reference to this, **Peter Harvey** says, “Note that the ‘motion/air’ element might be related to the modern concept of electrical discharges of the nerves... In that case, the wind would move the body by effecting the electrical modulation of nerve discharges.” (1993:7 digital ed). In contemporary terms, these “winds” clearly refer to the oxyhaemoglobin, ie, the oxygen in the blood, coursing through the body.

1.4.1.3 For our wind kasina practice, we need only to focus on §11.1 here (on the definitions of the wind element), and omit §11.2. However, note that this is the *internal wind element*. Reflecting on the nature of this internal wind element, we relate it to the *external* wind element. This type of meditation belongs to the practice related to the 3<sup>rd</sup> liberation, which is defined as “one is fully liberated after contemplating the idea of *the beautiful*.” [3.3.1.3]

**1.4.2 The Visuddhimagga** explains the wind or air kasina (*vāyo, kasīṇa*) in chapter 4.<sup>111</sup> If we wish to cultivate the wind or air kasina, we should apprehend the sign of wind (or moving air). This can be done by either sight or by touch, depending of which actually occurs or gives us the best perception of wind. Buddhaghosa quotes the Commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*) as follows”

“One who is learning the wind kasina apprehends the sign in wind. He notes the top of sugarcane, moving to and fro; or, he notes the top of trees, or the tips of the hair, moving to and fro; or, he notes its touch on the body.” (Untraced)

**1.4.3** In practice, then, we should observe the top of sugarcane plants, or any leafy tree, with the leaves moving to and fro in the wind, or the hair, about 4 fingers breadth (about 3” or 7.5 cm long), on a person’s head. In our own circumstances, we may even observe the curtain at a window before us moving in the wind, or we may use a fan at a suitable speed to effect such movements. Or we can simply feel the wind touching our body.

Then, we should mindfully note the wind striking such and such a place. We need not name the exact location of the wind’s contact point, but have a mental image or sense of it. We may also have a sense of where the wind is coming from: the window, a crack in the wall, the fan, and so on. This is merely a mental image, so that we do not have doubts or question “Where is it coming from?” which will distract us.

**1.4.4** Once we notice the wind, we should note it mindfully by simply feeling it. If this is difficult, then we should note it by using any suitable name or concept for “wind,” such as “breeze,” “zephyr,” “squall” and so on which best describes it at first. As we become more familiar with the moving air, we simply attend to the wind-object as “Wind, wind.”

The learning sign appears to move like an uprising swirl of heat from hot rice gruel just removed from the oven. The counterpart sign is still. When this sign arises, we have reached dhyana as described in the suttas.<sup>112</sup>

## THE 4 COLOUR KASINAS<sup>113</sup>

### 1.5 THE BLUE KASINA

#### 1.5.1 The ancient perception of “blue”

1.5.1.1 The practice of the blue or “dark” kasina (*nīla kasīṇa*) is described as the 5<sup>th</sup> base of mastery [2.3.5] in both **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) and **the Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta** ( M 77), thus.

Not perceiving forms internally [within oneself], one sees forms *externally*, that are blue [indigo], of blue colour, blue in appearance, with a blue glow.<sup>114</sup>

Just as a flax flower<sup>115</sup> that is blue, of blue colour, blue in appearance, with a blue glow; or just like Benares cloth smoothed on both sides, that is blue, blue in appearance, with a blue glow; even

<sup>111</sup> Vism 5.9-11/172.

<sup>112</sup> On these 4 dhyanas, see, eg, **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,76-84), SD 8.10.

<sup>113</sup> These 4 colours (*nīla, pīta, lohita* and *odāta*: see foll n) are four of the 6 colours of the Buddha’s bodily rays; the two remaining colours are crimson (*mañjeṭṭha*) and a composite of the other 5 (*pabhassara*) (Pm 1:125 f; DhsA 13 f, 307). See Endo, *Buddha in Theravāda Buddhism*, 1997:51-15. Also SD 36.9 (4.5.3).

<sup>114</sup> On blue (*nīla kasīṇa*, and yellow (*pīta*), copper-red (*lohita*) and white (*odāta*), see **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1(9.2).

<sup>115</sup> *Ummā,puppha*, *Linum usitatissimum*, a plant of the family Linaceae. It is a herbaceous annual, when densely planted for fibre, averages 3-4 ft (0.9-1.2 m) in height, with slender stalks, and with branches concentrated at the top. The flowers, born on stems growing from branch tips, have five petals, usu blue in colour but sometimes white or pink. See PED: *ummā* & CPD: *ummā-puppha*.

so, not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, blue, of blue colour, blue in appearance, with a blue glow.

By mastering [transcending] them, one perceives thus, “I know, I see.”

This is the fifth base for mastery.

(D 16,3.29), SD 6 = M 77,49(5)

Note here that the “blue” of the kasina comes from the colour of a flower, a natural object. Buddhaghosa quotes the Commentaries that mention “flowers such as blue lotus, morning glory, and so on,”<sup>116</sup> and adds “bronze-blue, leaf-green, coryllium-black” (*kaṃsa, nīla palāsa, nīla añjana, nīla*).<sup>117</sup> The point here is that there is no need of a technical exactness of blue as a colour (say, of such and such a wave-length)—it is simply a stretch of “blueness,” a range of colours from what we know today as green and blue to the blush of “dawn” or sky blue,<sup>118</sup> even the black of north Indian (or Asian) eyes.<sup>119</sup>

1.5.1.2 **The Visuddhimagga** explains the blue kasina in chapter 4,<sup>120</sup> where its author, Buddhaghosa, quotes an untraced passage from the Commentaries, thus: “Elsewhere, it is said, ‘One who is learning the blue kasina apprehends the sign of blue, whether in a flower or in a cloth or in a colour element.’” He then says that when someone has merit (past good karma), meaning here having the benefit of previous practice, the sign arises in him naturally when he sees a bush with blue flowers, or such flowers spread out on a plate of offering, or any blue cloth or blue gem.

Such a statement presumes a belief in past lives and rebirth, which explains why some of us may naturally or easily gain concentration and dhyana in meditation, or a particular kasina meditation—we have done it before! This is, of course, a nice statement, but effort still needs to be exerted if we are to attain the goal of kasina meditation. Even without previous experience, due diligence and wisdom are sure to help us in our meditation.

1.5.1.3 If we are new to the blue kasina meditation, Buddhaghosa advises that we should take flowers such as blue lotus or *giri, kannikā* (morning glory),<sup>121</sup> and spread them out to fill a tray or a flat basket completely so that no stamen or stalk shows, or with only their petals showing. Or, we should spread a piece of blue cloth over a tray, or fasten the cloth around the rim of a tray or a basket like the skin of a drum.

1.5.1.4 Otherwise, we need to make a kasina disc, either a portable one as described under the earth kasina [1.1.3.2] or one fixed on a wall, using one of the hues of “blue” (*nīla*), such as bronze-green, leaf-green, collyrium-black, surrounding it with a different colour [1.5.1.1]. After that, we should gaze at it and note it as “Blue, blue,” in the way already described under the earth kasina [1.0.3.2].

1.5.1.5 Just as in the other kasinas, any fault in this kasina will be evident in the learning sign: the stamens or stalks or the gaps between the petals, and so on. The counterpart sign appears as pure “blue” and pervades our whole being. When this sign arises, we have reached dhyana as described in the suttas.<sup>122</sup>

### **1.5.2 Ancient Indian perception of colours**

1.5.2.1 To do this properly, we need to know the ancient Buddhist notion of colours. The colour *nīla* is the trickiest one for us today. It is usually translated “blue,” but this is only partly correct. For example, we may speak of a “blue” sky or “sky-blue,” but the reality is that the conception of blueness of the sky varies culturally: the ancient Indians probably saw the sky as “grey,” as in rain-cloud grey, a “dark” sky—at least when they think of the hue of *nīla*.

<sup>116</sup> *Nīl'uppala, girikaṇṇik'ādīni pupphāni* (Vism 5.14/173).

<sup>117</sup> Vism 5.13/173.

<sup>118</sup> Vism 5.12/172 & Vism:Ñ 179 n3.

<sup>119</sup> See eg description of the Buddha's eye colour in **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30) §§1.2.2(29) + 2.10.1, SD 36.9.

<sup>120</sup> Vism 5.12-14/172 f.

<sup>121</sup> *Clitoria ternatea* L; Malay *bunga telang*; Sinh *nil kaṭarolu* (Ñāṇamoli 1994:136); Thai อัญชัน *anjan (anjana)*, Vietnam *đậu biếc*; Hindi □□□□□□□□ *aparājita* in Hindi; Chin 蝶豆 *dié dòu*; Telugu *sankhu poolu, sankham poolu*; Malayalam *shanku, pushpam*; Bengali □□□□□□□□ *aparājita*.

<sup>122</sup> On these 4 dhyanas, see, eg, **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2,76-84), SD 8.10.

The Pali *nīla* (ts) refers to colours ranging from blue, dark-blue, green, dark green, blue-green, grey, blue-black, and sometimes black (as in the case of human hair, DhsA 190). In meditation, however, it refers to the indigo or dark-blue of the linseed or flax flower (*ummā puppha*).<sup>123</sup>

1.5.2.2 We have to understand and accept the fact that the ancient Indians (like many other ancient and modern cultures) perceived colours differently. In fact, the ancient Indians tended to have a broad sense of an individual colour. *Nīla*, then, must be translated contextually, such as “cloud-grey,” or even “black” (in the case of eye-colour). The Buddha’s eyes, for example, are said to be *abhinīla*”; but it will be highly curious to say he has “blue” eyes! *Abhinīla* probably means “deeply dark or of a deep dark hue.”<sup>124</sup>

1.5.2.3 It is also helpful that discourses dealing with the colour kasinas, such as **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) refer to natural or familiar objects, such as flowers (eg, cassia or hibiscus), coloured cloth (Benares cloth), and the light of celestial bodies (such as the “morning star”)<sup>125</sup> [1.5.1.1]. In other words, we should be familiar with sutta teachings, which are a valuable depository of such spiritual methods and cultural truths.

### 1.5.3 Constructing a colour kasina

1.5.3.1 The preliminaries for creating a kasina device for the 4 elements have already been described [1.1.2]. Here, we only need to know how to create a colour kasina. Thitapuñño instructs as follows:

“Initially, you can try indigo blue on one side of the plate and a vivid, school bus yellow for the figure on the other side. Acrylic paint, or other suitable media, subsequently coated with glossy lacquer for the circle and border (leaving the white surface non-glossy) works very well. The fewer irregularities in the coloured image and border, and the less texture coarseness in the kasina surface, the better—particularly if the device is intended for use by a beginner.” (CKM p3; metric measurements added.)

1.5.3.2 The counterpart sign is motionless. When this sign of blue arises, it is radiant and pure, permeating our whole being, then we have reached dhyana as described in the suttas.<sup>126</sup>

## 1.6 THE YELLOW KASINA

1.6.1 The practice of the yellow kasina (*pīta kasina*) is described as the 6<sup>th</sup> base of mastery [2.3.6] in both **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) and **the Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta** (M 77), thus.

Not perceiving forms internally [within oneself], one sees forms externally, that are yellow, of yellow colour, yellow in appearance, with a yellow glow.

Just as a cassia<sup>127</sup> flower that is yellow, of yellow colour, yellow in appearance, with a yellow glow; or just like Benares cloth smoothed on both sides, that is yellow, yellow in appearance, with a yellow glow; even so, not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, yellow, of yellow colour, yellow in appearance, with a yellow glow.

By mastering [transcending] them, one perceives thus, “I know, I see.”

This is the sixth base for mastery. (M 77,52(6)) = Mahā,parinibbāna S (D 16,3.30), SD 6

<sup>123</sup> V 4:120; D 16,3.29/2:110; M 2:13 = A 5:61; Ap 258; Tha 1068.

<sup>124</sup> See **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30), §§1.2.2 (29) & 2.10.13 (SD 36.9).

<sup>125</sup> D 16,3.32 (SD 9).

<sup>126</sup> On these 4 dhyanas, see, eg, **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,76-84), SD 8.10.

<sup>127</sup> “Cassia,” *kaṇṇikāra* or *kaṇṇikāra* (Skt *karnīkāra*) (PED: Pterospermum acerifolium, but this is not the cassia tree), the tree (J 5:295, 420, 422, 6:269; Ap 167, 183; B 17.19; Mahv 73.123), or *~puppha*, its flower (D 3:111 = M 2:14 = A 5:61; J 2:25; Vism 173). The *kaṇṇikāra*, also called cassia, pudding-pipe, golden shower tree, or *kinihirimal* in Sinhalese, has long drooping pods and large racemes or clusters of star-shaped yellow flowers. It is often featured in ancient Indian literature, such as the *Buddha,carita*. Almost every part of the cassia tree is useful. The leafy shoots are cut and steamed as a fresh vegetable. The leaves steeped in water provide a laxative tea, or ground into a paste soothe skin irritations, and 4 grams of the sticky black seeds boiled in salted water drunk before bedtime is said to relieve “heart congestion.” Its bark, when macerate, becomes a good leather cleaner. This beautiful tall hardwood is also used in construction, and is so durable that it can be made into the spokes of wheels and handles for plows. Indians often plant a *karnikara* for each child born to the family as an investment for their future, but also as a kind of sympathetic magic, that the child will grow tall and strong like the tree.

Like the kasina colour blue [1.5.1.], we see the yellow for kasina practice as the colour of a flower, a natural object, or we can use a specially constructed yellow kasina disc. It is constructed in a similar way as that of the blue kasina [1.5.3].

**1.6.2 The Visuddhimagga** explains the yellow kasina in chapter 4,<sup>128</sup> where Buddhaghosa quotes an untraced passage from the Commentaries, thus: “One who is learning the yellow kasina apprehends the sign in yellow, either in a flower or in a cloth or in a colour element.” Here too, when someone has merit, having had previous practice, the sign of yellow arises in him when he sees a yellow flowering bush or yellow flowers spread out, or yellow cloth or some yellow hue.

Buddhaghosa quotes the case of a monk who saw an offering being made on the flower altar, with some *pattaṅga*,<sup>129</sup> and as soon as he saw it, the sign of yellow arose in him the size of the flower altar.<sup>130</sup>

**1.6.3** A yellow kasina device may be constructed in the way described for the blue kasina [1.5.1.3], with *kanikāra* flowers, etc, or with yellow cloth or with some yellow hue.

**1.6.4** For the practice, we should gaze at the yellow kasina, and note “Yellow, yellow.” The rest is as in the other colour kasinas [1.5.1.2, 1.5.1.4].

The counterpart sign is motionless. When this sign of yellow arises, it is radiant and pure, permeating our whole being. Then we have reached dhyana as described in the suttas.<sup>131</sup>

## 1.7 THE RED KASINA

**1.7.1** The red kasina (*lohita,kasina*) is described as the 7<sup>th</sup> base of mastery [2.3.7] in both **the Mahā-parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) and **the Mahā Sakul'udāyi Sutta** (M 77), thus.

Not perceiving forms internally [within oneself], one sees forms externally, that are red [copper-red], of red colour, red in appearance, with a red glow.

Just as a hibiscus<sup>132</sup> flower that is red, of red colour, red in appearance, with a red glow; or just like Benares cloth smoothed on both sides, that is red, red in appearance, with a red glow; even so, not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, red, of red colour, red in appearance, with a red glow.

By mastering [transcending] them, one perceives thus, “I know, I see.”

This is the seventh base for mastery. M 77,52(7) = Mahā,parinibbāna S (D 16,3.31), SD 9

Like the kasina colour blue [1.5.1.], we see the red for kasina practice as the colour of a flower, a natural object, or we can use a specially constructed red kasina disc. It is constructed in a similar way as that of the blue kasina [1.5.3].

**1.7.2 The Visuddhimagga** explains the red kasina in chapter 4,<sup>133</sup> where Buddhaghosa quotes an untraced Commentarial source, thus, “One who is learning the red kasina apprehends the sign in red, either in a flower or in a cloth or in a colour element.” Here too, when someone has merit, having had previous

<sup>128</sup> Vism 5.15-16/173.

<sup>129</sup> *Pattaṅga,puppha*, the *Caesalpinia sappan*, A medium-sized leguminous flowering tree 1.8 m (6 feet) high with a prickly stem, about 15 cm diameter. It is native to India, Sri Lanka and southeast Asia. Common names incl sappanwood, sapanwood, Malay *sepang*, Kannada *patanga-chekke sappanga*, Malayalam *pathimukham*, and Japan *suō*. Sappanwood belongs to the same genus as Brazilwood (*C echinata*), and was originally called "brezel wood" in Europe. [http://www.worldagroforestry.org/treedb/AFTPDFS/Caesalpinia\\_sappan.PDF](http://www.worldagroforestry.org/treedb/AFTPDFS/Caesalpinia_sappan.PDF).

<sup>130</sup> Vism 5.15/173.

<sup>131</sup> On these 4 dhyanas, see, eg, **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,76-84), SD 8.10.

<sup>132</sup> *Bandhu.jīvaka* (PED: *Pentapetes phœnicea*, but prob *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*) (D 2:111; M 2:14; J 4:179; Vism 174; VvA 43, 161; DhsA 14). The hibiscus or red hibiscus, belongs to the Malvaceae family (a large group of dicotyledonous flowering plants), and is also called Chinese hibiscus or “shoe flower.” The Sinhalese call it bandu. It is a shrub common in tropical Asia, now widely planted, frequently as a hedge. When crushed, the red flowers turn black, yielding a dark purplish dye that is used in India for blackening shoes. In China, the dye is used for the hair and eyebrows. It is also used to color liquor and to dye paper a bluish purple tint that reacts with litmus. Hawaiians eat raw flowers to aid digestion; the Chinese pickle and eat them.

<sup>133</sup> Vism 5.17-18/173 f.

practice, the sign of red arises in him when he sees a red flowering bush or red flowers spread out, or red cloth or some red hue.

**1.7.3** Alternatively, we can construct a red kasina device in the way already described for the blue kasina [1.5.1.3], with *jaya, sumana* flowers<sup>134</sup> or hibiscus flowers<sup>135</sup> or red *korandaka* flowers,<sup>136</sup> etc, or with red cloth or with some red hue.

**1.7.4** For the practice, we should gaze at the red kasina, and note “Red, red.” The rest is as in the other colour kasinas [1.5.1.2, 1.5.1.4].

The counterpart sign is motionless. When this sign of red arises, it is radiant and pure, permeating our whole being, then we have reached dhyana as described in the suttas.<sup>137</sup>

## 1.8 THE WHITE KASINA

**1.8.1** The white kasina (*odāta, kasiṇa*) is described as the 8<sup>th</sup> base of mastery [2.3.7] in both **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) and **the Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta** ( M 77), thus.

Not perceiving forms internally [within oneself], one sees forms externally, that are white, of white colour, white in appearance, with a white glow.

Just as the morning star<sup>138</sup> that is white, of white colour, white in appearance, with a white glow; or just like Benares cloth smoothed on both sides, that is white, white in appearance, with a white glow; even so, not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, white, of white colour, white in appearance, with a white glow.

By mastering [transcending] them, one perceives thus, “I know, I see.”

This is the eighth base for mastery. M 77,2(8) = Mahā,parinibbāna S (D 16,3.31), SD 6.

Like the kasina colour blue [1.5.1.], we see the white for kasina practice as the colour of a flower, a natural object, or we can use a specially constructed white kasina disc. It is constructed in a similar way as that of the blue kasina [1.5.3].

**1.8.2 The Visuddhimagga** explains the white kasina in chapter 4,<sup>139</sup> where Buddhaghosa quotes an untraced passage from the Commentaries, thus: “One who is learning the white kasina apprehends the sign of white, either in a flower or in a cloth or in a colour element.” Here too, when someone has merit, having had previous practice, the sign of white arises in him when he sees a white flowering bush, or jasmine flowers,<sup>140</sup> etc, spread out, or a heap of white lotuses or lilies, or white cloth or some white hue.

The sign of white can also arise for us in a tin disc, a silver disc, and the full moon’s disc.

**1.8.3** A white kasina device may be constructed in the way described for the blue kasina [1.5.1.3], with the kind of white flowers already mentioned, or with cloth or colour element.

<sup>134</sup> *Jaya, sumana*, *Pentapetes phoenicia*, or noon flower, scarlet mallow. It is an erect, half-woody plant, 0.5-1 m high. The branches are long and spreading. The leaves are alternate, linear, 6-10 cm long, serrated, usually with a broad, pointed base, and tapering to a point. Scarlet flowers (Aug-Nov) are borne in the axils of the heavily lobed leaves. The flowers, 2.5-3.5 cm across, with broadly ovate red petals, open around noon, and close the following dawn. The fruit is a 5-valved, rounded, hairy capsule, about 1 cm in diameter. The seeds, unwinged, are 8-12 in two series in each cell. It is native to a wide region of tropical south Asia from Ceylon and India to northern Australia and the Philippines.

<sup>135</sup> Hibiscus flowers (*bandhu, jīvaka*) [1.7.1].

<sup>136</sup> *Korandaka*, *Amaranthus caudatus*, love lies bleeding, tassel flower, amaranth. Its unusual name comes from its tiny blood-red petalless flowers that bloom in narrow, often drooping, tassel-like, terminal and axillary panicles throughout the growing season. An annual, native to India, Africa and Peru, it grows into a bush, 1-1.5 m (3-5 ft) tall and 45-75 cm (18-30 in) wide.

<sup>137</sup> On these 4 dhyanas, see, eg, **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,76-84), SD 8.10.

<sup>138</sup> *Osadhī, tāraka*, lit “the medicine star” (D 2:111; M 2:14; S 1:65; J 1:23). Also tr as “the star of healing.” *Osadhīsa* is the moon (Abhp 52; Sadd 380), which Indian mythology regards as the lord of healing. DPL says this is Venus (but without evidence).

<sup>139</sup> *Vism* 5.19-20/174 f.

<sup>140</sup> *Vassika, sumana*, *Jasminum sambac*, Malay “bunga melur,” Thai, “dork mali.”

**1.8.4** For the practice, we should gaze at the white kasina, and note “White, white.” The rest is as in the other colour kasinas [1.5.1.2, 1.5.1.4].

**1.8.5** The counterpart sign is motionless. When this sign of white arises, it is radiant and pure, permeating our whole being. Then, we have reached dhyana as described in the suttas.<sup>141</sup>

## THE LAST TWO KASINAS

### 1.9 THE SPACE KASINA

#### 1.9.1 The Mahā Rāhul'ovāda Sutta

1.9.1.0 **The space kasina** (*ākāsa, kasīna*) as a practice does not seem to have been described in the suttas or the Pali canon that have come down to us. However, we do have two practices related to space described in **the Mahā Rāhul'ovāda Sutta** (M 62). These are the cultivation of the space element (*ākāsa, saññā*) itself and the cultivation on the “space-like meditation” (*ākāsa.sama, bhāvanā*).

1.9.1.1 **The perception of the space element** (*ākāsa, saññā*) given in the Mahā Rāhulovāda Sutta (M 62) is actually an exercise in the vipassana aspect of meditation, that is, a perception on non-self (*anatta, saññā*), thus:

**12** Rāhula, what is the element of **space**?<sup>142</sup>

The space element may be either internal or external.

And what, Rāhula, is the internal space element?

Rāhula, whatever that is space, spatial and clung to, within oneself, separately, namely,  
*the ear-canals, the nostrils, the mouth cavity, and that (opening) whereby whatever is eaten, drunk, taken, and tasted, is swallowed, and where it collects [stays], and whereby it is voided from below,*

or whatever else that is space, spatial and clung to, within oneself, separately—this, Rāhula, is called internal space element.

12.2 Now both the internal space element and the external space element are simply **the space element**. And that should be seen, according to reality, with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

When one sees it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed by the space element and the mind becomes dispassionate towards the space element. (M 62,12), SD 3.11

For our space kasina practice, we omit §12.2 (until a later time), and focus on §12.1 for a description of the space element. However, note that this is the internal space element. Reflecting on the nature of this internal space element, we relate it to the external space element. This type of meditation belongs to the practice related to the 3<sup>rd</sup> liberation, which is defined as “one is fully liberated after contemplating the idea of the beautiful.” [3.3.13]

1.9.1.2 How do we cultivate **the perception of the space element** so that the idea of the beautiful (*subha*) arises? Here, the idea of the beautiful is expressed by the sentence: “*Subhan't'eva adhimutto hoti*” (“One is resolved thus, ‘Beautiful!’”) [3.1.1]. Simply, this means that we cultivate the perception of space so that it brings about dhyana [2.3.1.6]. This is not exactly a kasina meditation, because no kasina device is used, but its purpose of attaining dhyana is served, all the same. However, for the sake of easy reference, we will retain the use of the term “space kasina,” as defined by Buddhaghosa, so long as it reflects sutta teachings. [1.9.1.3]

1.9.1.3 The cultivation of the space kasina is further helped with **the cultivation on the space-like meditation** (*ākāsa, sama bhāvanā*) (M 62,17). This special meditation, taught by the Buddha to the young Rāhula, goes thus:

<sup>141</sup> On these 4 dhyanas, see, eg, **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2,76-84), SD 8.10.

<sup>142</sup> “Space,” *ākāsa*, according to Abhidhamma, is not a primary element but is classified under “derived (or derivative) material form” (*upādā rūpa*). See **(Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa S** 22.56.7 in SD 3.7 n on “forms derived....” See also Sue Hamilton, *Early Buddhism: A new approach; The I of the beholder*. Richmond: Curzon, 2000:168-172.



**17 Rāhula, cultivate a space-like meditation.** For when you cultivate a space-like meditation, agreeable and disagreeable contacts that have arisen will not overpower your mind and remain.

Rāhula, just as space is not established anywhere—

so too, Rāhula, cultivate a space-like meditation. For when you cultivate a space-like meditation, Rāhula, agreeable and disagreeable contacts that have arisen will not overpower your mind and remain.<sup>143</sup> (M 62,17), SD 3.11

The space-like meditation is helpful in preventing us from being distracted both by agreeable sense-stimuli or disagreeable sense-stimuli. This effectively means that we are undistracted by any kind of feeling, except for neutral ones, which, when noticed, should be regarded as being “impermanent.”<sup>144</sup>

### **1.9.2 Cultivating the space kasina**

1.9.2.1 If we are new to the space kasina, we should ensure that we are familiar with the perception of light [1.11.7] and the light kasina [1.11.8]. Their perception of space (*ākāsa, saññā*) is very similar to the perception of light. **The perception of space** should be done as follows:

Sit in an open space, especially a safe and quiet vantage point from which we can see the horizon before us and the open sky above us. Attend to the perception of space, now shutting our eyes, now opening our eyes. When, having opened our eyes, we close them and, it appears just as if we see, then the perception of space has arisen. Then, even when we are in an enclosed space, we can “see” space in the mind’s eye—then, we have well mastered it. [cf 1.11.5.4]

1.9.2.2 Another important preparation we must make before practising the space kasina is to study and understand the teachings of **the Ākāsānañc’āyatana Pañha Sutta** (S 40.5), where the elder Moggallāna describes it as follows:

‘Here, bhikshu, by completely transcending the perceptions of form, with the disappearance of the perceptions of sense-reaction,<sup>145</sup> with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that “Space is infinite,” he attains and dwells in **the base of infinite space**.<sup>146</sup> This is called the base of infinite space.’ (S 40.5/4:266), SD 24.15

This Sutta gives a very advanced teaching on the attaining of the formless dhyana. But it is a spiritually educational (bringing out the best in us) experience, when we know the direction we are heading. On a higher level, after mastering all the 4 dhyanas, we simply disregard all notions of form, and meditatively transcend all sense-stimuli, even the subtlest of the physical senses—then we attain the formless base of infinite space. We may or may not reach that goal for the moment, but we can certainly prepare ourselves for the journey with the first right steps.

To begin with, the perception of space is a great antidote to the hindrance of sloth-and-torpor. However, when properly cultivated, it can bring about the 1<sup>st</sup> dhyana up to the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana. Then, from there, we go on to refine the dhyana to progressively gain the formless attainments. Drop by drop we fill the meditation bowl.

**1.9.3 The Visuddhimagga** explains the space kasina in chapter 4,<sup>147</sup> where Buddhaghosa uses the term “limited space” (*paricchinn’ākāsa*) kasina (Vism 5.25-26). Of the limited-space kasina, it is said: “One who is learning the space kasina apprehends the sign by way of a hole in a wall, or in a keyhole, or in

<sup>143</sup> **Milinda,pañha** qu this para (Miln 388).

<sup>144</sup> On dealing with feeling during meditation, see **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10,32), SD 13.3 & **Daṭṭhabba S** (S 36.5), SD 17.3(5).

<sup>145</sup> “Perceptions of sense-reaction,” *pañiḅha, saññā*, also “sensory impact” (M:ÑB 267), “resistance-perception, reflex-perception” (BDict), said to be absent in the formless dhyanas. This is one of those terms that are only used contextually. See Vibh 245, §262; Vism 10.12-16.

<sup>146</sup> *Idha bhikkhu sabbaso rūpa, saññānam samatikkamā pañiḅha, saññānam atthaṅgamā nānatta, saññānam amana-sikārā ananto ākāso’ti ākāsānañcāyatanam upasampajja viharati.*

<sup>147</sup> Vism 423-26/175.

a window. For, someone with merit, having had previous practice, the sign arises in him when he sees any opening in a wall, and so on.”

**1.9.4** We may also make a hole with a diameter of a span and 4 fingers (about 11” or 28 cm) in a well-thatched hut, or in a piece of leather, or in a rush mat, and so on. We should note the hole in the wall or any such opening, as “Space, space.”

**1.9.5** The learning sign resembles the hole together with the wall, that is, its immediate surrounding. The space cannot be extended beyond this.

The counterpart sign appears only as a motionless circle of space. However, with proper mental effort, this circle of space can be extended until it embraces all of our being. When this sign arises, we have reached dhyana as described in the suttas.<sup>148</sup>

## 1.10 THE CONSCIOUSNESS KASINA

### 1.10.1 The primacy of consciousness

1.10.1.1 The kasina meditation is best understood as a culminating practice based on our understanding of all the natural aspects of whatever that exists as mind (the attention and experience) and matter (the 4 elements, the 4 colours, light and space). This understanding helps us to transcend the sensory aspects of matter, that is, our “indirect” experiences of these 11 elements as mediated by language and negotiated by thought. To “sense” something is to *internally verbalize and conceptualize* it, that is, to verbalize the experience by means of language and to apprehend and proliferate<sup>149</sup> them as thoughts. This is like taking snapshots or a movie shot of the element.

1.10.1.2 However, the “element” or thing thus apprehended is only our conception or imagination of that moment: it is *not the* thing. This is famously put in linguistic terms: the word is not the thing; the name is not the thing named.<sup>150</sup> It is like a signboard pointing out the direction; like a finger pointing to the moon. In kasina meditation, we direct our mind fully to the element, and *become* the element. More exactly, we become a conscious manifestation of that element.

Although such an experience may sometimes last quite long, even for days, up to a week, it is a fixed or permanent experience. However, it can be said to be our total (*kasīna*) experience of only part of true reality.

1.10.1.3 It is for this reason, too, that we do not need to include “consciousness” as a kasina meditation. In an important sense, it must always be there in some subtle form for the kasina to arise. Consciousness is the basis for *becoming* the kasinas: it is our experience of matter and mind.

It is vital to understand that we “become” the element in kasina meditation only when we are able to let go of the world (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and thoughts) and direct all our attention towards that element. It is like an emptying of oneself and to fill oneself up with the element. So effective is a kasina practice that it is able to bring us up to the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana.

In simple terms, this—that is, the attaining of the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana—is **the basis for psychic powers**. For example, we *become* the earth element and we are able to project this element onto any external state, such as water, taking it as solid so that we can walk on the water.<sup>151</sup> Such powers are not permanent, lasting only as long as we are able to master the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana.

1.10.1.4 If we accept the numerous stories of seers and ascetics with psychic powers in the suttas, and even more common in the Commentaries, then we must conclude that such wielders of psychic powers had been able to master the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana, and very likely did so through kasina meditation. As non-Buddhists, such people, as a rule, often identified with their meditation object or the elements, seeing some kind of abiding power or eternal essence in them.

In the Buddhist practice, the meditator, as a rule, never identifies with the meditation object. The meditator reaches full concentration of the object or element through transcending the 5 physical senses, and

<sup>148</sup> On these 4 dhyanas, see, eg, **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,76-84), SD 8.10.

<sup>149</sup> On the mental proliferation of thoughts (*papañca*), see **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18), SD 6.14 (2).

<sup>150</sup> See SD 17.4 (4).

<sup>151</sup> On psychic powers, see **Miracles**, SD 27.5a esp (4.3.7); also SD 1.7 (3).

has a purely *mental* experience of the object or element. When the meditator transcends the duality of subject-object in such a meditation, he attains dhyana. The essential nature of Buddhist meditation, then, is that we never identify with the object: there is no “That I am,”<sup>152</sup> but rather, “**This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self**”<sup>153</sup> [2.3.2.3].

1.10.1.5 On a higher formless level, consciousness can—for theoretical expedience—be said to exist in itself, as it were, as **the consciousness kasina**. There is really *no* such kasina—it is simply the formless base of infinite consciousness (*viññāṇaṅc’āyatana*) itself. The suttas—the **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) and the **Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta** (M 77)—list it as the 10<sup>th</sup> kasina to give us a complete idea of our being as body (the 4 elements, the 4 colours, light and space) and mind (consciousness) [3.3.8.1].

The term “consciousness kasina” (*viññāṇa,kasina*) is mentioned in the **Pañca-t,taya Sutta** (M 102), where the Buddha uses this term to refer to those who claimed to have attained “some kind of consciousness-kasina that is boundless and imperturbable” (*viññāṇa,kasinaṃ ... appamāṇaṃ āneñjaṃ*), experiencing it in different ways, but he stresses that such a state is “conditioned and gross” (*saṅkhata oḷārika*), and that the Buddha has transcended all such states.<sup>154</sup>

However, there is the alternative expression, “consciousness sphere *krtsna*,” which is in Buddhist Sanskrit: *vijñānānam,tyāyatana,krtsna*.<sup>155</sup> Reconstructed as a Pali term, this will be \**viññāṇaṅc’āyatana,-kasina* (the initial asterisk means that this is a constructed, non-existent, term).

This term is not found in the Pali texts, but occurs a couple of times in the Commentaries, such as in the Aṅguttara commentary on the 10 kasinas (A 1:41), where it alludes to it as being the last of these kasinas (AA 2:77). The concept is also alluded in the Tīkā to the **Pañcattaya Suttas** (M 102).<sup>156</sup>

Upatissa, in his **Vimutti,magga**, however, clearly identifies the consciousness kasina with the formless attainment of infinite consciousness. However, he does not elaborate. [1.10.3]

Buddhaghosa, in his Visuddhimagga, replaces the consciousness kasina with the “light kasina” (Vism 5.21-23). All this suggests that the concept is a late one, although we may surmise it probably arises towards a very late part of the Buddha’s dispensation, perhaps during the last decade or so, at the earliest.

**1.10.2** As we have noted, there is really *no* consciousness kasina—it is actually **the base of infinite consciousness** (*viññāṇaṅc’āyatana*) [1.10.1]. This kasina-base is described in the **Viññāṇaṅc’āyatana Pañha Sutta** (S 40.6), thus:

‘Here, bhikshu, by completely transcending the base of infinite space, aware that “Consciousness is infinite,” he attains and dwells in **the base of infinite consciousness**.’<sup>157</sup>

(S 40.6), SD 24.16<sup>158</sup>

This is not a definition of the base of infinite consciousness, but a description of how a meditator who has attained the 1<sup>st</sup> formless attainment goes on to attain the 4<sup>th</sup> formless attainment. The point is that it is not something we can really put into words, as it is a profound meditative state that we have to experience for ourselves.

<sup>152</sup> This is the classic Upaniṣadic statement, *tat tvam asi* (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8-16); see also SD 7.1 (4).

<sup>153</sup> *N’etaṃ mama, n’eso ’ham asmi, na mēso attā ti*. A brief version, “There can be no considering that (element) as ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am’” (*ahan ti vā maman ti vā asmī ti vā*) is found in **Mahā Hatthi,paḍōpama S** (M 28/1:184-191 §§6b-7, 11b-12, 16b-17, 21b-22). This is opp of “the 3 graspings” (*ti,vidha gāha*) formula: *etaṃ mama, eso ’ham asmi, eso me attā ti* [§§12-16]. In **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59,12-16/3:68), SD 1,2, this formula is applied to the 5 aggregates & in **Pārileyya S** (S 22.81/3:94-99), SD 6.1, to the 4 primary elements. See also (**Dhātu**) **Rāhula S** (A 4.177/2:164 f). See **Pārileyya S**, SD 6.1 (5). See Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995a:32 f.

<sup>154</sup> M 102,3.2-4 (SD 40a.12).

<sup>155</sup> Eg, in SHT 3:915R3 (p171), the restoration is corroborated by the immediately preceding (*ākāśānaṃ*)[*t*]yāyatana,*krtsnaṃ*). See also fragment X 679V4 in Stache-Rosen 1968:34 and fragment 689R3 in Schlingloff 1962a:14. See SD 40.12 (3.2.3).

<sup>156</sup> M 102 (SD 40.12) at MAT:Be 2:223.

<sup>157</sup> *Idha bhikkhu sabbaso ākāśānaṅc’āyatanaṃ samatikkamma anantaṃ viññāṇan ti viññāṇaṅc’āyatanaṃ upa-sampajja viharati*.

<sup>158</sup> On the consciousness kasina, see SD 40a.12 (3.2.3).

**1.10.3** Upatissa, in his **Vimutti,magga** (on which the Visuddhi,magga is based), lists space and consciousness as the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> kasinas.<sup>159</sup> However, in his explanations, he describes the light kasina and the limited space kasina<sup>160</sup> (an approach which is also followed by Buddhaghosa, in his Visuddhi,magga).<sup>161</sup> He, however, only describes the limited space kasina and the consciousness kasina (very briefly) in the same chapter. Upatissa merely says, “The consciousness kasina ... is the samadhi of the sphere of infinite consciousness.”<sup>162</sup>

## 1.11 THE LIGHT KASINA AND RELATED TEACHINGS

### 1.11.1 The perception of light

1.11.1.1 The light kasina (*āloka,kasīna*) is not listed in **the Mahā Sakul'udāyi Sutta** (M 77), for the simple reason that it is *not* exactly a kasina meditation, but is regarded so by Buddhaghosa in his Visuddhimagga, where he omits the “consciousness” kasina (which can only be done by those who have attained the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana) [1.10], and adds the “light kasina.”

**1.11.2** To practise the light kasina, we need first to understand and master **the perception of light** (*āloka,saññā*) as taught by the Buddha. In **the Pacalā Sutta** (A 7.58), for example, the perception of light is the 6<sup>th</sup> of the 7 ways of overcoming drowsiness during meditation that the Buddha teaches Moggallāna, thus:

If, Moggallāna, that drowsiness still would not go away, then, Moggallāna, you should practise **the perception of light**,

determine the perception of daylight: just as day is, so is night; just as night is, so is day.<sup>163</sup>

Thus through a mind that is open and unhindered, you should cultivate a mind of bright light.<sup>164</sup>

It is possible that when you do so, that drowsiness would go away.<sup>165</sup> (A 7.58,7/4:86), SD 4.11

While in the Pacalā Sutta, the perception of light is applied to get rid of drowsiness, in **the (Anussatiṭṭhāna) Udāyi Sutta** (A 6.29), the Buddha gives Ānanda the same perception of light, saying that it conduces to “the attaining of knowledge and vision.”<sup>166</sup>

**1.11.3** The same passage recurs in **the Samādhi Bhāvanā Sutta** (A 4.41), where it is said to be “the cultivation, growing, of samadhi for bringing about to the attainment of knowledge and vision.” In other words, the perception of light is the basis for cultivation of both calm and insight, for dhyana as well as wisdom-based liberation.<sup>167</sup>

**1.11.4** All these suttas and references attest to the fact that the perception of light is one of the key meditations in early Buddhism. This fact is further supported by the common use of the imagery of light, such as at the end of **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11).<sup>168</sup> We may even say that the perception of light is such a common meditation in early Buddhist times that it is taken for granted. However, it is mentioned in key references throughout the Pali canon.<sup>169</sup>

<sup>159</sup> Vim̐m ch 7 = Vim̐m:ESK 63.

<sup>160</sup> Vim̐m ch 8 sect 2 = Vim̐m:ESK 128.

<sup>161</sup> Vim̐m:ESK xlv f; Vism:Ñ xxvii.

<sup>162</sup> 問云何識一切入。答曰識處定。此謂識一切入。(T32.1648.424b13-14); Vim̐m ch 8 sect 3 = Vim̐m:ESK 129 f.

<sup>163</sup> *Yathā divā tathā rattim, yathā rattim tathā divā.*

<sup>164</sup> *Iti vivaṭṭena [vī vivaṭṭena] cetasā aparīyonaddhena sappabhāsam cittam bhāveyyasi.* Here, “**open and unhindered**” (*vivaṭṭena...aparīyonaddhena*) alludes to avoiding the first 2 of the “4 faults” (*catu,dosa*) in meditation, ie, against being “too slack” (*atilīna*) or “too tense” (*atipaggahita*): see **Iddhi,pāda Vibhaṅga S** (S 51.20/5:276-281), SD 28.14. See §8n below on the last 2 of the 4 faults.

<sup>165</sup> As at **Samādhi Bhāvanā S** (A 4.41,3/2:45), SD 24.1, & **(Anussatiṭṭhāna) Udāyi S** (A 6.29/3:322-325), SD 24.8. See also **Thīna,middha**, SD 32.6 (3.2).

<sup>166</sup> A 6.29,3/3:323 (SD 24.8).

<sup>167</sup> A 4.41,3/2:45 (SD 24.1).

<sup>168</sup> S 56.11/5:420-424 (SD 1.1).

<sup>169</sup> On the perception of light, *āloka,saññā* (D 3:224,4 = A 2:45,9 = 3:323,14 ≈ 4:86,22 ≈ Pm 1:115,11, 2:45,5, 228,-26 f; S 5:278,30, 280,22): see CPD: *āloka-saññā* for other refs. On the practitioner, *āloka,saññī*, see D 1:71,25 =

**1.11.5 The Iddhi,pāda Vibhaṅga Sutta** (S 51.20)

1.11.5.1 **The Iddhi,pāda Vibhaṅga Sutta** (S 51.20) defines the perception of light in the same way as in the Suttas above [1.11.2]. However, it presents the perception of light in the broader context of **the 4 paths of spiritual success** (*iddhi,pāda*)—that is, in concentration due to enthusiasm (*chanda*), to effort (*viriya*), to mind (*citta*), and to investigation (*vīmaṃsā*). Each of these 4 paths of spiritual success is cultivated in a harmonious way, so that it “will be neither too slack nor too tense, and it will neither be narrowed internally<sup>170</sup> nor be distracted externally.<sup>171</sup>”

1.11.5.2 Interestingly, the Sutta interprets the phrase, “just as day is, so is night; just as night is, so is day” in two ways: (1) as being diligent both day and night in meditation,<sup>172</sup> and (2) in terms of the perception of light.<sup>173</sup> In other words, here, we see the perception of light being used as a helping meditation to bring about mastery of the mind, that is, both the attaining of calm (*samatha*) or dhyana, and of insight.<sup>174</sup>

1.11.5.3 Here, we see mental mastery applied and understood implicitly, covering both the “base of mastery” (*abhibh’āyatana*) aspect (that is, dhyana), and the “freedom” (*vimutti*) or “liberation” (*vimokkha*) aspect. Only later, in **the Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta** (M 77), do we see these technical terms—*abhibh’āyatana* and *vimokkha*—being used.<sup>175</sup> Apparently, these two terms, being too complex, were in due course sidelined or abandoned altogether by the sangha elders for the simpler twin terms of calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*), which are better known.<sup>176</sup>

1.11.5.4 The Commentary to **the Iddhi,pāda Vibhaṅga Sutta** (S 51.20),<sup>177</sup> on the perception of light (*āloka,saññā*), gives the following practical instructions:

A monk [meditator] sits in an open space [*aṅgaṇa*] attending to the perception of light, now shutting his eyes, now opening his eyes. When, having opened his eyes, he closes them and, it appears just as if he sees (*olokentassa viya*), then the perception of light has arisen. It is also called “the perception of day” (*divā,saññā*), and with its arising in the night, it is said to be well mastered. (SA 3:260)

The perception of the light, as the name suggests, is to recognize the presence of light before us and remember it. Light is itself the object of meditation here. In other words, we should internalize a mental image of brightness which we can visualize whenever we need to.

**1.11.6 The Satta Dhātu Sutta** (S 14.11)

1.11.6.1 The Satta Dhātu Sutta (S 14.11) is a short but remarkable text that speaks of light (*ābha*) as an “element” (*dhātu*), that is, **the light element** (*ābhā,dhātu*), the first of 7 elements. These 7 elements (*satta dhātu*) are as follows:

|  |  |
|--|--|
| (1) the light element,   | <i>ābha dhātu</i>                      |
| (2) the beauty element,  | <i>subha dhātu</i>                     |
| (3) the base of infinite space element,                        | <i>ākāsānañ’āyatana dhātu</i>          |
| (4) the base of infinite consciousness element,                | <i>viññāṇaṅc’āyatana dhātu</i>         |
| (5) the base of nothingness element,                           | <i>ākīṅcaññ’āyatana dhātu</i>          |
| (6) the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception element, | <i>n’eva,saññā,nāsaññāyatana dhātu</i> |
| (7) the cessation of perception and feeling element.           | <i>saññā,vedayita,nirodha dhātu</i>    |

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3:49,15 = M 1:181,20 = 269,32 = 275,2 = 3:3,32 = A 2:211,1 = 3:92,30 = 4:437,9 = 5:207,12 = Pug 59,21 = Vbh 244,26 ≈ M 3:35,29; Vbh 254,14: see CPD: āloka-saññā for Comy refs..

<sup>170</sup> Due to sloth and torpor.

<sup>171</sup> Due to sensual pleasures.

<sup>172</sup> S 51.20,10+17+25+33 (SD 28.14), viz, in terms of meditating on the 31 parts of the body (to overcome lust).

<sup>173</sup> S 51.20,11+19+27+35 (SD 28.14), to harmonize the effects of the meditation of the 31 body-parts so that it is not in the extreme.

<sup>174</sup> S 51.20/5:278,30-280,22 (SD 28.14).

<sup>175</sup> M 77 (SD 49.5a).

<sup>176</sup> On calm and insight, see *Samatha and vipassanā*, SD 41.1.

<sup>177</sup> S 51.20,10/5:278 (SD 28.14).

(S 14.11/2:150 f), SD 74.11

1.11.6.2 Notice how closely these 7 elements resemble liberations (*vimokkha*) numbers 3-8 [3.1.1.1]. In fact, if we subsume liberations 1 and 2 under *the light element* here, the two sets—the 7 elements (*satta dhātu*) and the 8 liberations (*aṭṭha vimokkha*)—are practically identical! In fact, if we closely examine liberations 1 and 2, we will see that they are closely connected with the light element (*ābha dhātu*).

1.11.6.3 The term “**light element**” (*ābha, dhātu*)—a synonym of the *ālok'āyatana*—here refers to both the “light” as the *base* (*āyatana*) and the dhyana itself (AA 2:134). So, “element” here also has a broader sense of “base.”<sup>178</sup> We have noted [3.3.1] how the 1<sup>st</sup> liberation actually comprises the bases of mastery 1 and 2 [3.3.1.2], and how the 2<sup>nd</sup> liberation [3.3.2] comprises the bases of mastery 3 and 4 [3.3.2.1]. The key terms that underlie these four bases is whether the meditation object is “measurable” or “limited,” either of which is paired with “beautiful or ugly” [2.3.1-2.3.4].

1.11.6.4 The terms **measurable** (*pamāṇa*) and **limited** (*paritta*) are directly related to the cultivation of the 4 divine abodes [2.3.1.5], and also to the colour kasinas in the last 4 bases of mastery [2.3.5-2.3.8]. Here, “measurable” (*pamāṇa*) or “limited” (*paritta*) refers to the mental object that has not “grown” or pervaded our being. When it pervades our whole being, or has “broken the barriers,” it is said to be “**im-measurable**” or “unlimited” (*appamāṇa*). The goal of the kasina meditation is to let the meditation object “break the barriers,” that is, joyfully pervade our whole being; then, we have mastered it, and it is a base of mastery.

1.11.6.5 When the meditation object has joyfully flooded our being (that is, the mind is fully focused on the meditation object), the mind is said to be “beautiful” (*subha*). The Satta Dhātu Sutta calls it the “**beautiful element**” (*subha, dhātu*)—“element” here simply means a “state.”<sup>179</sup> The main ingredient of the “beauty” here is joy, one that is attended by a pervasive inner radiance. The radiant joy pervades our whole being. Hence, this term *beautiful element* (like the “light element”) here refers both to the meditation object as well as the dhyana itself (AA 2:134).

1.11.6.6 The Satta Dhātu Sutta also alludes to the attainment of cessation, describing how it is attained.<sup>180</sup> However, it is **the perception of light** (*āloka, saññā*) that is highlighted by the Sutta: it is the first of the 7 elements, as the “light element” (*ābha, dhātu*). [1.11.6.3; 2.2.2.2]

1.11.6.7 According to the Satta Dhātu, just as light is contrasted with darkness (or “delimited” by it), so, too, the *beautiful* is contrasted with the foul. Then, based on the 4<sup>th</sup> form dhyana, we go on to cultivate the 4 formless bases in proper sequence. The unusual style of the Satta Dhātu Sutta shows that meditation practice can be presented in a number of ways. Hence, we begin to understand the flexibility and versatility of the suttas in classifying the meditation objects and describing them in a manner that facilitates our attaining them for the sake of self-awakening and spiritual liberation.

**1.11.7** The verse of **the Cand'ābha Jātaka**, “the moonlight birth-story” (J 135/1:474) speaks of the benefit of meditating on moonlight or sunlight, thus:

*Cand'ābhaṃ sūriy'ābhañ ca  
yodha paññāya gādhati  
avitakkena jhānena  
hoti ābhassa, rūpa'go'ti*

Whoever moonlight and sunlight  
firmly holds with wisdom,  
with thought-free dhyana—  
he goes on to assume Ābhassara form.

The story goes that once in a past birth, when the Bodhisattva died, his last words were “Moonlight, sunlight!” and then he was reborn in Ābhassara, the 2<sup>nd</sup> form dhyana world of the “radiant gods.” When his followers did not understand the significance of his last words, his chief disciple explained it with the above verse.

<sup>178</sup> On a simpler practical level, the perception of light is associated with the abandoning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> hindrance, sloth and torpor: see **Pacalā S** (A 7.58,7/4:86), SD 4.11.

<sup>179</sup> On similar usages of “element” (*dhātu*), see SD 50.13 (2.3).

<sup>180</sup> For details on “cessation” (*nirodha*), see SD 48.7 (3.2).

In other words, this is a story that teaches moonlight or sunlight as suitable meditation objects for the perception of light by which we can attain dhyana. The full moon, free from clouds is an ideal object for the perceiving light. The perceptions should be done for as long as possible, that is, as long as the natural conditions allow. The perception approaches concentration when we are able to have a clear mental image of the moon disc, so that it works as an internal meditation object.

Sunshine can be used in the perception of light, especially in the morning, or whenever the sunlight is bright without glaring in our eyes. The best way to do this is to sit comfortably in a safe place, preferably some quiet vantage away from people, with a vast open space before us, say the calm sea, or an open valley, or any clear space free of buildings, people, animals or other distractions. We then perceive the space before us as being “bright” [1.11.8].

A rule of thumb is that we should never look directly into the sun or at glaring light—they harm the eyes. The light should be diffuse, such as a bright spaciousness or a circle of light that is comfortable to the eye. Although sometimes measurements are given for the dimension of the kasina disc, the size of the circle of light does not really matter. It should be of a size and intensity that allows us to comfortably focus on it so that we will be able to retain a bright image of it mentally to attain concentration.

Other ways of using light in the perception of light is described in the Visuddhimagga [1.11.8].

### **1.11.8 The light kasina**

1.11.8.1 Upatissa, in his **Vimuttimagga**, gives some very helpful instructions for the light kasina. He says that an experienced meditator will be able to apprehend the sign of light from natural objects, such as moonlight, sunlight, lamp-light or the glitter of gems. Thus, pleasure or displeasure arises in him on this account. The counter-image then arises in him.

If we are new to kasina meditation, we should find a suitable place for practice, using a wall that faces the east or the west. We should then place a bowl of water in a sun-lit place so that a circle of light is reflected on the wall. This is our meditation object. We apprehend it in three ways: by equanimous gazing, by skillfulness, and by the removal of distractions.<sup>181</sup> (T32.1648.424a1-16)

1.11.8.2 Buddhaghosa, in his **Visuddhimagga**, gives these instructions for the light kasina:

Now, regarding the light kasina, it is said that one who is learning the light kasina apprehends the sign in light in a hole in a wall, or in a keyhole, or through an open window.

Firstly, someone with merit, and who has previously practised, the sign arises in him when he sees a circle (of light) thrown onto a wall or the floor by sunlight or moonlight coming through a hole in the wall, etc, or moonlight coming through a gap in the branches of a dense foliage of a tree, or through a gap in the hut made of rightly packed branches.

Other than that, he should use that same kind of circle of light that has been described, and should cultivate, “Bright, bright,” or “Light, light.”

If he cannot do so, he can light a lamp inside a pot, close the pot’s mouth, make a hole in the pot, and place it with the hole facing a wall. He should cultivate, “Light, light!” This lasts longer than the previous one.

Here, the learning sign is just like a circle thrown onto the wall or the ground. The counterpart sign is like a tight cluster of radiant lights.<sup>182</sup> (Vism 5.21-23/174 f)

<sup>181</sup> 以三行取相。以平等觀。以方便。以離亂。

<sup>182</sup> *Āloka,kaṣiṇe pana āloka,kaṣiṇaṃ uggāhanto ālokasmim nimittaṃ gaṇhāti bhitti,chidde vā tāḷa-c,chidde vā vāta,pān’antarikāya vā’ti vacanato kat’ādhiḱārassa tāva puñṇavato yaṃ bhitti,chidd’ādīnaṃ aṇṇātarena sūriy’āloko vā cand’āloko vā pavisitvā bhittiyā vā bhūmiyā vā maṇḍalaṃ samuṭṭhāpeti, ghana,paṇṇa,rukka,sākh’antarena vā ghana,sākhā,maṇḍap’antarena vā nikkhamitvā bhūmiyā eva maṇḍalaṃ samuṭṭhāpeti, taṃ disvā’va nimittaṃ uppajjati. Itarenāpi tad eva vutta-p,pakāram obhāsa,maṇḍalaṃ “obhāso obhāso”ti vā “āloko āloko”ti vā bhāvetabbaṃ. Tathā asakkontena ghaṭe dīpaṃ,jāletvā ghaṭa,mukhaṃ pidahitvā ghaṭe chiddaṃ katvā bhitti,mukhaṃ ṭhapetabbaṃ. Tena chiddena dīp’āloko nikkhamitvā bhittiyā maṇḍalaṃ karoti, taṃ āloko āloko’ti bhāvetabbaṃ. Idam itarehi cira-t,ṭhitikaṃ hoti. Idha uggaha,nimittaṃ bhittiyā vā bhūmiyā vā uṭṭhita,maṇḍala,sadisam eva hoti. Paṭibhāga,nimittaṃ ghana,vippasanna,āloka,puñja,sadisam. (Vism 5.21-23/174 f)*

1.11.8.3 In terms of practice, this is a very instructive guide. However, we may make some adjustments of our own where feasible, such as making use of a suitable torchlight with good batteries to project a circle of light onto the wall. We should also ensure that the wall is clean, or we can cover a suitable area of the wall with clean white paper to serve as a screen for the circle of light.

## 2 The 8 bases of mastery

### 2.1 THE FORMULA

**2.1.1 The (Atthaka) Abhibh'āyatana Sutta** (A 8.65) lists the 8 bases of mastery (*aṭṭha abhibh'āyatana*), as follows, with cross-references to the modern commentaries:

### SD 49.5b(2.1)

## (Aṭṭhaka) Abhibh'āyatana Sutta

The (Eights) Discourse in the Bases of Mastery | A 8.65/4:305 f

Traditional: A 8,2,2,5 = Aṅguttara Nikāya 8, Aṭṭhaka Nipāta 2, Duttiya Paṇṇāsaka 2, Bhūmicāla Vagga 5

Theme: Meditation for the transcending of the 6 senses

Bhikshus, there are these 8 bases of mastery. What are the eight?

- (1) Perceiving forms internally [within oneself],  
one sees forms externally [in another], limited, beautiful or ugly.<sup>183</sup>  
By mastering [transcending] them, one perceives thus, “I know, I see.”<sup>184</sup>  
This is the first base for mastery. [2.3.1]
- (2) Perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally,  
immeasurable, beautiful or ugly.  
By mastering them, one perceives thus, “I know, I see.”  
This is the second base for mastery. [2.3.2]
- (3) Not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms *externally, limited*,  
beautiful or ugly.  
By mastering them, one perceives thus, “I know, I see.”  
This is the third base for mastery. [2.3.3]
- (4) Not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms *externally, immeasurable*,  
beautiful or ugly.  
By mastering them, one perceives thus, “I know, I see.”  
This is the fourth base for mastery. [2.3.4]
- (5) Not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, that are blue [indigo],  
of blue colour, blue in appearance, with a blue glow.<sup>185</sup>  
By mastering them, one perceives thus, “I know, I see.”  
This is the fifth base for mastery. [2.3.5]
- (6) Not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, that are yellow,  
of yellow colour, yellow in appearance, with a yellow glow.  
By mastering them, one perceives thus, “I know, I see.”  
This is the sixth base for mastery. [306] [2.3.6]
- (7) Not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, that are red [copper-red],  
of red colour, red in appearance, with a red glow.  
By mastering them, one perceives thus, “I know, I see.”  
This is the seventh base for mastery. [2.3.7]
- (8) Not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, that are white,  
of white colour, white in appearance, with a white glow.

<sup>183</sup> *Ajjhattam rūpa, saññī eko bahiddhā, rūpāni passati parittāni suvaṇṇa, dubbaṇṇāni.*

<sup>184</sup> *Tāni abhibhuyya jānāmi passāmīti evaṃ saññī hoti.* [0.3.2.2]

<sup>185</sup> On blue (*nīla*), yellow (*pīta*), copper-red (*lohita*) and white (*odāta*) kasinas, see *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1 (9.2.1).



By mastering them, one perceives thus, “I know, I see.”

This is the eighth base for mastery.

[2.3.8]

These, bhikshus, are the 8 bases of mastery.

— evaṃ —

**2.1.2 Related suttas.** The 8 bases of mastery are listed in the following suttas:

|                                       |              |                    |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| <b>Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta</b>         | D 16,3.24    | SD 9               |
| <b>Saṅgīti Sutta</b>                  | D 33.3.1(10) |                    |
| <b>Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta</b>         | M 77,72      | SD 49.5a           |
| <b>Parihāna Dhamma Sutta</b>          | S 35.96      | SD 91.12           |
| <b>(Ekaka) Abhibh’āyatana Sutta</b>   | A 1.18.47-54 | = A:B 1.18.439-446 |
| <b>(Aṭṭhaka) Abhibh’āyatana Sutta</b> | A 8.65       | SD 49.5b(2.1)      |
| <b>Sammā,vattana Sutta</b>            | A 8.90       |                    |

However, in all these texts, the bases are only listed without any explanation except for a few rare comments. Detailed explanations of these bases are only found in the Commentaries and later works.

## 2.2 ABHIBH’ĀYATANA

### 2.2.1 Definitions

2.2.1.1 The “bases of mastery” or “spheres of transcendence” (*abhibh’āyatana*),<sup>186</sup> refers to powers gained through kasina (*kasina*; Skt *kṛtsna*) meditation as a means of transcending the physical senses (DhsA 187), that is, attaining dhyana, or even transcending the sense-world itself to be reborn in the form world or formless world. Indeed, when properly cultivated, we might even awaken in this life itself.

2.2.1.2 The list of 8 bases of mastery is listed in the following suttas and references:

|                                       |  |          |
|---------------------------------------|--|----------|
| <b>Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta</b>         | D 16,3.24                                | SD 9     |
| <b>Saṅgīti Sutta</b>                  | D 33.3.1(10));                           |          |
| <b>Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta</b>         | M 77,72                                  | SD 49.5  |
| <b>Parihāna Dhamma Sutta</b>          | S 35.96                                  | SD 91.12 |
| <b>(Ekaka) Abhibh’āyatana Sutta</b>   | A 1.18.47-52/1:40 [A:B 1.18,439-446]     |          |
| <b>(Aṭṭhaka) Abhibh’āyatana Sutta</b> | A 8.65/4:305 f                           |          |
| <b>Sammā,vattana Sutta</b>            | A 8.90/4:349                             |          |
| And also at                           | <b>Nm 143; Dhs §§235-247; DhsA 191).</b> |          |

2.2.1.3 In **S 35.96**, the term is applied to 6 “mastered bases” (*cha abhibh’āyatana*) and refers to the mastery of the senses: when a sense-object impinges on the sense-base, “there do not arise in him bad unwholesome states, nor any memories and intentions connected with the mental fetters” (S 35.96/4:76 f).<sup>187</sup>

### 2.2.2 The kasinas and mental mastery

2.2.2.1 Although a number of the bases of mastery and the kasina-bases (*kaṣiṇ’āyatana*) [3] coincide, the two meditation bases work in different ways<sup>188</sup> (DhsA 187). Except for the first two bases, there is no perception of physical qualities of the body, because it is not an object of mastery. On account of delusion (*moha*), we tend to see *external* objects that are to be “known and seen” as being *limited*, but through initial application (*vitakka*) of the mind, we see *mental* objects as being boundless.

<sup>186</sup> *Abhibh’āyatana*, lit “the overlord’s sphere” (Skt *abhibhv-āyatana*) = *abhibhū*, literally, “overcomer,” that is, “overlord, sovereign, master” (said of Mahā Brahmā, D 1:18,714) and of Buddha, M 1:327,1) + *āyatana*, “base,” especially, the sense-bases, or more broadly, the sense-world. See also **Nm 143; Dhs §§235-247; DhsA 191**). See BDict: *abhibhāyatana*, and Ency Bsm, sv. For textual context n, see Gethin 2001:206-270. For meditation context n, see Sandra Shaw, *Buddhist Meditation*, 2006: 93-96.

<sup>187</sup> See *Buddhist Dictionary*: *abhibhāyatana*, and Ency Bsm, sv. For textual context n, see Gethin 2001:206-270. For meditation context n, see Sarah Shaw, *Buddhist Meditation*, 2006: 93-96.

<sup>188</sup> *Sāmaṇe pi ārammaṇe bhāvanāya asamānaṃ*, DhsA 187).

The “**beautiful**”—a radiant mind comprising any of the divine abodes or any of the elements [2.3.1.6]—is especially suitable and beneficial for someone with a hateful predisposition. A mental object of the “**ugly**” or “**impure**” (*asubha*), on the other hand, is conducive to one disposed to lust, and helps to reduce, even remove, lust (DhsA 189). The “ugly” or “impure”—technically called the “perception of impurity” (*asubha,saññā*)—according to the suttas, such as the **Giri-m-ānanda Sutta** (A 10.60)—refers to the contemplation of the 31 (or 32) body-parts (*kāya,gatā,sati*).<sup>189</sup> It works as an antidote to the hindrance of sensual desire<sup>190</sup> and the mental perversion (*vipallāsa*) which sees what is really impure as being pure and beautiful.<sup>191</sup>

2.2.2.2 **The 4 primary elements** (*mahā,bhūta*)—earth, water, fire and wind—are used for the attaining of dhyana in the first four bases of mastery, by using the limited (*paritta*) and the boundless (*appamāṇa*) methods. **The 4 colour kasinas**—blue, yellow, red and white—are used for the other four bases, by the method of beauty and ugliness. The appropriate base should be—whether that of beauty or ugliness—depends on our mental predisposition, as already stated.<sup>192</sup> [2.2.2.1].

As stated in the Attha,sālīnī, these 8 kasinas are the same as the 8 bases of mastery in terms of mental object (*ārammaṇa*), differing only in the manner of cultivation (*bhāvanā*) (DhsA 187 f) [2.2.2.1]. By “having mastered (them)” (*abhibhuyya*) means having transcended the 6 physical senses (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind) by means of these devices. With that transcended mind, calm and clear, we direct it to directly seeing into true reality.

**2.2.3 Transcending the senses.** “Mastery” here refers to the transcending of our 6 senses to attain a profound meditative state. In the **Parihāna Dhamma Sutta** (S 35.96), the term, “bases of mastery” is applied to 6 “mastered bases” (*cha abhibh'āyatana*) themselves, and refers to the mastery of all the senses, that is, the 5 physical senses, as well as the mind itself, that is, the 6 sense-bases (*saḷ-āyatana*).<sup>193</sup> This means that when a sense-object impinges on the sense-base, “there do not arise in him bad unwholesome states, nor any memories and intentions connected with the mental fetters.”<sup>194</sup>

The **fetters** (*saṃyojana*)<sup>195</sup> here are what prevent us from breaking free from samsara, from attaining the path to awakening and full liberation. When the first 3 fetters are broken, we attain the first stage of awakening, that is, streamwinning,<sup>196</sup> and when all 10 are broken, we become arhats,<sup>197</sup> just like the Buddha himself, so that we do not need to become Buddhas ourselves.<sup>198</sup>

## 2.3 EXPLANATIONS ON THE 8 BASES OF MASTERY

### 2.3.1 The 1st base of mastery

2.3.1.1 The Mahā Sakul'udāyi Sutta (M 7) defines the 1<sup>st</sup> base of mastery as follows:

“**Perceiving forms internally [within oneself], one sees forms externally [in another], limited, beautiful or ugly.**”<sup>199</sup> By mastering [transcending] them, one perceives thus, ‘I know, I see.’<sup>200</sup> (M 77,49-1)

<sup>189</sup> On *kāya,gatā,sati*, see **Giri-m-ānanda S** (A 10.60,6), SD 19.16 & **Kāya,gatā,sati S** (M 119,7), SD 12.21.

<sup>190</sup> On the hindrance of sensual desire, see **Kāma-c, chanda**, SD 32.2.

<sup>191</sup> On *vipallāsa*, see **Vipallāsa S** (A 4.49/2:52), SD 16.11.

<sup>192</sup> Vism 3.74-103/101-110. On balancing the faculties, see Vism 4.45-49/130 f.

<sup>193</sup> See eg **Saḷ-āyatana Vibhaṅga S** (M 137), SD 29.5.

<sup>194</sup> S 35.96/4:76 f (SD 91.12).

<sup>195</sup> They are the 10 fetters (*dasa saṃyojana*): (1) self-identity view (*sakkāya,ditṭhi*), (2) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b,bata,parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma,rāga*), (5) aversion (*paṭigha*), (6) lust for form existence (*rūpa,rāga*), (7) lust for formless existence (*arūpa,rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*). See **Kīṭa,giri S** (M 70), SD 11.1 (5.1); (**Sekha**) **Uddesa S** (A 4.85), SD 3.3 (2).

<sup>196</sup> On the 3 fetters, see **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8. See also **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3.

<sup>197</sup> On the 5 higher fetters, see **Uddham,bhāgiya S** (S 45.180), SD 50.12.

<sup>198</sup> Some later sectarians, esp in the Mahāyāna school, tend to have the false view that arhats still need to become Buddhas. On arhathood as the highest goal, see **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39,21.3), SD 10.13; **Mahānidāna S** (M 15.-36.3/2:71,26), SD 5.17; see also SD 30.8 (6.4.4). On dealing with the Buddha's death, see SD 27.6b (4.1.1).

<sup>199</sup> *Ajjhattam rūpa,saññī eko bahiddhā,rūpāni passati parittāni suvaṇṇa,dubbaṇṇāni.*

<sup>200</sup> *Tāni abhibhuyya jānāmi passāmīti evaṃ saññī hoti.*

This is the attaining of the 4 dhyanas by using a colour kasina derived from an object on or within our body. In fact, the 1<sup>st</sup> base of mastery is worded as having the same sense as the 1<sup>st</sup> liberation (*vimokkha*), which is “one possessing physical form sees physical form.” They are, in fact, regarded as practically identical in the Attha,sālinī (the Dhamma,saṅgāṇī Commentary). [2.3.1.2]

2.3.1.2 The Majjhima Commentary explains that for this 1<sup>st</sup> base, the meditator does the preliminary exercise (*parikamma*) on an internal form (in our own body), for example, the dark (*nīla*) of the eyes for a blue *kasina*, the skin for a yellow *kasina*, the blood for a red *kasina*, the teeth for a white *kasina*, but the concentration sign (*nimitta*) arises externally (MA 3:258 f). However, there are difficulties here, which have been discussed elsewhere [4].

Theoretically, then, the “transcending” or mastery (*abhibhāyatana*) of form begins with the attainment of the meditation sign (*nimitta*), followed by the attaining of dhyana. [2.3.1.5]

2.3.1.3 On emerging from the dhyana, he “perceives thus” (that is, reviews), “I know, I see” [2.3.1.2]. Here, he “**perceives thus**” (*eva,saññī*) means he is percipient or conscious with “reflective attention” (*ābhoga*), and with the perception of dhyana (AA 4:144).

“**I know, I see**” (*jānāmi passāmi*) refers to his reflective attention. This occurs *after* he has emerged from the attainment (*samāpatti*), not in the attainment itself.<sup>201</sup> Here “attainment” does not refer to dhyana, but to samadhi which is not yet dhyana, but approaching it, a sort of “access samadhi” (*upacāra samādhi*).<sup>202</sup> This occurs with the arising of the meditation sign (*nimitta*),<sup>203</sup> which is unclear and unstable at first. Once the sign is stable and clear—the colours, for example, become pure, radiant and fully flooding—dhyana has been attained. [2.3.1.6]

2.3.1.4 Regarding the perception of overcoming (*abhibhavana,saññā*), it exists in the attainment itself. However, the perception of reflective attention (*ābhoga,saññā*) occurs after emerging from the attainment, meaning on emerging from dhyana (no thinking as we know it occurs during dhyana)<sup>204</sup> (AA 4:144). Even then, the calm and clarity of the mind is still very profound, such that we are able to know or sense things even more acutely and fully: this is what is meant by “seeing with dhyana-eyes” (*jhāna,cakkhu*).<sup>205</sup>

2.3.1.5 The key terms of the formula [2.3.1.1] will be briefly explained here. By “**limited**” (*paritta*) is meant that the preliminary practice (*parikamma*) is limited to only our body or an external body (in the same manner as contemplating on our own body. It is limited in the sense that it is not applied to *all* things without any limit (as in the cultivation of lovingkindness, and the other 3 divine abodes).

2.3.1.6 By “**beautiful or ugly**” (*suvanna,dubbanna*) means how we are at the moment disposed towards the mental object (as it reflects on our temperament as explained in the Visuddhi,magga).<sup>206</sup> When applied to the colour kasinas [1.5-1.8], it simply means noting whether it is dull or radiant, without analyzing it further. It is as if we should “feel” the colour.

To “**feel**” the colour means to have a clear mental image of it. We should set aside our current or cultural idea of the colours, and see each of them as described in the suttas. “Blue” (*nīla*). for example, covers a range of blueness to cloud grey. We need to choose a hue that suits us (meaning one that helps us have a stable and calm focus). Then, we contemplate the colour-kasina (whether a flower, a piece of cloth or a kasina device), as say, “Blue,” then mentally picture it, until it can appear naturally in our mind.

The colour is not stable or complete at first. So, we need to be patient. Only when the colour fills our whole mind in a pure, radiant and stable way: “everything” appears to be, say, radiantly *blue*, only then we silently focus at the centre of the image (*nimitta*),<sup>207</sup> and avoid examining its fringes. When the mind is totally focused here, the hindrances disappear, then with the arising of bliss, it is called the “**beautiful**.”<sup>208</sup>

<sup>201</sup> *So ca kho samāpattito vuṭṭhitassa, na anto,samāpattiyam* (AA 1:144).

<sup>202</sup> On access samadhi, see SD 15.1 (9.3); also SD 33.1a (3.1).

<sup>203</sup> On the meditation sign, see *Nimitta*, SD 19.7.

<sup>204</sup> On thoughts not arising in dhyana, see SD 33.1b (6.2).

<sup>205</sup> DA 3:513; MA 3:255; AA 2:275, 4:146; PmA 3:552; DhsA 191.

<sup>206</sup> Vism 3.74-133101-117.

<sup>207</sup> For more practical details, see *Nimitta*, SD 19.7 (4.6.4).

<sup>208</sup> Further, see **The radiant mind**, SD 8.3.

2.3.1.7 The attaining of the **beautiful** (*subha*) for each of the 4 divine abodes is done in a similar way elsewhere [3.3.3.1]. The mental object (whether it is a divine abode or a primary element) is said to be “*beautiful*,” when it fully, radiantly and blissfully pervades our whole being. This idea of the beautiful underpins all the 8 bases of mastery. However, in the case of the last 4 bases of mastery—with the phrase “**I know, I see**”—the emphasis is on insight, that is, seeing both the *beauty* of the base (the meditation object) and its being mind-made, impermanence, and so on.

2.3.1.8 It is practically impossible for us to meditate on the colour kasina on our body, much less in it. These colours can only be contemplated on externally, as in the 2<sup>nd</sup> base of mastery [2.3.2]. Hence, in practical terms, we can only use the 4 elements—the earth kasina, the water kasina, the fire kasina and the wind (or air) kasina—which is, in fact, what comprise our body. Their respective methods are explained under the headings of these kasinas [1.1-1.4]. We can, of course, include the space kasina, too [1.9], and perhaps the consciousness kasina [1.10], which is the most difficult of the kasina practices. The practice of the “5-element” kasinas here (that is, including the “space” element) are described in simple terms in **the Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62), and every meditation practitioner should be familiar with them.<sup>209</sup> [1.9.1.3]

2.3.1.9 The problems regarding difficulties of using the various colours of “internal” body-parts as meditation objects has been noted elsewhere [4.5].

### **2.3.2 The 2<sup>nd</sup> base of mastery**

2.3.2.1 The Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta (M 7) defines the 2<sup>nd</sup> base of mastery as follows:

“**Perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, immeasurable, beautiful or ugly.** By mastering them, one perceives thus, ‘I know, I see.’” (M 77,49(2))

This is the attaining of the 4 dhyanas by using a colour kasina [1.5-1.8] derived from an object outside, that is “before us”<sup>210</sup> as a physical sign. In fact, the 2<sup>nd</sup> base of mastery is worded as having the same sense as the 2<sup>nd</sup> liberation (*vimokkha*), which is “One does not see physical forms internally, but sees physical forms externally.” [3.3.2]

2.3.2.2 Besides using the colour kasinas as external meditation objects, we can here also use the 5 elements (*mahā,dhātu*)—earth, water, fire, wind and space—combined with the 4 divine abodes (*brahma,-vihāra*)—lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity. This method is described in **the Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62), and is called the “element-like meditations.”<sup>211</sup> To do this meditation, we should, of course, first be familiar with the meditation on the 4 or 5 elements.<sup>212</sup> The meditation is then cultivated internally in a boundless manner.

Essentially, an “**element-like meditation**” on the internal earth, for example, we press the tongue-tip on the back of the upper row of teeth, noting the earth element as “hardness.” Then, we reflect on the exceptional qualities of the element (“people throw things clean and foul ... the *earth* is not troubled ...”) until we have mastered it.

Once we have mastered the meditation on this element, we go on to practise on the internal water element, such as feeling our saliva in the mouth, or the sweat on our body, as “water.” We reflect on the exceptional qualities of the element (“people throw things clean and foul ... the *water* is not troubled ...”) until we are good at it.

Then, contemplate on the internal fire element by feeling some warmth (or cool sensation) on our body, such as in the arm-pits or our seat, noting, “fire.” We reflect on the exceptional qualities of the element (“people throw things clean and foul ... the *fire* is not troubled ...”) until we have mastered it.

The internal wind element can be noted in our in-and-out breath, noting it as “wind.” We reflect on the exceptional qualities of the element (“people throw things clean and foul ... the *wind* is not troubled ...”) until we are good at it.

<sup>209</sup> M 62,8-12/1:422 f (SD 3.11).

<sup>210</sup> On “before us” (*parimukha*), see SD 13 (3.9.4).

<sup>211</sup> M 62,13-17/1:423 f (SD 3.11).

<sup>212</sup> M 62,8-12/1:422 f (SD 3.11).

Internal space can be located in the mouth cavity, the nose cavity, the ear cavity, or stomach cavity (this is done with some feeling and visualization). We reflect, “Space contains nothing.” (This 5<sup>th</sup> element may be omitted, if you have difficulty with it.)

2.3.2.3 We cultivate this **boundlessly** by extending the meditation to “all earth element everywhere,” and so on. As for the space element, we reflect on it, thus: “Space is not established anywhere.” In other words, the element is not just limited to our body or ourself, but to everyone and everything as a whole.

Then, seeing the element as being impermanent and conditioned, we reflect thus, ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’ [1.10.1.4]

The “beautiful” and the “ugly aspects have already been described [2.3.1.6].

Once we have mastered the earth-like meditation, we go on to master the water-like meditation, and so on.

### **2.3.3 The 3<sup>rd</sup> base of mastery**

2.3.3.1 The Mahā Sakul’udāyī Sutta (M 7) defines the 3<sup>rd</sup> base of mastery as follows:

“**Not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, limited, beautiful or ugly.** By mastering them, one perceives thus, ‘I know, I see.’” (M 77,49(3))

2.3.3.2 Besides using the colour kasinas as external meditation objects, here we can also use the 5 elements (*mahā,dhātu*)—earth, water, fire, wind and space—combined with the 4 divine abodes (*brahma,-vihāra*)—lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity. These are the “element-like meditations” as described in **the Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62).<sup>213</sup> Here, contemplate on the 4 or 5 elements<sup>214</sup> externally in a limited manner.

Essentially, an “element-like meditation” on earth, for example, is contemplated on the external element in the form of a kasina-disc, or some suitable patch of cleared earth, or even any earth quality of our environment (such as trees, rocks, mountains, etc). First, we must be visually familiar with them, so that we have a vision of earth in our mind. Then, we reflect on the exceptional qualities of the earth (“people throw things clean and foul ... the earth is not troubled ...”). We then simply note that the element is *impermanent*.

2.3.2.3 First, we familiarize ourself with the earth-like meditation, then we go on to do the same with the water-like meditation, then the fire-like meditation, and then the wind-like meditation. We may choose to focus on the element-like meditation that we find the easiest to do, that is, to attain some level of samadhi.

2.3.2.4 We cultivate this in a **limited** manner simply by contemplating on an aspect of our body, or as an external manifestation of the element. The “beautiful” and the “ugly aspects have already been described [2.3.1.6].

### **2.3.4 The 4<sup>th</sup> base of mastery**

The Mahā Sakul’udāyī Sutta (M 7) defines the 4<sup>th</sup> base of mastery as follows: “**Not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, immeasurable, beautiful or ugly.** By mastering them, one perceives thus, ‘I know, I see.’” (M 77,49(4))

2.3.4.2 Besides using the colour kasinas as external meditation objects, here we can also use the 5 elements (*mahā,dhātu*)—earth, water, fire, wind and space—combined with the 4 divine abodes (*brahma,-vihāra*)—lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity. These are the “element-like meditations” as described in **the Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62).<sup>215</sup> Here, contemplate on the 4 or 5 elements<sup>216</sup> externally in an immeasurable manner.

Essentially, an “element-like meditation” on earth, for example, is contemplated on the external element in the form of a kasina-disc, or some suitable patch of cleared earth, or even any earth quality of our environment (such as trees, rocks, mountains, etc). First, we must be visually familiar with them, so that we have a vision of earth in our mind.

<sup>213</sup> M 62,13-17/1:423 f @ SD 3.11.

<sup>214</sup> M 62,8-12/1:422 f @ SD 3.11.

<sup>215</sup> M 62,13-17/1:423 f (SD 3.11).

<sup>216</sup> M 62,8-12/1:422 f (SD 3.11).

Then, we reflect on the exceptional qualities of the earth (“people throw things clean and foul ... the earth is not troubled ...”).

2.3.4.3 We cultivate this **boundlessly** by first noting our internal earth element as “internal earth element,” and then the external earth element, as “external earth element”—they are “both the same earth element; they are impermanent. And so we extend the meditation to “all earth element everywhere,” and so on. In other words, the element is not just limited to our body or ourself, but everything as a whole.

Then, seeing the element as being impermanent and conditioned, we reflect thus, ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

2.3.4.4 First, we familiarize ourself with the element-like meditations, beginning with the earth-like meditation again. Alternatively, if we are already quite good with one of the element-like meditations [2.3.2.3], that is, we find that it is the easiest one to do (that is, to attain some level of samadhi), then we can use that same meditation here.

2.3.4.5 The “beautiful” or “ugly aspects have already been described [2.3.1.6].

### **2.3.5 The 5<sup>th</sup> base of mastery**

2.3.5.1 The Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta (M 7) defines the 5<sup>th</sup> base of mastery as follows:

**“Not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, that are blue [indigo], of blue colour, blue in appearance, with a blue glow.”**<sup>217</sup>

Just as a flax flower<sup>218</sup> that is blue, of blue colour, blue in appearance, with a blue glow; or just like Benares cloth smoothed on both sides, that is blue, blue in appearance, with a blue glow; even so, not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, blue, of blue colour, blue in appearance, with a blue glow.” (M 77,49(5))<sup>219</sup>

2.3.5.2 **The Visuddhi,magga**, alluding to the sutta teachings, tells us to cultivate the sign (*nimitta*) using “a flower, a cloth or a colour element” that is suitable.<sup>220</sup> We should gather flowers of a suitable colour<sup>221</sup> and put them in a flat container so that only the petals are visible (so that we are not distracted by its other parts, such as the stalk, leaves, etc). The flowers may be contemplated on the plants themselves, but this should be in an enclosed place or where they will not move about, such as when there is some breeze.

If a piece of cloth is used, it should be of a suitable colour, and wrapped and secured around a plate or mouth of a small basket. Or ideally, we can use a colour kasina disc.<sup>222</sup>

Anyway, these instructions alone are not sufficient to start our practice with. We need to consult an experienced meditation teacher skilled in kasina practice.

More details on the blue kasina have been given elsewhere [1.5].

### **2.3.6 The 6<sup>th</sup> base of mastery**

2.3.6.1 The Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta (M 7) defines the 6<sup>th</sup> base of mastery as follows:

**“Not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, that are yellow, of yellow colour, yellow in appearance, with a yellow glow.”**

2.3.6.2 The Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta describes the kasina for this meditation as follows:

Just as a cassia<sup>223</sup> flower that is yellow, of yellow colour, yellow in appearance, with a yellow glow; or just like Benares cloth smoothed on both sides, that is yellow, yellow in appearance, with a yellow glow; even so, not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, yellow, of yellow colour, yellow in appearance, with a yellow glow.” (M 77,49(6))

<sup>217</sup> On blue (*nīla*), yellow (*pīta*), copper-red (*lohita*) and white (*odāta*) kasinas, see *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1 (9.2.1).

<sup>218</sup> *Ummā,puppha*, *Linum usitatissimum*, a plant of the family Linaceae. For details, see *Mahā,parinibbāna S* (D 16,3,29) n, SD 9.

<sup>219</sup> On kasina meditation, see *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1 (9.2).

<sup>220</sup> *Vism* 5.12/172.

<sup>221</sup> Monastics are not allowed to pluck flowers or harm plants in any way (Pāc 11 @ V 4:34,34).

<sup>222</sup> On how to make a kasina disc, see *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1 (9.2.3).

<sup>223</sup> “Cassia,” *kaṇṇikāra* or *kaṇṇikāra* (Skt *karṇikāra*) For details, see *Mahā,parinibbāna S* (D 16,3,30) n, SD 9..

2.3.6.3 The other details for colour kasina have been described under the 5<sup>th</sup> base of mastery [2.3.5.2] and see also the yellow kasina in the Kasina section [1.6].

### **2.3.7 The 7<sup>th</sup> base of mastery**

2.3.7.1 The Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta (M 7) defines the 7<sup>th</sup> base of mastery as follows:

“**Not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, that are red [copper-red], of red colour, red in appearance, with a red glow.**

2.3.7.2 The Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta (M 7) also gives the following details:

“Just as a hibiscus<sup>224</sup> flower that is red, of red colour, red in appearance, with a red glow; or just like Benares cloth smoothed on both sides, that is red, red in appearance, with a red glow; even so, not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, red, of red colour, red in appearance, with a red glow.” (M 77,49(7))

2.3.7.3 The other details for colour kasina have been described under the 5<sup>th</sup> base of mastery [2.3.5.2] and see also the red kasina in the Kasina section [1.7].

### **2.3.8 The 8<sup>th</sup> base of mastery**

2.3.8.1 The Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta (M 7) defines the 8<sup>th</sup> base of mastery as follows:

“**Not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, that are white, of white colour, white in appearance, with a white glow.**

2.3.8.2 The Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta (M 7) also gives the following details:

“Just as the morning star<sup>225</sup> flower that is white, of white colour, white in appearance, with a white glow; or just like Benares cloth smoothed on both sides, that is white, white in appearance, with a white glow; even so, not perceiving forms internally, one sees forms externally, white, of white colour, white in appearance, with a white glow.” (M 77,49(8))

2.3.8.3 The other details for a colour kasina have been described under the 5<sup>th</sup> base of mastery [2.3.5.2] and see also the white kasina in the Kasina section [1.8].

2.3.8.4 With the attaining of these 8 bases of mastery (or of any of them), we are ready to embark on any of the first 3 liberations. All these preliminary liberations refer to the 4 form dhyanas. As we have noted [0.3.3.5], liberation 1 comprises bases of mastery 1 and 2; liberation 2, bases 3 and 4; and liberation 3, bases 5-8. This overlapping between the liberations and the bases of mastery is to help us upgrade and refine our practice to attain the dhyanas and fully master them.<sup>226</sup>

## **3 The 8 liberations**

### **3.1 MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE**

#### **3.1.1 Formulas and terms**

3.1.1.1 **The Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta** (M 77) describes the 8 liberations (*aṭṭha vimokkha*), as follows, with cross-references to the modern commentaries:

- |  |         |
|--|---------|
| (1) <u>One possessing physical form</u> sees physical forms. <sup>227</sup>                                | [3.3.1] |
| (2) One does not see physical forms internally, but <u>sees physical forms externally</u> . <sup>228</sup> | [3.3.2] |

<sup>224</sup> *Bandhu, jīvaka* (PED: Pentapetes phoenicea, but prob Hibiscus rosa-sinensis) (D 2:111; M 2:14; J 4:179; Vism 174; VvA 43, 161; DhsA 14). For details, see **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.31) n, SD 9.

<sup>225</sup> *Osadhī, tāra*, lit “the medicine star” (D 2:111; M 2:14; S 1:65; J 1:23). Also tr as “the star of healing.” *Osadhī-sa* is the moon (Abhp 52; Sadd 380), which Indian mythology regards as the lord of healing. DPL says this is Venus (but without evidence).

<sup>226</sup> Technically, there is the fivefold mastery (*vasī*) of dhyana, viz, (1) attaining it; (2) attaining it quickly and whenever we wish; (3) remaining in it; (4) emerging from it; and (5) reviewing the dhyana-factors: SD 24.3 (2); SD 33.1a (2.1.3).

<sup>227</sup> *Rūpī rūpāni passati*. This 1<sup>st</sup> liberation refers to the attainment of the 4 dhyanas using a *kaṣiṇa* (meditation device) derived from a coloured object on one’s own body.

<sup>228</sup> *Ajjhattam arūpa, saññī bahiddhā rūpāni passati*. This 2<sup>nd</sup> liberation is the attainment of dhyana using a *kaṣiṇa* derived from an external object and the arising of the concentration sign externally.

- (3) One is liberated after contemplating the idea of the beautiful.<sup>229</sup> [3.3.3]
- (4) Through the utter transcending of the perception of physical forms, the passing away of the perception of impingement [sense-contact], and non-attention to the perception of diversity, (contemplating,) ‘Space is infinite,’ one enters and dwells in the base of infinite space. [3.3.4]
- (5) Through the utter transcending of infinite space, (contemplating,) ‘Consciousness is infinite,’ one enters and dwells in the base of infinite consciousness. [3.3.5]
- (6) Through the utter transcending of the base of infinite consciousness, (contemplating,) ‘There is nothing,’ one enters and dwells in the base of nothingness. [3.3.6]
- (7) Through the utter transcending of the base of nothingness, one enters and dwells in the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. [3.3.7]
- (8) Through the utter transcending of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, one enters and dwells in the cessation of perception and feeling.<sup>230</sup> [3.3.8]
- (M 77,48), SD 49.5

3.1.1.2 The term *vimokkha*, “liberation,” sometimes occurs in the suttas, synonymous with *vimutti*, “freedom,” that is, spiritual liberation, a freedom on account of self-understanding. More specifically, however, *vimokkha* refers to the 8 ways to mental liberation or spiritual freedom (the freedom of the spirit). These are levels of progressive mastery specifically in mental concentration (*samatha*), with only the last liberations, as directly related to the result of the cultivation of insight (*vipassanā*).

*Vimokkha*, then (except in the last case), is used here in a specific and limited sense, and is only temporary—the mind’s liberation from all defilements is lost when we are out of that mental state. The permanent liberation from all defilements, on the other hands, is indicated by such terms as the “unshakable freedom of mind” (*akuppa ceto, vimutti*)<sup>231</sup> or the “freedom through wisdom and freedom of mind” (*pañña, vimutti ceto, vimutti*).<sup>232</sup>

### 3.1.1.3 The Commentary explains:

“In what sense are they liberations? In the sense of releasing (*adhimuccana*). But, in what sense of “releasing”? In the sense of utterly freeing one from opposing [adverse] (*paccanīka*) qualities, and the sense of fully freeing one through delighting in the mental object. This means that the mind enjoys the object without constraint, free from worry, like a child sleeping on his father’s lap, all his limbs completely relaxed. This latter meaning (regarding the object) does not apply to the last liberation (which is “cessation”), but only to the other liberations. (In the last liberation, that of the cessation of perception and feeling, there is no object of perception.)<sup>233</sup> (AA 4:146)

<sup>229</sup> ‘*Subhan’t’eva adhimutto hoti*, lit, “One is resolved thus, ‘Beautiful!’” This 3<sup>rd</sup> liberation refers to the attainment of the perception of either a very pure, bright and beautiful (*subha*) coloured *kaṣiṇa* or of the 4 *brahma, vihārā*. See Analayo 2009:146 f.

<sup>230</sup> “The cessation of perception and feeling,” *saññā, vedayita nirodha*. This anomalous state, fully described in **Visuddhi, magga** (Vism 23.16-52/702-709), is a combination of deep meditative calm and insight where all mental states temporarily shut down (Vism 23.43/707 f): see **Sappurisa S** (M 113), SD 23.7 (2); **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43), SD 30.2 (3).

<sup>231</sup> See SD 11.4 (3.3). Cf “unconditioned [time-free] and unshakable liberation of mind” (*asāmāyikā akuppā ceto, vimutti*) (M 122,4) + SD 11.4 (3.2).

<sup>232</sup> See SD 4.25 (3.1, 3.3).

<sup>233</sup> *Vimokkhāti ken’aṭṭhena vimokkhā? Adhimuccan’aṭṭhena. Ko paṇāyam adhimuccan’aṭṭho nāma? Paccanīka, - dhammehi ca suṭṭhu muccan’aṭṭho, ārammaṇe ca abhirati, vasena suṭṭhu muccan’aṭṭho, pitu, aṅke vissaṭṭh’aṅga, - pacc’aṅgassa dāraṅgassa sayanam viya aniggahita, bhāvena nirāsaṅkatāya ārammaṇe pavattīti vuttam hoti. Ayam pan’attho pacchime vimokkhe n’atthi, purimesu vimokkhesu atthi.* (AA 4:146)



**3.1.2 Liberation should be realized.** Although the final goal of **liberation** transcends all mental concentration and calm, the suttas often describe in considerable detail the various levels of mental liberation that point to such a final goal. Thus, the 8 liberations form a set of teachings that is essential for spiritual progress and awakening. Such a set is listed in **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33), **the Das’uttara-sutta** (D 34) and **the (Aṭṭhaka) Vimokkha Sutta** (A 8.66).<sup>234</sup> The Das’uttara Sutta actually specifies that these liberations “should be realized” (*sacchikatabba*), meaning they have yet to be reached.

**3.1.3 A moment’s practice.** Hence, in **the (Ekaka) Vimokkha Sutta** (A 1.18.55-62), the Buddha exhorts us that if we were to cultivate *any* of the 8 liberations even for a brief moment, we have done the Teacher’s teaching, and, if we are renunciants, we will not be eating the country’s alms food in vain.<sup>235</sup> This is not to trivialize the practice, but it means that even if we were to really taste the dhyanic experience, or even the taste of a moment of profound peace provided by such methods, we will be enthralled enough and again, just to recall the beauty of that moment. Such a perception will inspire us to go on to practise meditation, even if we will progress at our own rate, even if it is slow but steady.

### 3.2 TEACHINGS CONNECTED WITH THE LIBERATIONS

**3.2.1 Teaching the liberations.** The suttas highlight the vital role of the 8 liberations in the realization of the Buddhist path. **The Saḷ-āyatana Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 137), for example, compares the Buddha’s ability to teach these 8 liberations to the skill of the trainer of an elephant, a horse, or cattle. However, while such a trainer only teaches the animals how to move in one of the 4 directions, the Buddha teaches his disciples how to move in 8 directions, that is, towards gaining the 8 liberations.<sup>236</sup>

#### 3.2.2 Practice and benefits of the liberations

3.2.2.1 Notice that the first three liberations (*vimokkha*)—although they refer to attaining the form dhyanas—sound familiarly like the 8 bases of mastery. Indeed, if we see the 8 bases of mastery as focusing on the 4 colour kasinas, then, these first 3 liberations employ the 4 divine abodes as their main practice. In this sense, we can see that, in practical terms, the first three liberations are a continuation of the 8 bases of mastery.

3.2.2.2 The vital role of the 8 liberations in the practice related to the path is highlighted in the suttas. **The (Peyyāla) Aṭṭha Vimokkha Sutta** (A 8.120), for example, lists the 8 liberations in a set of practices that lead to overcoming defilements.<sup>237</sup>

The **Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta** (M 77) famously declares the 8 liberations as the 8<sup>th</sup> set of teaching with which the Buddha’s disciples gain direct knowledge (arhathood).<sup>238</sup>

### 3.3 EXPLANATIONS OF THE 8 LIBERATIONS

#### 3.3.1 The 1<sup>st</sup> liberation

- “One possessing physical form sees physical forms” (*rūpī rūpāni passati*).

3.3.1.1 This 1<sup>st</sup> liberation refers to the attainment of the 4 dhyanas using a *kasīṇa* (meditation device) derived from a coloured object on one’s own body. The “one possessing physical form” (*rūpī*) refers to a meditator who contemplates on an aspect of his own body, in this case, its colour (*vaṇṇa*) as the kasina-base (meditation object).

Perceiving form in our own body, we see form externally. This is also said in connection with kasina meditation that is one of the “bases for mastery” (*abhibhāyatana*), that is, power gained through kasina meditation as a means of transcending our senses and the sense-world itself.<sup>239</sup>

3.3.1.2 The method for cultivating the 1<sup>st</sup> liberation is the effectively the same [0.3.3.5] as that for the 1<sup>st</sup> base of mastery [2.3.1.2] and the 2<sup>nd</sup> base of mastery [2.3.2]. The Commentary on **the Mahā Sakuludāyi Sutta** (M 77,22) says that these liberations (*vimokkhā*) are the mind’s full, but temporary, release (*adhi-*

<sup>234</sup> D 33,3.1(11)/3:262; D 34,2.1(10)/3:288; A 8.66/4:306 (SD 95.11), respectively.

<sup>235</sup> **(Ekaka) Vimokkha S** (A 1.18,55-62/1:40 f) = A:B 1.18.447-454.

<sup>236</sup> M 137,25-26/3:222 (SD 29.5).

<sup>237</sup> A 8.120/4:349.

<sup>238</sup> M 77,48/2:12 (SD 49.5).

<sup>239</sup> See D 2:110; M 77/2:13; A 8.675/4:305, 10.29/6:61.

*muccana*) from the opposing states, and full, but temporary, release by delighting in the mental object (*ārammaṇa*).<sup>240</sup>

3.3.1.3 Each of these 8 liberations is a dhyana arising from a **kasīna**, that is, cultivated by way of a kasīna object or device, that allows us to experience the entirety (*sakala*) of the object (DhsA 191). In this sense, it is called a *kasīna*, meaning “totality.” That is to say, through an inner vision of a kasīna (say, earth), we see “earth” as radiant and pure, pervading the totality of our consciousness (the whole “universe”)—just as in the cultivation of lovingkindness culminates with “breaking the barriers,” so that we pervade the whole universe (the totality of our consciousness) with lovingkindness

Here, “**totality**” (*kasīna*) means that we have overcome (at least temporarily) all the mental hindrances, and our mind is fully absorbed into the kasīna-base, as it were, and it pervades our whole being and the whole universe (as in “breaking the barriers” in the divine abodes) [3.3.3.1]. We have fully transcended all the physical senses, and even the thinking aspects of the mind. In short, this is the “pure mind,” our attention, that is fully occupied with the idea of the kasīna-base, that is, a colour or a divine abode. Such a state is profoundly “beautiful,” that is, joyful in a non-physical sense of the word. This is the most direct experience of beauty that we can ever experience, short of awakening itself.

### **3.3.2 The 2<sup>nd</sup> liberation**

- “One does not see physical forms internally, but sees physical forms externally” (*ajjhataṃ arūpa-saññī bahiddhā rūpāni passati*).

3.3.2.1 This 2<sup>nd</sup> liberation is the attainment of dhyana using a kasīna derived from an external object and whose concentration sign is external. Here, the kasīna preliminary exercise is done on an external kasīna object or device, and the concentration sign occurs, that is, projected externally.<sup>241</sup> Otherwise, the practical details are here applicable, mutatis mutandis, as those for the 3<sup>rd</sup> base of mastery [2.3.3] and the 4<sup>th</sup> base of mastery [2.3.4]. [0.3.3.5]

3.3.2.2 The formulation of the second liberation “suggests that it is a shorthand for all the 8 *abhibhāyatanas* [2] which consist of variations on the theme *ajjhataṃ arūpa-saññī eko bahiddhā rūpāni passati*” (Gethin 2002:267 n7). In fact, as we have noted, both the 8 bases of mastery and the 8 liberations are identical in practice, differing only in that the liberations, as the name suggest, refer to the attaining of the freedom of dhyana [0.3.2.2].

### **3.3.3 The 3<sup>rd</sup> liberation**

- “One is fully liberated after contemplating the idea of the beautiful” (*subhan't'eva adhimutto hoti*).

3.3.3.1 This 3<sup>rd</sup> liberation refers to the attainment of the perception of either a very pure, bright and beautiful (*subha*) coloured kasīna [2.3.1.6] or of the 4 divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*). As the attaining of the “beautiful” has already been described [2.3.1.6], we shall here examine only on how to attain the beautiful for **the divine abodes**.

As the divine abodes begin with lovingkindness (*mettā*) and are based on it, we must always begin here with cultivating lovingkindness. The basic practice is to begin by cultivating lovingkindness towards ourself, using suitable words and images. Then, we direct it to a dear friend (the kindest living person we know in a wholesome way). The third stage is to a neutral person. The fourth stage to a hostile person.

All these four stages then help us “**break the barriers**,”<sup>242</sup> which is the fifth or last stage (the most important) when our lovingkindness pervades our whole being and everything else “outside,” the whole universe itself. This is when we may notice a pervasive and stable radiance within.

When we are fully absorbed in any of these 4 abodes, we will attain the first dhyana, which we should be thoroughly familiar with before going any further. On attaining the 1<sup>st</sup> dhyana, the meditator sees the

<sup>240</sup> MA 3:255, cf 255-259; DhsA 190.

<sup>241</sup> When the meditator’s mind is “projected externally,” it means here that in between his meditations, he is functionally aware of the external world (but to caught up with it the ways we are). However, he also projects his mind onto the external world, seeing it in its “elements,” ie, seeing earth as earth, etc, as detailed in **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62,8-12), SD 3.11.

<sup>242</sup> On the basic preparations for *mettā bhāvanā*, see (**Karaṇīya Metta S** (Khp 9 = Sn 1.8) + SD 38.3 (3). On “breaking the barriers,” see SD 38.5 (7.2.2).

kasina as being “beautiful,” and on emerging, and reviewing, he notes, “How beautiful!” Thus, too, he reviews in the case of the other 3 form dhyanas.<sup>243</sup>

3.3.3.2 **The Paṭisambhidā, magga** says that this contemplation can also be effected through the cultivation of the divine abodes. When properly done, the result of attaining dhyana through lovingkindness, compassion, gladness, or equanimity, it pervades everywhere without any bounds. The meditator sees all beings as “non-repulsive” (*appaṭikkūla*), so that they look perfectly pure, and thus the mind sees the beautiful (Pm 5.20/2:39).

3.3.3.3 **The Atthasālinī**, however, sees the third liberation as dhyana attainment through a colour kasina that is thoroughly purified (DhsA 191). This explanation is curious and interesting because it shows how far the Atthasālinī is influenced by the idea of kasina meditation, so that it will even contradict the Paṭisambhidāmagga. [4.5.3]

3.3.3.4 These first three liberations are closely connected with kasina meditation by way of the “bases of mastery” (*abhibhāyatana*), that is, one of the 8 stages of mastery over the senses through dhyana. The **Dhamma,saṅgaṇī** apparently regards the *abhibhāyatana* as being “concerned with the mastery and facility in certain aspects of *jhāna* practice” (Gethin, 2001:267).<sup>244</sup>

In fact, in practice, we will realize that this 3<sup>rd</sup> liberation comprises all the last four bases of mastery [2.3.5-2.3.8]. This overlapping is clearly intentional: it facilitates a theoretical explanation and understanding of the 10 kasinas, the 8 bases of mastery and the 8 liberations. However, once we begin to attain any of the bases of mastery, we will notice that we need to refine them. This is where there is an overlapping between the 8 bases of mastery and in the first 3 liberations. After all, these 3 liberations concerned with the form dhyanas, while the other 5 liberations are those of the formless attainments and of cessation.

3.3.3.5 The next four liberations (nos. 4-7) are the formless attainments (*arūpa samāpatti*), that is,

- (4) the sphere of infinite space;
- (5) the sphere of infinite consciousness;
- (6) the sphere of nothingness;
- (7) the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

### 3.3.4 The 4<sup>th</sup> liberation

• “Through the utter transcending of the perception of physical forms, the passing away of the perception of impingement [sense-contact], and non-attention to the perception of diversity, (contemplating,) ‘Space is infinite,’ one enters and dwells in the base of infinite space.”

3.3.4.1 As already noted [4.5.7], we must have mastered the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana to be able to move on to attain this 4<sup>th</sup> liberation, that is, that of the base of infinite space.<sup>245</sup> Here, we perceive space as being boundless or infinite. As we keep up such a focus, we begin to lose track of time. When time is divorced from space, as it were, space, as we know it (as an external object or reality), becomes “timeless,” that is, unbounded.

3.3.4.2 The “base of infinity of space” pericope goes like this:

- 1 “by completely transcending the perceptions of form,
- 2 with the disappearance the perceptions of sense-reaction,
- 3 with non-attention to perceptions of diversity,
- 4 aware that ‘Space is infinite,’ I entered upon and dwelled in  
**the base of infinite space.**” (S 40.5), SD 24.15

**Line 1** means that all perceptions of material form belonging to the 4 dhyanas, and the objects of these perceptions (the form-dhyana counterpart signs), must be abandoned, before we can attain the base of infinite space.

**Line 2** means that all perceptions of the 5 physical senses are abandoned in the base of infinite space. There is only the perception of mind-objects (*dhamma,saññā*), albeit in a very subtle manner.

<sup>243</sup> For details on the divine abodes, see *Brahma, vihāra*, SD 38.5.

<sup>244</sup> See Dhs 45-52 where the 8 *abhibhāyatana* (with slight variations from the Nikāya formulation) are treated as an aspect of dhyana of the form realm (*rūpāvacara*); cf DhsA 187-190.

<sup>245</sup> On the characteristics of this 1<sup>st</sup> formless attainment, see SD 24.15 (1.2 @ 2.0.3).

**Line 3** means that all perceptions connected with the form bases are abandoned (Vism 275).

**Line 4** means that *time* is simply our perception of space; so when time is no more perceived, space, too, is experienced as infinite. Seen from the physical body and the physical world, we are now truly formless beings.<sup>246</sup>

### **3.3.5 The 5<sup>th</sup> liberation**

• “Through the utter transcending of infinite space, (contemplating,) ‘Consciousness is infinite,’ one enters and dwells in **the base of infinite consciousness.**”

3.3.5.1 After perceiving space as infinite, we notice that space, as an external object or reality, disappears [3.3.4.1]. Then, we turn to a more refined object, that is, *consciousness* itself. So, we are, as it were, *conscious of consciousness itself*. Since this consciousness has no external object, it is like two mirrors facing each other: we see an infinity of images in either mirror. This is a simple way of illustrating the “infinity of consciousness,” or simply as “consciousness” (Vbh 262), and dwelling in such a beautiful concentration.

3.3.5.2 The “base of infinity of consciousness” pericope goes like this:

- 1 “By completely transcending the base of infinite space,
- 2 aware that ‘Consciousness is infinite,’
- 3 he attains and dwells in **the base of infinite consciousness.**” (S 40.6,4), SD 24.16

**Line 1:** Having experienced that space is boundless or infinite, we now turn our attention to what is aware of this infinite space: the “knowing” or consciousness itself.

**Line 2:** All perception of space is gone, so that consciousness, as it were, is left with itself.

**Line 3:** Consciousness is now perceived as infinite because it has no more object, but simply knowing itself. Not only are we formless mental beings, but our mind is as infinite as space itself.<sup>247</sup>

### **3.3.6 The 6<sup>th</sup> liberation**

• “Through the utter transcending of the base of infinite consciousness, (contemplating,) ‘There is nothing,’ one enters and dwells in **the base of nothingness.**”

3.3.6.1 Having mastered the 5<sup>th</sup> liberation [3.3.5], we are then prepared to move on to the base of nothingness. As we maintain a constant focus on infinite consciousness [3.3.5], consciousness itself begins to disappear. This leaves behind only the *infinity*, that is, “nothingness” (*ākiñcañña*). Only in letting go of the perception of infinite consciousness can we rise to the 6<sup>th</sup> liberation—that of the base of nothingness. We have then truly renounced *everything*, so that nothing is left! This is true renunciation.

3.3.6.2 The pericope for the base of nothingness is as follows:<sup>248</sup>

- 1 “By completely transcending the base of infinite consciousness,
- 2 aware that ‘There is nothing,’
- 3 he attains and dwells in **the base of nothingness.**” (S 40.7,4), SD 24.17

**Line 1:** Having experienced infinite consciousness, we let go of even that consciousness itself as our meditation object. We stop the process of “knowing” itself, which is very subtle at this stage.

**Line 2:** When all knowing stops here, there is an infinity of “nothing,” that is, there is nothing at all to know, except that there is nothing!

**Line 3:** The knowing is now so refined that there is nothing to know. Consciousness has come to such a state of rest that it is merely aware that there is nothing at all. We are now completely free of the physical world, as it were. We are purely formless mental beings.<sup>249</sup>

### **3.3.7 The 7<sup>th</sup> liberation**

<sup>246</sup> For details, see *Ākāsānañc'āyatana Pañha S* (S 40.5), SD 24.15.

<sup>247</sup> Further see *Viññāṇañc'āyatana Pañha S* (S 40.6), SD 24.16.

<sup>248</sup> On the formless attainments, see *Paṭhama Jhāna Pañha S* (S 40.1), SD 24.11 (5).

<sup>249</sup> Further see *Ākiñcaññ'āyatana Pañha S* (S 40.7), SD 24.17.

• “Through the utter transcending of the base of nothingness, one enters and dwells in **the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.**”

3.3.7.1 While in the 6<sup>th</sup> liberation, there is still the subtle mental object, “Nothing.” When we have mastered this liberation, then we are even able to let go of this object of “nothing.” Then, our consciousness becomes subtler still, so subtle that we can neither say that it exists or not exists. Hence, this is called the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception (*n’eva,saññā,nāsaññ’āyatana*). Amongst the unawakened this is consciousness at its most subtle.

From **the Satta Dhātu Sutta** (S 14.11) [1.11.6], we can see that even the highest of the formless attainments—the base of neither perception nor non-perception—is still “an attainment with a residue of formations” (*saṅkhārāvasesa,samāpatti*).<sup>250</sup> According to **the Visuddhi,magga**, perception and the other mental factors are still present in this attainment in a subtle residual state. Since they cannot perform their decisive functions, they are described in an ambivalent manner.<sup>251</sup> These mental aggregates only fully cease (but temporarily) in the attainment of cessation of perception and feeling. [3.3.8]

3.3.7.2 The pericope for the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception is as follows:

1 “By completely transcending the base of nothingness,

2 he enters and dwells in **the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.**”

(S 40.8,4), SD 40.8

**Line 1:** When we let go of even the subtle awareness of “nothing” of the 6<sup>th</sup> liberation, consciousness becomes so subtle that we cannot really detect it, but it is not completely gone.

**Line 2:** This is the most refined mental state amongst the unawakened. Any further progress is prevented by the view that there is some kind of abiding self or eternal essence, whether internal (a soul) or external (God). In other words, to proceed any further means that we have to be free of all ideas and views, which will be awakening itself.<sup>252</sup>

### **3.3.8 The 8<sup>th</sup> liberation**

• “Through the utter transcending of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, one enters and dwells in **the cessation of perception and feeling.**”

3.3.8.1 Through the utter transcending of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, the meditator enters and dwells in the cessation of perception and feeling (*saññā,vedayita nirodha*). While the preceding states only need calmness (*samatha*), this last liberation requires both calm and insight (that is, concentration and wisdom). In other words, the meditator needs to be fully free of not only the body, but also the mind, that is, of all views and ideas. Hence, this liberation can be attained only by non-returners and arhats who have mastered the formless attainments—and also broken the mental fetters relating to views.<sup>253</sup>

3.3.8.2 In simple terms, we can understand **cessation** (*nirodha*) as the cessation of the 4 mental aggregates—feeling, perception, formations and consciousness [3.3.7.1]—after we have progressively mastered the form dhyanas and the formless attainments (AA 2:135). In the 4<sup>th</sup> formless dhyana, consciousness is so subtle that we can neither say it exists nor does not exist. However, our wrong view, especially of some kind of abiding entity (such as the immortal soul) or eternal agency (such as the God-idea), prevents us from attaining cessation. The non-returners and arhats who have mastered both the form and the formless dhyanas, and overcome such wrong views, are able to remain in cessation for any duration they wish.

<sup>250</sup> S 11.14/2:151 (SD 74.11)

<sup>251</sup> Vism 10.47-54/337 f.

<sup>252</sup> Further see **N’eva,saññā,nāsaññ’āyatana Pañha S** (S 40.8), SD 24.18.

<sup>253</sup> This, in fact, directly or indirectly, relates to all the 10 fetters (*dasa saṃyojana*): 1) self-identity view (*sakkāya,-diṭṭhi*), (2) doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b,bata,parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma,rāga*), (5) aversion (*paṭigha*), (6) lust for form existence (*rūpa,rāga*), (7) lust for formless existence (*arūpa,rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*): **Kīṭa,giri S** (M 70), SD 11.1 (5.1); (**Sekha**) **Uddesa S** (A 4.85), SD 3.3 (2).

3.3.8.3 This anomalous state is described in detail **in the Visuddhi,magga**.<sup>254</sup> It is a combination of deep meditative calm and insight where all mental states temporarily shut down (Vism 23.43). In other words, in medical terms, the meditator will be effectively dead. However, at the end of the cessation period, lasting for a week at most, the meditator will emerge from his meditation.<sup>255</sup>

## 4 Problems in theory, challenges to practice

### 4.1 PROBLEMS REGARDING THE BASES OF MASTERY AND THE LIBERATIONS

**4.1.1 No sutta details.** None of the the suttas listing either the 8 bases of mastery or the 8 liberations give instructive details on their significance in terms of theory or practice. According to an explanation given in **the Paṭisambhidā,magga**, however, the first liberation entails cultivating the perception of a colour like blue, yellow, red, or white. The “sign” (*nimitta*) of such a colour is at first to be attended to “internally” on or in oneself (*ajjhata paccatta*).

Once this has been well cultivated, this same colour-sign is to be attended to “externally” (*bahiddha*), leading to a perception of form in terms of the respective colour internally as well as externally (Pm 2:38). Beyond this, we can only guess how it is actually to be done, if it is possible at all. [4.3]

### 4.1.2 No commentarial details

4.1.2.1 Although we know enough that the 8 bases of mastery [1] and 8 the liberations [2] are about attaining the form dhyana, the attainments, and (in the case of the 8<sup>th</sup> liberation) cessation, we know little about how exactly the two sets are actually related or their components are to be actually cultivated. There are a few key problems.

4.1.2.2 The first is that the two sets are often not really distinguishable from one another, and both have 8 components each. We find no helpful details, especially of their actual practice, and almost no living meditation teacher has written about them nor teaches them as actual practice.

4.1.2.3 Secondly, even where there are explanations, such as in the Paṭisambhidā,magga, the Attha-sālinī (the Dhamma,saṅgānī Commentary) and Buddhaghosa’s Visuddhimagga, on which most of the study here is based, both sets are described in almost the same language and purpose. It is as if we only need to practise the 8 liberations which seem to encompass the 8 bases of mastery.

4.1.2.4 Thirdly, critics have noted how “contrived” and impracticable the commentarial explanation of the 1<sup>st</sup> base of mastery and the 1<sup>st</sup> liberation are [4.3]. It is as if the exegesis is merely theoretical, explaining the term “internal” (*ajjhata*) simply as contemplating the mental object *physically* within ourselves—which is clearly impossible. However, those familiar with the 8 dhyanas (the form dhyanas and the formless attainments) and cessation should not have much problem understanding at least the theory behind the other components of both sets.

### 4.2 ABHIDHAMMA INTERPRETATIONS

**4.2.1** Both the 8 bases of mastery (*abhibh'āyatana*) and the 8 liberations (in reverse order to that of the Mahā Sakul’udāyi Sutta)<sup>256</sup> are mentioned in **the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī**.<sup>257</sup> Its commentary, **the Attha,-sālinī**, by Buddhaghosa, gives some details of these two sets, that is, in chapters 11 and 12 respectively (DhsA 187-190, 190-192).

**4.2.2 The Attha,sālinī**, the commentary to the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī, adds that, to perceive a colour internally refers to attaining a dhyana based on taking a colour of some part of our own body as the object (DhsA 190). Thus, to cultivate the perception of the colour “blue,”<sup>258</sup> we should attend to the hair, bile or

<sup>254</sup> Vism 23.16-52/702-709.

<sup>255</sup> See **Sappurisa S** (M 113), SD 23.7 (2); **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43), SD 30.2 (3).

<sup>256</sup> See SD 49.5 (2.2.1).

<sup>257</sup> The 8 bases of mastery (*aṭṭha abhi'āyatana*) at Dhs §§246-237/52 and the 8 liberations (*aṭṭha vimokkha*) at Dhs §§248-249/52 f.

<sup>258</sup> The Pali *nīla* refers to colours ranging from blue, dark-blue, green, dark green, blue-green, grey, blue-black, and sometimes black (as in the case of human hair); in meditation, however, it refers to the indigo or dark-blue of the linseed or flax flower (*ummā puppha*) (V 4:120; D 16,3.29/2:110; M 2:13 = A 5:61; Ap 258; Tha 1068): see PED: *ummā* & CPD: *ummā-puppha*.

the pupil of the eye. For “yellow,” we are to attend to fat, the skin or a yellow spot on the eyes. For “red,” we look at our flesh, blood, the tongue, the palms of the hand, the feet, or the red of the eyes. And for “white,” we see the bones, the teeth, the nails, or the white of the eye.

**4.2.3** The Atthasalini goes on to explain that a meditative vision of these colours should also be cultivated “externally” by way of a kasina object or device. The second of the 8 liberations, then, will be found in the case of someone who does not cultivate the internal vision of colours described under the first liberation, but instead practise to cultivate a vision of these colours with the help of an external meditation object, a kasina device.

#### 4.3 DIFFICULTIES IN THE ABHIDHAMMA INTERPRETATIONS

**4.3.1** Taken as it is, the explanations given in the Atthasalini [4.2] are somewhat “forced” (Analayo 2009:144). For example, it is difficult to imagine how we could use the white of our own bones as a meditation object, unless we have just had an accident where a bone is visible. Such an accident, however, will naturally render us simply incapable of meditating, much less to work towards dhyana. Any dhyanic vision of such whiteness will be incidental only when we are already serious practitioners. Hence, we are dealing with exceptions here rather than the rule.

**4.3.2** There are also problems, although less difficult than the preceding [4.3.1], in trying to meditate on our own flesh or blood to develop a perception of redness. It is nearly impossible for us to look directly at our own hair (unless we have very long hair) for the perception of “blue” (*nīla*) [4.2.1 n]. It is impossible for clean-shaven monastics to look at their own head-hair, too.

It is also unclear how we can ever perceive bile as being “blue” (*nīla*); or how the skin of an Indian, fair or dark, could be “yellow”; or, our palms be red; or, for us to see colours in the pupil of our own eyes.

All these visions might only be possible if we were to use an external aid, such as a mirror. If this were possible, then, we might as well look directly at an external object of the same colour. Moreover, in using a mirror for such a meditation, the distinction between internal and external visions, as given in the Attha-sālinī will be lost.

**4.3.3** The Atthasalini’s explanation of the first and second liberations seems contrived. Perhaps, they were modelled on the 8 bases of mastery (*abhibh’āyatana*), several of which do employ external visions of forms whose colour is blue, yellow, red or white [3].

Buddhaghosa, however, explains that we are to see the external forms in these colours, and other kasinas “with dhyana-vision” (*jhāna, cakkhunā passati*).<sup>259</sup> This means that the meditator must be very familiar with the kasina-object, which is then observed as an *idea* or as an *external object* until dhyana is attained. During such a dhyanic vision, we can only view it with joy, but on emerging, during the review, we note it accordingly. This is the probably what is meant here.

#### 4.4 EARLY MAHĀYĀNA EXPLANATIONS

**4.4.1** The Mahāyāna tradition gives a different explanation of the first two liberations, which can be gleaned from the Chinese translations of the Mahāvibhāṣā<sup>260</sup> and the Mahā,prajñā,pāramitā,śāstra.<sup>261</sup> These

<sup>259</sup> DA 2:513; MA 3:255; AA 2:75, 4:146; PmA 3:552; DhA 191. The Abhidhammāvatāra (Be), too, says that both internal and external objects are “seen” when “dhyana is obtained” (*jhāna, paṭilābho*) (Abhāv:Be 1:224);

<sup>260</sup> T27.437c29. This is the popular name for **Abhidharma, mahā.vibhāṣā**, “the great exegesis on the Abhidharma,” a massive Vaibhāṣika treatise on the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma, tr into Chin by Xuanzang between 656 and 659: 阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論 *Apidamo dapiposha lun*. It purports to offer a comprehensive overview of the varying views of the meaning of **Jñāna,prasthāna**, the key Abhidharma treatise of the Sarvāstivāda, compiled by 500 arhats at the 4<sup>th</sup> (Mahāyāna) council, held in king Kanishka’s time. These texts, however, are later philosophical compilations, not found in the early Buddhism, but is generally based on its teachings. See Princeton Dict of Buddhism: Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣā.

<sup>261</sup> T25.215a14. **Mahā,prajñā,pāramitā,śāstra**, “the treatise on the great perfection of wisdom,” 大智度論 *Dazhi-du lun*, attr to the Madhyamaka exegete, Nāgārjuna. It is only preserved in Chin, tr by Kumārajīva between 402 and 406. Some scholars speculate that it was composed by an unknown Central Asian monk of the Sarvāstivāda school who had “converted” to Madhyamaka, perhaps even Kumārajīva himself. The treatise promotes a Mahāyāna theology of Buddhahood, rejecting the Hīnayāna (early Buddhist) teaching. See Princeton Dict of Buddhism: Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra.

works more or less agree with the Paṭisambhidā, magga and the Attha, sālinī, in saying that the first liberation takes parts of our body as its object, that is, skin, flesh, blood, bone marrow. They, however, differ in saying that these objects are not to be seen directly, but are to be recollected from the perspective of the foul nature of these body parts.

**4.4.2** Once the first liberation has been cultivated in this way, the same recollection is then made regarding the bodies of others, which, when carried out successfully, constitutes the second liberation. The Mahā, prajñā, pāramitā, śāstra explains that to progress in this way from the first to the second liberation means that from having gained some level of freedom from conceit and attachment regarding our own bodily appearance, we go on to cultivate a similar level of freedom from desire and lust for the bodies of others (T25.215a19).

**4.4.3** Such a contemplation of body-parts is described in detail in **the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10), according to which we should “review” (*paccavekkhati*) the whole body from the soles of the feet to the top of the head in terms of impurity, beginning with the skin pentad, that is, head hair, body-hair, nails teeth, skin, and so on, to the rest of 31 body-parts.<sup>262</sup> **The Giri-m-ānanda Sutta** (A 10.60), too, explains how reviewing such body-parts, as described in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, constitutes the perception of the foul (*asubha, sañña*).<sup>263</sup>

**4.4.4** Similar to the progression from the first to the second liberation, the *satipaṭṭhāna* instructions also proceed from contemplating our own body (*ajjhatta*) to contemplating externally, that is, on the bodies of others (*bahiddhā*). In either case, we need not actually see these different body-parts, but only mentally review the make-up of the physical body as far as we are familiar with it. To this end, **the Visuddhi, magga** helpfully gives detailed descriptions of various body-parts to be reviewed in this manner.<sup>264</sup>

**4.4.5** The Mahāvibhāṣā then explains that, once the perception of foulness has been cultivated, the third liberation arises, we will trade off any excessive disgust or negativity by cultivating a perception of the beautiful (*subha*) (T27.437c28). In this way, we properly progress in the first three liberations.

#### **4.4.6 Caveat**

**4.4.6.1 A caveat** should be carefully noted here. The teachings of the Prajñā, pāramitā literature of early Mahāyāna gives elaborate and often helpful, but theoretical, commentaries on meditation. However, it should be remembered that they are “wisdom” literature, that is, deeply philosophical texts that *celebrate* meditation rather than *teach* the actual practice. None of these texts, whether profoundly long or intensely terse, are actual guides to practical meditation, but they can be inspirational reading.

Some of these “wisdom” teachings may seem to work in **ritual meditation**, which may even bring some apparent benefits of calm and insight. They, however, work as “empowerments” or endorsements to certain ecclesiastical or hierarchical status, especially in Chan and Zen Buddhism. Transformative meditation, on the other hand, works best where the practice is free from ritual, hierarchy, philosophy, and sectarianism, and also eccentricity and religiosity. Transformative meditation frees us from all views in a most wholesome way.

In fact, no Mahāyāna practitioner is ever historically known to have mastered meditation using the Prajñāpāramitā literature alone. Even in present-day Mahāyāna training, monastics, as a rule, have to master the teachings of early Buddhism and begin with breath meditation and mindfulness.<sup>265</sup> Having mastered these basics, they may then go on to other more difficult forms of meditation, or those unique to their tradition. Hence, it is not advisable for us to use any such literature as meditation guides.

It is only with some understanding of early Buddhism and some experience of practical meditation, that such texts might make sense to us. However, for practical meditation guidance, we must certainly go back to the early Buddhist teachings and methods.

### **4.5 SUTTA DEVELOPMENTS**

<sup>262</sup> M 10,10/1:57 (SD 13.3).

<sup>263</sup> A 10.60,3/5:109 (SD 19.16).

<sup>264</sup> Vism 8.81-138/248-265.

<sup>265</sup> See Buswell 1992:217 & SD 40b (5.5.1)



**4.5.1** From the terse Pali passages, it is not easy to see that the first two liberations need our contemplating the body-parts as being foul. These texts in themselves do not tell us that we need to do any kind of kasina meditation—that is, unless we are familiar with the Atthasālinī.

Once we have the benefit of the Atthasālinī’s commentary, we have a better idea of the clarity and practicality of the explanations given in the Mahāvibhāṣā and the Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra. They give us a good idea of the way in which the meditator progresses in the first three liberations, as we have noted [4.4.5].

**4.5.2** According to the Paṭisambhidā, magga, to be mentally focused on the beautiful, the third of the 8 liberations, requires the cultivation of the 4 divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*),<sup>266</sup> so that the mind is liberated by way of a boundless permeation of positive emotion. This instruction parallels that given in the Paṭisambhidāmaggā.

The Paṭisambhidā, magga explains that, due to such a cultivation, beings appear as non-repulsive (*apapaṭikkūla*). In this way, we gain the liberation through being mentally focused on the beautiful (Pm 2:39). In theory, this advice sounds right and easy, but it will only work if we are effectively familiar with both the liberations and the divine abodes.<sup>267</sup>

There is another difficulty. The Atthasālinī, however, sees the third liberation as referring to dhyana attainment through a fully purified colour device (DhsA 191). This gloss is noteworthy as it shows how the Atthasālinī explanations are influenced by the idea of kasina meditation to the extent that it contradicts the Paṭisambhidāmagga.

**4.5.3 The Metta, sahadaya Sutta** (S 46.54) shows how lovingkindness alone, properly cultivated, can lead to the “beautiful liberation” (*subha vimokkha*),<sup>268</sup> and how the other three divine abodes—compassion, gladness and equanimity—can lead to the subsequent liberations, namely, those related to the first three formless attainments.<sup>269</sup>

It should also be noted that each of these divine abodes is cultivated through the 7 awakening-factors. They are cultivated, in short, in a progressive manner, balancing both calm and insight. Lovingkindness forms the foundation of all the other three divine abodes, as do the “lower” abodes progressively becoming the foundations for those above them.

#### **4.5.4 Sutta explanations**

**4.5.4.1 The Paṭika Sutta** (D 24) speaks of meditation in aesthetic terms, that is, when we have attained the beautiful liberation, we will not perceive all our experiences not as “ugly,” but as “beautiful.”<sup>270</sup> The commentary then says that this explanation refers to an attainment based on a colour device (*vaṇṇa, kasina*, DA 3:830). So, here again, we have an explanation that involves kasina meditation, contrary to the teaching of the Metta, sahadaya Sutta [4.5.3].

**4.5.4.2** From the perspective of the explanation of the first two liberations given in the Mahāvibhāṣā and the Mahā, prajñāpāramitāśāstra, however, the practice of lovingkindness will fit the series well, since the cultivation of lovingkindness will indeed balance out any negativity that might have arisen through excessive contemplation of the repulsive nature of our own body or that of others.

**4.5.4.3** The contrast provided in the Paṭika Sutta between perceiving phenomena as ugly or as beautiful could also be related to this topic, in the sense of highlighting that with the third liberation, the perceptions of the foul (*asubha*), that was cultivated earlier, are now definitely left behind.

**4.5.5** Whatever may be the final word on the implications of the first three liberations, the remaining set is quite straightforward. **Liberations 4 to 7** involve the attainment of the 4 formless bases. In practical

<sup>266</sup> On the 4 divine abodes, see *Brahma, vihāra*, SD 38.5.

<sup>267</sup> This kind of practice is taught on a more advanced level, esp for advanced meditators and the saints, as evident in the teaching of the 5 perceptions, such as those given in **Tikaṇḍaki S** (A 5.144), SD 2.12.

<sup>268</sup> S 46.54, 12.10 (SD 10.11).

<sup>269</sup> Viz, those of the bases of infinite space (*ākāśānañc’āyatana*), of infinite consciousness (*viññāṇāñc’āyatana*), and of nothingness (*ākāñcaññ’āyatana*) (S 46.54, 13.10+14.10+15.10), SD 10.11

<sup>270</sup> D 24, 2.21/3:34 @ SD 63.3.

terms, based on the mental stability of the fourth dhyana, any perception related to form or diversity is to be overcome in order to attain the base of boundless space.

The 4 formless attainments can be attained only after we have mastered the 4 form dhyanas,<sup>271</sup> and therefore mastering the 8 attainments (*aṭṭha,samāpatti*).<sup>272</sup> These 4 formless attainments are, in fact, ever more refined forms or aspects of the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana, as the mind lets go of ever more of itself, until it is able to nearly transcend even itself, as it were.<sup>273</sup>

**4.5.6** An even more subtle meditative experience follows. Our attention is directed to the experience of space, that is, consciousness itself is seen like space itself, as boundless. The base of infinite space then is the basis for attaining the base of boundless consciousness.

#### **4.5.7 The higher liberations**

4.5.7.1 We then direct our attention to the cessation aspect of the experience of infinite consciousness, we go on to attain the base of nothingness. Further practice results in subduing perceptions until a state is reached when consciousness becomes so subtle that it can neither be said to exist nor not exist, that is, the attaining of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, the fourth formless attainment and the highest of the 8 dhyanas.

4.5.7.2 For the unawakened, this is the highest of the 8 liberations. Nothing is attainable by the unawakened beyond this, because it entails transcending our last mental links with the world, that is perception and feeling. We must really renounce the world here, not in just the monastic sense, but it is a fully liberating dimension. When this stage is attained, we are truly liberated and awakened: for, only the arhats and non-returners can attain this cessation of perception and feeling. (A 3:194; Vism 702).

#### **4.6 REFLECTIONS**

**4.6.1** Reflecting on this study—further with some experiential perspective, if we are serious meditation practitioners—we will surely surmise that the teachings on the 8 bases of mastery and the 8 liberations are strangely lacking in the suttas, the Commentaries, and in related writings up to our times. This may suggest a couple of interesting possibilities.

**4.6.2** The first is that these are lists of practices compiled like the Saṅgīti Sutta (D 33) and the Das'uttara Sutta (D 34)—as topical summaries of meditation teachings. Such teachings assume and expect our pre-knowledge of meditation teachings and practices, especially on the form dhyanas and formless attainments. Hence, they are meant only as a quick guide or reminder for the neophyte and those who are still unawakened.

**4.6.3** Secondly, it is possible that the lists were an “intrusion” into the sutta collection from the nascent Abhidhamma at a time when the Tipiṭaka was still open. In that case, it is likely that it was the suttantikas (the early council elders and sutta reciters) who adopted what they saw as helpful meditation lists. However, no efforts were made to elaborate on these lists for reasons we can only speculate on.<sup>274</sup>

#### **4.6.4 “Unfinished” teachings**

4.6.4.1 One possible reason for the “unfinished” state of the two sets is probably that they were formulated late or introduced from the Abhidhamma tradition within the centuries after the Buddha's death. However, by then the meditation practice had probably been eclipsed by the “burden of learning” (*gantha,dhura*) as the Buddhist monasteries became more urbanized, organized, wealthy and successful.<sup>275</sup>

<sup>271</sup> On the formless attainments, see SD 24.11 (5).

<sup>272</sup> Cf the 8 liberations (*aṭṭha vimokkha*, D 15,35/2:70 f, 16,3.33/2:111 f, 34,2.1(10)/3:288; A 8.66/4:306 f).

<sup>273</sup> See SD 8.4 (12.3) & SD 24.11 (5.4).

<sup>274</sup> The Pali Text Society has published Yogāvacara's Manual, ed by T W Rhys Davids in 1896, based on an untitled Sinhala MS of unknown date, but with some detailed instructions for meditation practice. It has been translated by F L Woodward as *Manual of a Mystic* (1916) and repr since. This book has two major difficulties: (1) It is an early colonial-period translation by a scholar, not a Buddhist meditator; (2) even with a good translation of such a book, it can never be better than an experienced meditation instructor (it is like having a “how to drive” book: we still need an experienced driving instructor to teach us).

<sup>275</sup> The Comys speak of the “burden of books” (*gantha,dhura*) and the “burden of insight” (*vipassanā,dhura*), ie, meditation (AA 5:68 f; DhA 1:7, 68, 154, 2:240, 4:38; SnA 1:305; ThaA 2:141; ApA 237; PugA 224). Although this

4.6.4.2 In later Buddhism, especially the Prajñā, pāramitā literature, we have a proliferation of prolix writings—encrusted with interminable impressive names of samadhis and dhyanas—but very little, if any, of such teachings and names will very little or useful sense serious or skilled meditators. They may, however, impress those theologically inclined towards “other-power” Buddhism. Even in the case of such texts as the “Heart Sutra,” their popularity is more by way of being a populist lip-service or triumphalist quip, seemingly unrelated to meditation or historical Buddhism. After all, these are classic examples of the works of a “Buddhism of the books,” where the *statement* is often misconstrued to be the *state* itself.<sup>276</sup>

4.6.4.3 In other words, we are seeing here clues to some “lost” teachings. “Lost” in the sense that the monastic priorities shifted away from meditation to more theoretical, even worldly, pursuits, which progressively grew as Buddhism spread in India itself and beyond. Fortunately, we do have some vital clues to the nature of these doctrinal sets in the suttas, and in the teachings of living meditation masters who have kept to the ancient lineage of inner silence and outer simplicity, best exemplified in the forest meditation tradition, which is itself fast “modernizing” and even disappearing.

There is only one way to regain the lost teachings, and strengthen the true teachings that are still with us. We need to avoid and reject the false teachings, declare them publicly to be so at the proper time; study and practise the true teachings, declare them publicly to be so; and cultivate a calm and clear mind to realize the path, and awaken in this life itself, at least as a streamwinner. This journey begins here and now with each of us.

— evaṃ —

[For **Bibliography**, see the end of SD 49]

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was the case in Sri Lanka during the commentarial period, the trend was already present in Indian Buddhism centuries before that.

<sup>276</sup> For a scholarly insight, see Andrew Skilton, “State or statement? Samādhi in some early Mahāyāna Sūtras,” *Eastern Buddhist* 34,2 2002:51-90.