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Sa,saṅkhāra Paṭipadā Sutta

The Discourse on the Way With Effort | A 4.169 [A:B 4.166]

Theme: The 4 ways of attaining nirvana

Translated by Piya Tan ©2017

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 OVERVIEW

1.1.1 The Sa,saṅkhāra Paṭipadā Sutta (A 4.169) mentions 4 kinds of persons in terms of how they attain nirvana. The first two have to exert themselves, meaning that they have to work to finish off the remnants of their hindering karma (*sa,saṅkhāra*).

The last two need not exert themselves (*asaṅkhāra*), meaning that they attain nirvana right away. This last pair of individuals attain nirvana either “in this very life,” that is, here and now (while they still live), or with their last breath, that is, at the moment of dying.

1.1.2 The attaining of nirvana of these individuals depends on **two factors**:

(1) the strength of their 5 spiritual faculties (*pañc’indriya*) and

(2) the strength of their meditation, including attaining dhyana (*jhāna*).

The 4 kinds of individuals, according to the factors that make up their practice, are as follows:

		<u>faculties</u>	<u>methods</u>	
(1) Nirvana with effort	in this very life	profuse	loathsomeness	[\$2]
(2) Nirvana with effort	at the body’s breaking up	weak	loathsomeness	[\$3]
(3) Nirvana without effort	in this very life	profuse	the 4 form dhyanas	[\$4]
(4) Nirvana without effort	at the body’s breaking up	weak	the 4 form dhyanas	[\$5]

Table 1.1.2. The 4 ways of attaining nirvana

1.2 MEDITATION AND THE FACULTIES

1.2.1 Meditation

1.2.1.1 According to the Sutta, the 1st and 2nd persons practise a meditation based on loathsomeness [§§2.2, 5.2]—that is,

- (1) contemplating on the impurities of the body,
- (2) perception of the loathsomeness of food,
- (3) perception of non-delight in all the world,
- (4) perception of impermanence in all formations, and
- (5) perception of death.

The 3rd and 4th persons practise the 4 form dhyanas [§§5+6].

1.2.1.2 The distinction between these two methods determines whether the practitioner attains nirvana through effort (*sa,saṅkhāra parinibbāyī*) or without effort (*asaṅkhāra parinibbāyī*). Those practitioners who keep to the practice of loathsome meditations have to exert themselves, while the dhyana practitioners do not need to exert themselves.

1.2.2 Spiritual faculties

The distinction between profuse spiritual faculties and weak spiritual faculties determines whether the practitioner attains nirvana in this very life (*ditth'eva dhamme*) or with the breakup of the body (*kāyassa bheda*), that is, at death. With a profusion (*adhimattattā*) of faculties, one attains arhathood in this very life, while when the faculties are weak (*mudutattā*), one attains arhathood at the moment of death.

1.3 COMMENTARIAL NOTE

1.3.1 *Samatha and vipassanā*

1.3.1.1 The Aṅuttara Commentary¹ says that the first and second persons are “dry-insight” meditators (*sukkhā, vipassaka*)—those who practise only insight meditation—attending to conditioned states as their meditation object (*saṅkhāra, nimittam upatthāpentī*). The commentarial or scholastic notion that a purely “*vipassanā*” leads to arhathood is unacceptable as there is no basis for this anywhere in the suttas, except for the term in the three **(Samatha, vipassanā) Samādhi Suttas** (A 4.92-94).² Even there, it refers not to a method, but simply how the meditators should adjust his meditation to harmonize for the arising of calm and insight leading to liberation.

1.3.1.2 These suttas merely list types of meditators without connecting them to any kind of attainment, certainly not to arhathood. In other words, there are these 4 kinds of meditators:

- (1) those who gain inner mental calm without any insight;
- (2) those who gain insight without any mental calm;
- (3) those who gain both; and
- (4) those who have neither.

(A 4.92/2:92), SD 95.7

1.3.1.3 The third and fourth persons, according to the same Aṅuttara Commentary, are those who take calmness as their vehicle (*samatha, yānika*). These are the meditators who only work to attain mental calm (*samatha*), that is, to gain dhyanas. The Commentaries seem to take this as meaning that they only attain dhyana, without gaining any insight. This is all acceptable if we understand them *only* as meditation methods, not as means of attaining arhathood—which then would not work.

1.3.1.4 To clarify the problem here, we need to examine **the Yuganaddha Sutta** (A 4.170), which makes a very clear reference to the 4 vehicles for mental cultivation leading to arhathood, as follows:

- (1) Insight preceded by calm.³ When the path arises in him, he pursues it, so that the mental fetters⁴ are abandoned and the latent tendencies⁵ are destroyed.
- (2) Calm preceded by insight.⁶ When the path arises in him, he pursues it, so that the mental fetters are abandoned and the latent tendencies are destroyed.

¹ AA 3:142; also 2:135; SA 3:238; PmA 2:465. See also DA 3:1030; SA 3:144, 236; AA 2:350 f, 4:7, 39; KhpA 182; ItA 1:51 f; SnA 1:278; PugA 199-202; Vism 23.56/710.

² **(Samatha Vipassanā) Samādhi S 1** (A 4.92/2:92), SD 95.7; **(Samatha Vipassanā) Samādhi S 2** (A 4.93/2:92 f), SD 95.8; **(Samatha Vipassanā) Samādhi S 3** (A 4.94/2:93-95), SD 41.3.

³ *Samatha, pubb'āṅgamāṇi vipassanāni*. This refers to the calmness practitioner (*samatha, yānika*), ie one who first cultivates access concentration (*upacāra, samādhi*), the dhyanas or the formless attainments, and then takes up insight (*vipassanā*) meditation. “Access concentration” is the concentration gained just before attaining dhyana. See MA 1:112.

⁴ On the 10 mental fetters (*dasa saṃyojana*), see SD 10.16 (1.6.6-1.6.8).

⁵ **Latent tendencies** (*anusayā*), alt trs “underlying tendencies,” “latent dispositions.” There are 7 of them: (1) sensual desire (*kāma-rāga*); (2) aversion (*paṭigha*); (3) wrong view (*diṭṭhi*); (4) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*); (5) conceit (*māna*); (6) desire for existence (*bhava, rāga*); (7) ignorance (*avijjā*). See **Anusaya**, SD 31.3.

- (3) Calm and insight coupled together.⁷ When the path arises in him, he pursues it, so that the mental fetters are abandoned and the latent tendencies are destroyed.
- (4) A monk's mind is seized by agitation caused by higher states of mind;⁸ but there comes a time when his mind becomes internally steadied, composed, unified and concentrated. Then the path arises in him, and while he does so, the mental fetters are abandoned and the latent tendencies are destroyed. (A 4.170/2:156 f), SD 41.5

The technicalities of these 4 types of approaches to meditation for liberation have been discussed elsewhere.⁹ Here, we will only mention that the rule is that any kind of meditation that brings liberation, that is, sainthood, especially arhathood, must have dhyana and involve insight. The dhyana provides a calm and clear mind that is able to cultivate insight, the basis for arhathood.

1.3.1.5 The question now remains: How do we explain the first two methods of the Sa,saṅkhāra Paṭipadā Sutta which merely states that the meditator applies various loathsomeness-based meditation *without dhyana*. Such methods, too, bring the practitioners nirvana.

First, it should be noted that the vital ingredient of insight is present in these meditation methods [1.2.1.1]. Although the practitioners do not cultivate the formal dhyana meditations, note that they all “depend on the 5 faculties”—faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. Note that “concentration” (*samādhi*) is still present here.

Samadhi includes both dhyana. In other words, these meditators *do* practise to attain some simple level of dhyanic states—when the mind is fully free from the body—but not to the full level of the 1st form dhyana. Even with weak dhyana, the meditator—with the help of the other spiritual faculties—is able to generate the insight necessary for arhathood.

1.3.2 Sa,saṅkhāra

The Commentary glosses **sa,saṅkhārena** with *sa-p,payogena*, “with preparation” (AA 3:142). The word *payoga* means “means, instrument,”¹⁰ or “preparation, undertaking, occupation, exercise,

⁶ *Vipassanā,pubb’āṅgamāṇi samathāṇi*. Here the practitioner first enters access concentration (*upacāra,samādhi*) or full concentration (*appanā,samādhi*), and then takes up insight by regarding those states as impermanent, etc (MA 1:108 f). “This refers to one who by his nature first attains to insight and then, based on insight, produces concentration” (AA 3:143), ie the insight practitioner (*vipassanā,yānika*). See MA 1:112.

⁷ *Samatha,vipassanā,yuganaddhāṇi*. Here, one enters the first dhyana and emerging from it, one applies insight to that experience, ie one sees the 5 aggregates within the dhyana (form, feeling, perceptions, formations, consciousness) as impermanent, subject to suffering and non-self. Then one enters the 2nd dhyana, emerges and applies insight to it. One applies the twofold reflection to the other dhyanas as well in the same manner until the path of streamwinning, or higher, is realized.

⁸ *Dhamm’uddhacca,viggahitāṇi mānasāṇi hoti*. Comy says that the “agitation” (*uddhacca*) here refers to a reaction of the 10 “impurities of insight” (*vipassanā’nupakkilesa*) when they are wrongly taken as indicating path-attainment (AA 3:143). That is, he is distracted by any of these 10 impurities: evil conduct of body, speech and mind; sensual thoughts, thoughts of ill will, violent thoughts; thoughts about relatives, home country and reputation; thoughts about higher mental states (*dhamma,vitakka*) (**Paṃsu,dhovaka S**, A 3.100a.4.1/1:254), SD 19.11.

Visuddhi,magga uses *dhamma,vitakka* (“thoughts about higher states”) to refer to the same 10 impurities (Vism 20.105-128/ 633-638). Bodhi: “It is plausible, however, that the ‘agitation caused by higher states of mind’ is mental distress brought on by eagerness to instantaneous enlightenment experience” (A:ÑB 294 n69). See the story of Bāhiya Dārucīriya in (**Arahatta**) **Bāhiya S** (U 1.10/6-9), SD 33.7 & also the story of Anuruddha in (**Anuruddha**) **Upakkilesa S** (M 128/3:152-162), SD 5.18.

⁹ See SD 8.4 (10).

¹⁰ J 6:116; SnA 7; DhsA 215 *sa,payoga*.

business, action, practice.”¹¹ The sentence, *payogaṃ karoti*, means “to exert oneself, to undertake, to try” (PvA 18). These glosses support translating *sa,saṅkhāra* as “with effort.”

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The Discourse on the Way With Effort

A 4.169

1 Bhikshus, there are these 4 kinds of persons found in the world. What are the four?

1.2 THE 4 KINDS OF PERSONS ATTAINING NIRVANA

- | | |
|---|---|
| (1) Here, bhikshus, a certain person attains nirvana with effort in this very life [here and now]. | <i>diṭṭh’eva dhamme sa,saṅkhāra,parinibbāyī</i> |
| (2) Here, bhikshus, a certain person attains nirvana with effort at the body’s breaking up . | <i>kāyassa bhedā sa,saṅkhāraparinibbāyī</i> |
| (3) Here, bhikshus, a certain person attains nirvana without effort in this very life . | <i>diṭṭh’eva dhamme asaṅkhāra,parinibbāyī</i> |
| (4) Here, bhikshus, a certain person attains nirvana without effort at the body’s breaking up . | <i>kāyassa bhedā asaṅkhāra,parinibbāyī</i> |

(1) Nirvana with effort in this very life

2 And how, bhikshus, does a person **attain nirvana with effort in this very life**?

2.2 Here, bhikshus, he dwells

contemplating impurities in the body,	<i>asubhānupassū kāye viharati</i>
perceiving the loathsomeness of food,	<i>āhāre paṭikūlasaṅgā</i>
perceiving non-delight in all the world,	<i>sabba,loke anabhirati,saṅgā</i>
perceiving impermanence in all formations,	<i>sabbasaṅkhāresu aniccānupassī</i>
perceiving death. [156]	<i>maraṇasaṅgā</i>

well established internally.

2.3 He dwells dependent on these **5 learner’s powers**, that is to say:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| (1) the power of faith, | <i>saddhā,bala</i> |
| (2) the power of moral shame, | <i>hiri,bala</i> |
| (3) the power of moral fear, | <i>ottappa,bala</i> |
| (4) the power of energy, | <i>vīriya,bala</i> |
| (5) the power of wisdom. | <i>paññā,bala</i> |

2.4 These **5 faculties**—

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| (1) the faculty of faith, | <i>saddh’indriya</i> |
| (2) the faculty of energy, | <i>viriy’indriya</i> |
| (3) the faculty of mindfulness, | <i>sat’indriya</i> |
| (4) the faculty of concentration, and | <i>samadh’indriya</i> |
| (5) the faculty of wisdom— | <i>paññ’indriya</i> |

arise profusely¹² in him.

¹¹ V 4:278; Miln 228, 328; MA 2:213; KhpA 23, 29 f; PvA 8, 98, 103, 146, 184, 285.

2.5 Despite the *profusion* of these 5 faculties, he attains *nirvana with effort in this very life*.¹³

2.6 This, bhikshus, is how a person attains nirvana with effort in this very life.

(2) Nirvana with effort at the moment of death

3 And how, bhikshus, does a person **attain nirvana with effort at the body's breaking up**?¹⁴

3.2 Here, bhikshus, he dwells

*contemplating impurities in the body,
perceiving the loathsomeness of food,
perceiving non-delight in all the world,
perceiving impermanence in all formations,
perceiving death.*

well established internally.

3.3 He dwells dependent on these **5 learner's powers**, that is to say:

*(1) the power of faith,
(2) the power of moral shame,
(3) the power of moral fear,
(4) the power of energy,
(5) the power of wisdom.*

3.4 These **5 faculties**—

*(1) the faculty of faith,
(2) the faculty of energy,
(3) the faculty of mindfulness,
(4) the faculty of concentration, and
(5) the faculty of wisdom—*

arise *weakly*¹⁵ in him.

3.5 Because of the *weakness* of these 5 faculties, he attains *nirvana with effort at the body's breaking up*.¹⁶

3.6 This, bhikshus, is how a person attains nirvana with effort at the body's breaking up.

(3) Nirvana without effort in this very life

4 And how, bhikshus, does a person **attain nirvana without effort in this very life**?

4.1 Here, bhikshus, a monk,

*quite detached from sensual pleasures, detached from unwholesome mental states,
enters and dwells in **the first dhyana**,
accompanied by initial application and sustained application,
accompanied by zest and joy, born of solitude.*¹⁷

¹² "Profusely," *adhimattā* = *adhi* ("above, beyond") + *matta* ("measure"), abundantly, profusely, in a higher degree.

¹³ *So imesaṃ pañcannaṃ indriyānaṃ adhimattattā kāyassa bheda sa,saṅkhāra,parinibbāyī hoti.*

¹⁴ Note the phrase, "with the body's breaking up" (*kāyassa bheda*), stands by itself and is not followed "after death" (*param maraṇā*), as it usually is, eg in **Devā, dūta S** (M 130,2), SD 2.23. This truncated term indicates that the person attains nirvana at the moment of death, without having to undergo any more rebirth.

¹⁵ "Weakly," *mudūni*, from *mudu*, weakly, gently.

¹⁶ *So imesaṃ pañcannaṃ indriyānaṃ mudutattā kāyassa bheda sa,saṅkhāra,parinibbāyī hoti.*

4.2 With the stilling of initial application and sustained application,

by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind,
he enters and dwells in **the second dhyana**,
free from initial application and sustained application,
accompanied by zest and joy born of stillness [samadhi].¹⁸

4.3 With the fading away of zest,

he dwells equanimous, mindful and clearly comprehending,
and experiences joy with the body.

He enters and dwells in **the third dhyana**,
of which the noble ones declare, “Happily he dwells in equanimity and mindfulness.”¹⁹

4.4 With the abandoning of joy and abandoning of pain—and

with the earlier disappearance of pleasure and displeasure—
he attains and dwells in **the fourth dhyana** that is neither painful nor pleasant,
and with mindfulness fully purified by equanimity.²⁰

4.5 He dwells dependent on these **5 learner’s powers**, *that is to say*:

- (1) *the power of faith,*
- (2) *the power of moral shame,*
- (3) *the power of moral fear,*
- (4) *the power of energy,*
- (5) *the power of wisdom.*

4.6 These **5 faculties**—

- (1) *the faculty of faith,*
- (2) *the faculty of energy,*
- (3) *the faculty of mindfulness,*
- (4) *the faculty of concentration, and*
- (5) *the faculty of wisdom—*

arise profusely in him.

4.7 Because of the *profusion* of these 5 faculties, he attains *nirvana without effort in this very life*.

4.8 This, bhikshus, is how a person attains nirvana without effort in this very life.

(4) Nirvana without effort at the moment of death

5 And how, bhikshus, does a person **attain nirvana without effort at the body’s breaking up?**

5.2 *Here, bhikshus, a monk,*

quite detached from sensual pleasures, detached from unwholesome mental states,
*enters and dwells in **the first dhyana**,*
accompanied by initial application and sustained application,
accompanied by zest and joy, born of solitude.

¹⁷ *Vivicc’eva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi sa, vitakkaṃ sa, vicāraṃ viveka, jaṃ pīti, sukhaṃ paṭhama-j, jhānaṃ.* See D 2,75.2 (SD 8.10).

¹⁸ *Vitakka, vicāraṃ vūpasamā ajjhataṃ sampasadānaṃ cetaso ekodi, bhāvaṃ avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ samādhi. jaṃ pīti, sukhaṃ dutiya-j, jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati.* See **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (5.2).

¹⁹ *Pītiyā ca virāgā ca upekhako ca viharati sato ca sampajāno, sukhañ ca kāyena paṭisaṃvedeti yan taṃ ariyā ācikkhanti, “upekhako satimā sukha, viharī ti tatiya-j, jhānaṃ.* See **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (5.3).

²⁰ *Sukhassa ca pahānā dukkhassa ca pahānā pubbe’va somanassa, domanassānaṃ atthaṅgamā adukkham asukhaṃ upekkhā, sati, parisuddhiṃ catuttha-j, jhānaṃ.* See **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (5.4).

- 5.3 With the stilling of initial application and sustained application,
by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind,
*he enters and dwells in **the second dhyana**,*
free from initial application and sustained application,
accompanied by zest and joy born of stillness [samadhi].
- 5.4 With the fading away of zest,
he dwells equanimous, mindful and clearly comprehending,
and experiences joy with the body.
*He enters and dwells in **the third dhyana**,*
of which the noble ones declare, “Happily he dwells in equanimity and mindfulness.”
- 5.5 With the abandoning of joy and abandoning of pain—and
with the earlier disappearance of pleasure and displeasure—
*he attains and dwells in **the fourth dhyana** that is neither painful nor pleasant,*
and with mindfulness fully purified by equanimity.
- 5.6 He dwells dependent on these **5 learner’s powers**, that is to say:
 (1) *the power of faith,*
 (2) *the power of moral shame,*
 (3) *the power of moral fear,*
 (4) *the power of energy,*
 (5) *the power of wisdom.*
- 5.7 These **5 faculties**—
 (1) *the faculty of faith,*
 (2) *the faculty of energy,*
 (3) *the faculty of mindfulness,*
 (4) *the faculty of concentration, and*
 (5) *the faculty of wisdom—*
 arise weakly in him.
- 5.8 Despite the *weakness* of these 5 faculties, he attains *nirvana* without effort at the body’s *breaking up*.
- 5.9 This, bhikshus, is how a person attains nirvana with effort at the body’s breaking up.
- 6** These, bhikshus, are the 4 kinds of persons found in the world.

— evaṃ —

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