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(Navaka) Paññā, vimutta Sutta

The Discourse on the Wisdom-freed | A 9.44
Theme: The arhat liberated by insight wisdom
Translated by Piya Tan ©2017

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 Sutta summary

The **(Navaka) Paññā, vimutta Sutta** (A 9.44) is a discourse dealing with arhathood, found in the Pañcāla Vagga (A 9) of the Aṅguttara, which deals with dhyana and nirvana.¹ It lists the 9 progressive stages of cessation (*anupubba nirodha*), that is, the 4 form dhyanas (*rūpa jhāna*), the 4 formless attainments (*arūpa samāpatti*) and the attainment of cessation (*nirodha samāpatti*). They are also similarly listed in the **Anupubba Nirodha Sutta** (A 9.31).²

1.2 Sutta theme

1.2.1 In each of the first 8 stages [§§3-10], the dhyana experience is said to be “the wisdom-freed in a provisional manner (*pariyāyena*),” that is, in a relative way of speaking. This means that, at each level, we experience a kind of temporary “nirvana,” that is, the extinction or disappearance of certain dhyana-factors,³ and the cooling or suspension of certain defilements, that is, the 5 mental hindrances⁴ and the 4 influxes.⁵

None of these stages is nirvana itself, but they give us a progressively better idea of what nirvana is like, relatively speaking. This is the closest experience of nirvana we can have *here and now*, in this life itself, before we actually attain arhathood, the final liberation, as taught by the historical Buddha.⁶

1.2.2 Only the 9th and last stage—that of the cessation of perception and feeling [§11]—refers to the non-returner’s and the arhat’s experience of nirvana here and now. Hence, the nirvana-experience is said to be described “in a non-provisional way” (*nippariyāyena*), that is, in the ultimate or Dharma way of speaking.

In simple terms, “provisional” means the stages of progress leading to nirvana *here and now*, our concept of which is “non-provisional,” in the full and real sense of the term.⁷ This means that we experience the true and final liberation, nirvana, as taught by the historical Buddha.

¹ For the full list, see SD 50.25 (2.1).

² A 9.31/4:409 (SD 33.6(3.2.3)): see SD 33.6 (3.2.2).

³ On dhyana-factors (*jhān’āṅga*), see **Jhāna Pañha S** (S 40.1), SD 24.11 (4.3); SD 8.4 (6).

⁴ The 5 mental hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇa*)—sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt—prevent us from attaining dhyana. See **Nīvaraṇā**, SD 32.1

⁵ The 4 influxes (*āsava*) are those of sensual desire, of existence, of views and of ignorance: see **Ogha Pañha S** (S 38.11) SD 30.3 (1). An older set has only 3 influxes, ie, omitting the influx of views, which underlies all three: see SD 30.1 (1.3.2).

⁶ It is vital to stress that **arhathood** is the “true and final liberation, as taught by the historical Buddha” because many later Buddhists, esp of the Mahāyāna teachings, tend to falsely claim that even arhats still have to attain full awakening, and that the historical Buddha is merely a kind of emanation of some eternal or divine essence or state, like a Godhead. It is prob that such Mahāyāna theology has been directly or indirectly influenced by early Christianity, and responding to it. Both religions arose around the same time, and Christian ideas influenced by Mahāyāna through merchants and travelers plying between the lands of the two religions.

⁷ Further on *pariyāyena* and *nippariyāyena*, see SD 50.25 (1.4).

2 The wisdom-freed

2.1 FREEDOM BY WISDOM

2.1.1 “Freedom by wisdom” (*paññā, vimutti*), according to the commentary on **the Ārabhati Sutta** (A 5.142), is the wisdom associated with the fruition of arhathood (*arahatta, phala*) (AA 3:289). This is a narrow definition applying only to arhathood, but it is also used in connection with the spiritual attainments of other noble individuals. [2.1.2]

2.1.2 In **the (Navaka) Paññā, vimutta Sutta** (A 9.44), we see this attainment—implied by the term “the wisdom freed” (*paññā, vimutta*) as being applicable to any meditator who, having attained any of the 4 dhyanas or the 4 formless attainments, emerges and reflects on the impermanence of that meditative state. This kind of description of the nirvana experience—real but temporary—is said to be a “provisional” (*pariyāyena*) one.

Arhathood only fully and properly—in a “non-provisional” way (*nippariyāyena*)—applies to the meditator when he is able to attain the 9th and last attainment, that of cessation [§11]. The only other person able to attain cessation—but with only a temporary experience of nirvana—is the non-returner. In all such cases—especially in the preceding 8 attainments—the meditator is at least temporarily (in a “provisional” manner) able to free himself from his defilements, that is, for the duration of his meditation and perhaps soon after, too.

2.1.3 The term, *paññā, vimutti*, is often linked with “liberation of mind” (*ceto, vimutti*)—as ***ceto, vimutti paññā, vimutti***, “the liberation of mind, liberation through wisdom”—in reference to the attainment and wisdom of the fruition of arhathood. The ***sukka, vipassaka***, “the dry-insight meditator”—a commentarial notion—refers to one who practises only “insight,” but this notion is unattested in the suttas.

The term itself appears in the three **(Samatha, vipassanā) Samādhi Suttas** (A 4.92-94).⁸ There, it refers *not* to a method, but simply to how the meditator should adjust his meditation so that it is harmonized (that is, appropriately balanced) for the arising of calm and insight leading to liberation.⁹

2.2 THE WISDOM-FREED

2.2.1 In the case of the wisdom-freed “in a provisional manner” [§§3-10], he only attains a knowledge of nirvana through insight arising from understanding the true nature of things. In **the (Arahatta) Susīma Sutta** (S 12.70), for example, a wisdom-freed arhat tells the wanderer Susīma, “First comes the knowledge of the true nature of reality, then the knowledge of nirvana.”

The Sutta expresses “**the knowledge of the true nature of reality**” (*dhmma-t, ṭhiti, ñāṇa*) as being those of the 5 aggregates [S 12.70, §§32-43.1] and dependent arising [§§43.2-50]. More commonly, the term refers to an understanding of the 3 characteristics (*ti, lakkhaṇa*) of existence—impermanence (*aniccatā*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkhatā*), and non-self (*anattatā*)—which, in this sutta, is taught to Susīma by the Buddha by way of “the 3 turns” (*te, parivaṭṭa*) [§§32.2-43.1], that is, firstly, there is impermanence; then, how impermanence is the basis for suffering; and finally, both impermanence and suffering as attesting to non-self.¹⁰

⁸ **(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.

⁹ See **Jhānābhīññā S** (S 16.9,29+30), SD 50.7.

¹⁰ **(Arahatta) Susīma S** (S 12.70,28-50/2:124-128), SD 16.8.

2.2.2 The Puggala Paññatti (Pug 1.31) and **the Kīṭā, giri Sutta** (M 70) states that “a monk (that is, a mediator) may not have personally attained (*kāyena phassivā*) any of the 8 liberations (*aṭṭha vimokkha*)¹¹ [2.2.2], but it is through the arising of wisdom that he eradicates his influxes (*āsava*).¹² Such an individual is said to one who is wisdom-freed (*paññā, vimutta*).¹³”

2.2.3 The Puggala Paññatti Commentary adds that “he may be one of these 5 persons: a practitioner of ‘dry insight’ or ‘bare insight’ (*sukkha, vipassaka*),¹⁴ or one who has attained to arhathood after the arising of any of the 4 dhyanas” (PugA 191).¹⁵ None of them attains the 8 liberations—this means that the mediator experiences only a form dhyana, using it as a basis for insight into impermanence; and that he does *not* attain any formless dhyana. This is the only difference between the wisdom-freed arhat and the both-way-freed arhat (this latter attains both the form dhyanas and the formless dhyanas).¹⁶

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The Discourse on the Wisdom-freed

A 9.44

- 1 (Originating in Kosambī.)¹⁷
- 2 “‘Wisdom-freed. Wisdom-freed,’ avuso,¹⁸ it is said.
How, avuso, has the Blessed One spoken of **the wisdom-freed** (*paññā, vimutta*)?”¹⁹

THE OPENING: THE 9 PROGRESSIVE ABODES²⁰

The 4 dhyanas

(1) THE 1ST DHYANA

- 3 Here, avuso, a monk,²¹

¹¹ PugA 191. The 8 liberations (*aṭṭha vimokkha*) refers to the attainment of mental freedom through dhyana in various ways: see SD 5.17 (10); SD 49.5b (3).

¹² The 4 influxes (*āsava*) are those of sensual desire, of existence, of views and of ignorance: see **Ogha Pañha S** (S 38.11) SD 30.3 (1). An older set has only 3 influxes, ie, omitting the influx of views, which underlies all three: see SD 30.1 (1.3.2).

¹³ For fuller nn, see esp M 70,16 + SD 11.1 (5.2(2)); also Pug 1.31/14;

¹⁴ See SD 50.17 (1.3.1.1).

¹⁵ See also **(Arahatta) Susīma S** (S 12.70,25-32/2:123), SD 16.8.

¹⁶ See **(Navaka) Ubhato.bhāga, vimutta S** (A 9.45), SD 50.32.

¹⁷ Ce. On Kosambī, see SD 6.1 (1-2).

¹⁸ Presumably, Ānanda is addressing the monk Udāyī—Kāl’udāyī, says Comy (AA 4:205)—in Ghosit’ārāma, outside Kosambī, far west of the “middle country” (*majjhima, desa*), ie, the central Gangetic plain. Since they address one another as *āvuso* (“Friend, brother”), this sutta—and the others of this **Pañcāla Vagga** [2.1]—record events while the Buddha is still living. The Buddha’s absence may be explained by the fact that he is away on solitary retreat for the rains of the 10th year of the ministry (BA 3): see SD 6.1 (2+6). **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16) records the Buddha, in his last days, as instructing that senior monks should address juniors by name or as *āvuso*, while junior monks should address seniors as *bhante* (“sir”) or *āyasmā* (“venerable”) (D 16, 6.2), SD 9.

¹⁹ On the “wisdom-freed” (*paññā, vimutta*), see (2.2).

²⁰ See SD 50.25 (1.3.2.2).

quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome mental states,
attains and dwells in the **1st dhyana**,
accompanied by initial application and sustained application,
and with zest and happiness born of solitude.²²

3.2 He understands it with wisdom.²³

3.3 To that extent, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **the wisdom-freed** in a provisional [relative] manner.²⁴

(2) THE 2ND DHYANA

4 And, furthermore, avuso, a monk,
with the stilling of initial application and sustained application,
by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind,
attains and dwells in **the 2nd dhyana**,
free from initial application and sustained application,²⁵
with zest and happiness born of concentration.²⁶

4.2 He understands it with wisdom.

To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **the wisdom-freed** in a provisional [relative] manner.

(3) THE 3RD DHYANA

5 And furthermore, avuso, a monk,
with the fading away of zest, he dwells equanimous, mindful and clearly knowing,
and experiences happiness with the body.

He attains and dwells in **the 3rd dhyana**,
of which the noble ones declare, ‘Happily he dwells in equanimity and mindfulness.’
He permeates and pervades, floods and fills this very body with the happiness
free from zest.

5.2 He understands it with wisdom.

To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **the wisdom-freed** in a provisional [relative] manner.

(4) THE 4TH DHYANA

6 And furthermore, avuso, a monk,

²¹ “A monk” (*bhikkhu*) in such contexts always refers to a meditator (**Satipaṭṭhāna S**, M 10,3A n, SD 13.3), or to the practitioner (SD 4.9 (5.3); SD 13.1 (3.1.1)).

²² “Born of solitude,” *viveka,ja*; ie it is the result of abandoning the hindrances: on the 3 kinds of solitude, see **The body in Buddhism**, SD 29.6a (1.5). On the omission of “one-pointedness of mind” (*cittassa ek’aggatā*) and “concentration” (*samādhi*) here, see **The layman and dhyana**, SD 8.5.

²³ *Paññāya ca nam pajānāti*.

²⁴ *Ettāvatā’pi kho āvuso sandiṭṭhiko dhammo vutto bhagavatā pariyāyena*. “In a provisional manner,” *pariyāyena*, ie, in a restricted sense, “in a sense”: SD 50.25 (1.4.2-1.4.4); cf *nippariyāyena*: SD (1.4.5).

²⁵ On “initial application and sustained application” (*vitakka,vicāra*), see **Vitakka,vicāra**, SD 33.4; SD 8.4 (5.1.2).

²⁶ The 2nd dhyana is known as “the noble silence” (*ariya,tuṇhī,bhāva*) because within it initial application and sustained application (thinking and discursion, *vitakka,vicāra*) cease, and with their cessation, speech cannot occur. (S 2:273); cf S 4:293 where *vitakka* and *vicāra* are called verbal formation (*vacī,saikhāra*), the mental factors responsible for speech. In **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 1:161), the Buddha exhorts the monks when assembled to “either speak on the Dharma or observe the noble silence” (ie either talk Dharma or meditate). See **Dutiya Jhāna Pañha S** (S 40.2/4:263 f), SD 24.12.

with the abandoning of joy and pain—

and with the earlier disappearance of pleasure and displeasure—

attains and dwells in **the 4th dhyana**,

that is neither painful nor pleasant, and with mindfulness fully purified by equanimity.

6.2 *He understands it with wisdom.*

*To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **the wisdom-freed** in a provisional [relative] manner.*

The 4 attainments

(5) THE SPHERE OF INFINITE SPACE

7 And furthermore, avuso, a monk,

having completely transcended perceptions of form,

with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance,

through non-attention to perceptions of diversity,

contemplating, “Infinite space,” attains and dwells in **the sphere of infinite space**.²⁷

7.2 *He understands it with wisdom.*

*To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **the wisdom-freed** in a provisional [relative] manner.*

(6) THE SPHERE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

8 And furthermore, avuso, a monk,

having completely transcended the sphere of infinite space,

contemplating, “Infinite consciousness,”

attains and dwells in **the sphere of infinite consciousness**.²⁸

8.2 *He understands it with wisdom.*

*To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **the wisdom-freed** in a provisional [relative] manner.*

(7) THE SPHERE OF NOTHINGNESS

9 And furthermore, avuso, a monk,

having completely transcended the sphere of infinite consciousness,

contemplating, “There is nothing,”

attains and **[451] dwells in the sphere of nothingness**.²⁹

9.2 *He understands it with wisdom.*

*To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **the wisdom-freed** in a provisional [relative] manner.*

(8) THE SPHERE OF NEITHER-PERCEPTION-NOR-NON-PERCEPTION

10 And furthermore, avuso, a monk,

having completely transcended the sphere of nothingness,

contemplating, “This is peaceful; this is sublime,”

attains to **the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception**.³⁰

²⁷ *Sabbaso rūpa,saññānam samatikkamā paṭigha,saññānam atthaṅgamā nānatta,saññānam amanasikārā ananto ākāso ti ākāśānañcāyatanam upasampajja viharati.*

²⁸ *Sabbaso ākāśānañc’āyatanam samatikkama anantam viññāṇan ti viññāṇañcāyatanam upasampajja viharati.*

²⁹ *Sabbaso viññāṇañc’āyatanam samatikkamma n’atthi kiñcī ti ākiñcaññ’āyatanam upasampajja viharati.*

10.2 *He understands it with wisdom.*

*To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **the wisdom-freed** in a provisional [relative] manner.*

The cessation of perception and feeling

11 (9) Furthermore, avuso, a monk,
having completely transcended the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception,
attains and dwells in **the cessation of perception and feeling,**

11.2 and having seen it with wisdom, his mental influxes are fully destroyed.³¹

11.3 He dwells, having touched that base with the body, as far as it is attained.³²

To that extent, too, avuso, the Blessed One has spoken of **the wisdom-freed** in a non-provisional manner.³³

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³⁰ *Sabbaso ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ samatikkama santam etaṃ paṇītam etaṃ ti n'eva, saññā, nāsaññāyatanaṃ upa-sampajja viharati.*

³¹ *Paññāya cassa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti.*

³² *Yathā yathā ca tad-āyatanaṃ tathā tathā naṃ kāyena phassitvā viharati.* Note that this sentence occurs only here—which means that in the preceding 8 bases, the meditator, having attain each of them, emerges and reviews it with wisdom (ie, as being mind-made, hence, impermanent). It is only in cessation that the wisdom-freed feels the bliss of nirvana, and goes on to awaken as an arhat.

³³ “In a non-provisional manner,” *nippariyāyena*, ie, in the ultimate sense: see SD 50.25 (1.4.5).