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(Chakka) Nissaraṇīya Sutta

The (Sixes) Discourse on What Conduces to Escape | A 6.13

Theme: The 6 elements of spiritual freedom

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2019

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY AND HIGHLIGHT

1.1.1 Sutta summary. The (Chakka) Nissaraṇīya Sutta (A 6.13) contains teachings on the 6 elements of escape (*cha nissaraṇīya dhātu*), based on the 4 divine abodes, the signless and the uprooting of conceit. In any of these ways, except the last-named, the mind is rid of distractions (at least temporarily) by the freedom of mind (*ceto, vimutti*). The last term, in its highest sense, refers to the dhyana-based attainment of arhathood, in which case, it is referred to as “the freedom of mind and freedom by wisdom” (*ceto, -vimutti paññā, vimutti*).¹

The whole Sutta (A 6.13) is preserved, practically in full, in the Saṅgīti Sutta (D 33),² as “the 6 elements of escape” (*cha nissaraṇīya dhātu*), and the Das’uttara Sutta (D 34)³ as “the 6 things difficult to penetrate” (*cha dhamma duppaṭivijjhā*)—which attests to the earliness of A 6.13.

1.1.2 Sutta highlights

1.1.2.1 The (Chakka) Nissaraṇīya Sutta speaks of 6 kinds of freedom of mind (*ceto, vimutti*), that is, the attainment of dhyana with right view,⁴ and what each of these freedoms exclude or remove, thus:

		freedom of mind
(1) the freedom of mind through lovingkindness	removes <u>ill will</u>	<i>mettā, ceto, vimutti</i>
(2) the freedom of mind through compassion	removes <u>harming</u> ;	<i>karuṇā, ceto, vimutti</i>
(3) the freedom of mind through joy	removes <u>discontent</u> ;	<i>muditā, ceto, vimutti</i>
(4) the freedom of mind through equanimity	removes <u>lust</u> ;	<i>upekkhā, ceto, vimutti</i>
(5) the freedom of mind that is signless	removes <u>(mental) signs</u> ;	<i>animitta, ceto, vimutti</i>
(6) the freedom of mind that is conceit-free	removes <u>doubt and uncertainty</u> .	<i>suññata, ceto, vimutti</i> ⁵

1.1.2.2 Of the freedoms of mind based on the divine abodes, (1)-(3) can reach the 3rd dhyana, and (4) the 4th dhyana.⁶ They are collectively called the immeasurable freedom of mind (*appamāṇā ceto, vimutti*).⁷ These states are cultivated to full mental absorption or dhyana (*jhāna*). Having mastered such a dhyana, we emerge from it and reflect on it as being impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-self, which

¹ On *ceto, vimutti*, see SD 4.25 (2.2 + 4.5).

² D 33,2.2(17)/3:249 f.

³ D 34,1.7(7)/3:280.

⁴ On *dhyana with right view*, see SD 33.1b (4.4.3).

⁵ Neither the Sutta nor its comy names this 6th freedom of mind. *Suññata, ceto, vimutti*, “the freedom of mind through emptiness,” fits there because it is empty (*suñña*) of self (*attā*), or of what is owned by the self (*attaniya*). Conceit arises through fixation on some self-view. See SD 30.2 (3.2.3.3).

⁶ Comy however says that even lovingkindness can be used as the basis for the “3rd or 4th dhyana” (*tika, catukka-j, -jhānikā*, AA 3:346,21-24; Vism 9.118/324).

⁷ See SD 30.2 (3.2.2).

leads to the arising of meditative insight, and to freedom in due course.⁸ Since this freedom of mind is *mind-made*, it is still liable to cease (A 5:344). However, its proper cultivation can lead to the attainment of **non-returning** but not arhathood, as the subtler defilements still need to be transcended (A 5:300).

1.1.2.3 Then, there is **the signless freedom of mind** (*animittā ceto, vimutti*), which is attained by “the non-attention to all signs” (that is, disregarding all mental objects) or “the attention to the signless element.”⁹ The “signs” (*nimitta*) here refer to the various sense-objects, such as forms and so on. The “signless element” (*animitta, dhātu*) is nirvana itself (MA 2:355).

1.1.2.4 The freedom of mind that is **conceit-free** seems, at least in name, to be unique to **the (Chakka) Nissaraṇīya Sutta** (A 6.13). Neither the Sutta nor its commentary names this 6th freedom of mind. Considering that **conceit** arises through fixation on some self-view, this is probably “**the freedom of mind through emptiness**” (*suññata, ceto, vimutti*), which is empty (*suñña*) of self (*attā*), or of what is owned by the self (*attaniya*).¹⁰

1.1.2.5 In addition to the abovementioned 3 freedoms of mind—those of the immeasurables (divine abodes), through the signless and through emptiness, **the Mahā Vedalla Sutta** (M 43) mentions a 4th, the freedom of mind through nothingness, attained through that formless attainment.¹¹ Since all these can bring awakening to nirvana, they are commonly known as “**the unshakable freedom of mind**” (*akuppa ceto, vimutti*).¹²

1.1.3 Nissarana dhātu and ceto, vimutti

Unlike **the (Pañcaka) Nissaraṇīya Sutta** (A 5.200), which mentions the attainment of **arhathood**, this is not directly mentioned in **A 6.13**. **A 5.200** lists the 6 ways by which we can attain **dhyana**, where the 5 “elements of escape” (*nissaraṇa dhātu*) refer to overcoming **the 5 mental hindrances** (*pañca nīvaraṇa*): *sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt*.¹³ With the removal of the 5 hindrances, the 1st dhyana arises.

However, in place of the last element, that of “self-identity,” **A 6.13** has the “signless freedom” and the “I am” conceit (SD 55.18).

The term “element of escape” (*nissaraṇīya dhātu*) is here a synonym for the freedom of mind (*ceto, vimutti*), that is, where dhyana is the vehicle for freeing the mind.

1.1.4 The 6 elements of escape

1.1.4.1 The (Chakka) Nissaraṇīya Sutta describes a progressive meditation beginning with the 4 divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*) and closing with the signless concentration, ending with the uprooting of conceit. Of the divine abodes, the first 3 (lovingkindness, compassion and joy), when properly cultivated, can bring us to the 3rd dhyana; equanimity, on the other hand, can reach the 4th dhyana.¹⁴

⁸ The 4 immeasurables make up meditations nos 33-36 in the list of 40 traditional methods: see **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (8.1) & diag.

⁹ See **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43,27+34), SD 30.2.

¹⁰ See SD 30.2 (3.2.3.3).

¹¹ M 43,27 + SD 30.2 (3.2.3).

¹² See **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43,35-37), SD 30.2; also **Go, datta S** (S 41.7/4:295-297), SD 60.4.

¹³ See **Nīvaraṇa**, SD 32.1.

¹⁴ See SD 38.5 (7.4).

(Pañcaka) Nissaraṇīya Sutta (A 5.200), SD 55.17		(Chakka) Nissaraṇīya Sutta (A 6.13), SD 55.18	
<u>“not delighting in”</u>	<u>one mentally attends to</u> ¹⁵	<u>by overcoming</u>	<u>freedom of mind through</u>
(1) sensual pleasures	renunciation	→ (1) ill will	lovingkindness
(2) ill will	good will	→ (2) (thought of) harming	compassion
(3) (thought of) harming	non-harming	→ (3) discontent	joy
(4) form	the formless	→ (4) lust	equanimity
(5) self-identity	cessation of self-identity	→ (5) signs	the signless
		→ (6) doubt + uncertainty	uprooting of conceit ¹⁶

Table 1.1. The “elements of escape” and freedom of mind

1.1.4.2 In terms of **the divine abodes**, the first 4 of the 6 freedoms of mind in **the A 6.13** list, parallel the first 3 of the 5 delights of **A 5.200**. They both refer to the mind that frees itself from the body, and attains dhyana.

The 1st freedom of mind—that of **lovingkindness**—of A 6.13 is basically the same divine abodes, lovingkindness, cultivated to the level of dhyana that is the 2nd element of escape. Similarly, the 2nd freedom of mind rooted in **compassion**, which is the same as the 3rd element of escape.

The 3rd and 4th freedoms of mind—joy and equanimity—overlap with the 1st element of escape, renunciation. When discontent is renounced **joy** arises to the level of freedom of mind. When lust is renounced, we attain the freedom of mind that is **equanimity**.

1.1.4.3 The freedom of mind in **the signless** parallels is an interesting way with the element of escape that is the formless. In the former, we turn away from all mental signs and attains deep dhyana. In the latter, we no more mentally attend to any form, that is, not attending to the mental object whether as desirable, undesirable or neither. We see them as being mind-made, impermanent, and so are free from them.

1.1.4.4 The 6th freedom of mind (entailing the uprooting of conceit) of A 6.13 overlaps with the 5th element of escape of **A 5.200** by giving up the notion of “self.” In the former, the meditator stops identifying with the 5 aggregates; in the latter, the meditator stops identifying with others (which is the nature of conceit).

1.2 SUTTA TEACHING

1.2.1 The Majjhima Commentary explains that it is “freedom of mind” (*ceto, vimutti*) because it is a **samādhi** that is free from *lust*;¹⁷ it is “freedom by wisdom” (*paññā, vimutti*) because of **the wisdom** is free from *ignorance*.¹⁸ Samadhi or concentration is the result of meditative calm (*samatha*), while wisdom, the result of meditative insight (*vipassanā*).¹⁹

¹⁵ These are the “elements of escape” (*nissaraṇīya dhātu*).

¹⁶ This 6th element refers to the attainment of arhathood.

¹⁷ *Samādhi rāgato vimuttattā ceto, vimutti* (MA 1:164,31 f).

¹⁸ *Paññā avijjāya vimuttatā paññā, vimutti* (MA 1:164,32 f).

¹⁹ For details on *ceto, vimutti paññā, vimutti*, see SD 30.2 (3).

1.2.2 *Ceto, vimutti*

1.2.2.1 *Ceto, vimutti*, “freedom of mind,” basically refers to the mastery of any of the 4 dhyanas (*jhāna*),²⁰ which brings temporary suppression of the influxes (*āsava*: of sensual lust, existence, views and ignorance)²¹ by virtue of mental concentration (*samādhi*). *Ceto, vimutti* by itself is insufficient to bring about awakening (*bodhi*) or the cessation of rebirth. It must be complemented by the “**freedom through wisdom**” (*paññā, vimutti*), which refers to freedom by gaining insight into the 3 characteristics (impermanence, suffering and nonself).²²

1.2.2.2 Through the 4 dhyanas, *ceto, vimutti* is associated with the acquisition of **the 3 or 6 super-knowledges** (*abhiññā*). The 3 superknowledges, better known as **the 3 “knowledges”** (*ti, vijjā*), form the older set of superknowledges. These are the knowledges of an arhat, especially the last knowledge.

Here is a comparative table on the 2 sets of knowledges of an arhat:

The 3 knowledges (*ti, vijjā*)²³

-
-
-
- (1) the recollection of past lives
- (2) the divine eye (knowledge of death and rebirth of beings according to karma)
- (3) the knowledge of the destruction of the mental influxes

The 6 superknowledges (*cha-ḷ-abhiññā*)²⁴

- (1) psychic powers *iddhi, vidha*
- (2) the divine ear *dibba, sota*
- (3) mind-reading *ceto, pariya, ñāṇa*
- (4) (same) *pubbe, nivāsānussati, ñāṇa*
- (5) (same) *dibba, cakkhu* or (*cutūpa-pāta, ñāṇa*)
- (6) (same) *āsava-k, khaya, ñāṇa*

Table 1.2. The 3 knowledges and the 6 superknowledges

The 3 knowledges (*ti, vijjā*) are of historic significance because they are the special knowledges that the Buddha attains respectively during each of the 3 watches of the night of his awakening.²⁵ Of the 6 superknowledges, the first 5 are regarded as mundane, attained through the mastery of the 4th dhyana. Only the 6th—cultivated through insight wisdom with or without the medium of the 4th dhyana—is the “liberating knowledge” of **the arhat**.²⁶

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²⁰ On *ceto, vimutti paññā, vimutti*, see **Jhānābhiññā S** (S 16.9, 29+30) SD 50.7.

²¹ On the 3 influxes (*āsava*), see SD 30.3 (1.3.2); on the 4 influxes, see SD 30.3 (1.4.2).

²² See SD 30.2 (3); also BDict: *ceto-vimutti*.

²³ This is the Buddha’s “natural adaption” of the Brahminical notion of the “knower of the 3 Vedas” (*tri, vidyā*). See **Te, vijja S** (D 13) + SD 1.8 (2.2.2).

²⁴ See **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2, 89-99), SD 8.10; **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11, 55-66), SD 1.7; SD 27.5a (5).

²⁵ On the Buddha’s awakening to the 3 knowledges, see **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36, 38-44), SD 49.4.

²⁶ On the arhat, see SD 10.16 (14).

(Chakka) Nissaraṇīya Sutta

The (Sixes) Discourse on What Conduces to Escape

A 6.13

1 “Bhikshus, there are these **6 elements of escape**.²⁷ What are the six?

(1) Lovingkindness is free of ill will

2 Here, bhikshus, a monk might say thus:

‘I have cultivated and developed the freedom of mind²⁸ through **lovingkindness**,²⁹ made it a vehicle, made it the basis [the ground], pursued it, built it up, made it well even,³⁰ yet **ill will** still continues to overwhelm my mind.’³¹

3 He should be told:

‘It is not so! Venerable, speak not so! Do not misrepresent the Blessed One; for it is not good to misrepresent the Blessed One.

4 The Blessed One would certainly not speak in such a way.

It is impossible and inconceivable, avuso,

that one has cultivated and developed the freedom of mind through lovingkindness, made it a vehicle, made it the basis, pursued it, built it up, made it well even, yet **[291] ill will** can still obsess one’s mind. This is impossible.

5 For this, avuso, is the escape from ill will, namely, the freedom of mind through lovingkindness.’

(2) Compassion is free of harming

6 Now, bhikshus, a monk might say thus:

‘I have cultivated and developed the freedom of mind through compassion, made it a vehicle, made it the basis, pursued it, built it up, made it well even, yet (the thought of) **harming** still continues to overwhelm my mind.’

²⁷ *Nissaraṇīya dhātuyo*. Compare **(Pañcaka) Nissaraṇīya S** (A 5.200), SD 55.17, which treats the 5 “elements of escape” as latent tendencies (*anusaya*).

²⁸ “The freedom of mind,” *ceto, vimutti*. [1.1.3; 1.2.2]

²⁹ This + foll line: *Mettā hi kho me ceto, vimutti bhavitā bahulī, katā yāni, katā vatthu, katā anuṭṭhitā paricitā susam-āradhā*. The underscored is stock: **(Ceto, vimutti) Kula S** (S 20.3/2:264), SD 66.7; **Okkhā S** (S 20.4/2:264), SD 2.14; **Satti S** (S 20.5/3:265f); **(Aṭṭhaka) Saṅkhitta S** (A 8.63/4:300 x2).

³⁰ “Cultivated and developed ... made very well even,” *bhāvitā bahulī, katā yāni, katā vatthu, katā anuṭṭhitā paricitā susam-āradhā* (D 2:104 x5, 115-118 x9, 3:248 f x5; S 1:116, 2:264 f x4, 4:200, 5:170, 259 f x4; **A 6.13/3:290-292** x5 (SD 55.18), A 4:300 x2, 309 3x; U 62 f x4). All terms def at Pm 1:172, here paraphrased: cultivated (*bhāvitā*): perfected by way of embracing dhyana, insight and path; developed (*bahulī, katā*): thoughts (*dhammā*) do not arise in excess; made it a vehicle (*yāni, katā*): his calm and insight is ever ready; made it the basis (*vatthu, katā*): mindfulness is well-established; pursued it (*anuṭṭhita*): able to guide his mind; built it up (*pari, citā*), lit, become well-accumulated: able to conquer bad mental states; made them well even (*susam-āradhā*), lit, “making beauty arise”: overcoming defilements and attaining the goal. (Pm 3.173 f/1:172)

³¹ *Atha ca pan’assa vyāpādo cittaṃ pariyādāya ṭhassati*.

7 He should be told:

'It is not so! Venerable, speak not so! Do not misrepresent the Blessed One; for it is not good to misrepresent the Blessed One.

8 The Blessed One would certainly not speak in such a way.

It is impossible and inconceivable, avuso,

that one might have cultivated and developed the freedom of mind through compassion, made it a vehicle, made it the basis, pursued it, built it up, made it well even, yet harming can still obsess one's mind. *This is impossible.*

9 For this, avuso, is the ridding of harming, namely, the freedom of mind through compassion.'

(3) Joy is free of discontent

10 Now, bhikshus, a monk might say thus:

'I have cultivated and developed the freedom of mind through joy, made it my vehicle, made it the basis, pursued it, built it up, made it well even, yet **discontent**³² still continues to overwhelm my mind.'

11 He should be told:

'It is not so! Venerable, speak not so! Do not misrepresent the Blessed One; for it is not good to misrepresent the Blessed One.

12 The Blessed One would certainly not speak in such a way.

It is impossible and inconceivable, avuso,

that one might have cultivated and developed the freedom of mind through joy, made it a vehicle, made it the basis, pursued it, built it up, made it well even, yet discontent can still obsess one's mind. *This is impossible.*

13 For this, avuso, is the ridding of discontent, namely, the freedom of mind through joy.'

(4) Equanimity is free of lust

14 Now, bhikshus, a monk might say thus:

'I have cultivated and developed the freedom of mind through equanimity, made it a vehicle, made it the basis, pursued it, built it up, made it well even, yet **lust** still continues to overwhelm my mind.'

15 He should be told:

'It is not so! Venerable, speak not so! Do not misrepresent the Blessed One; for it is not good to misrepresent the Blessed One.

16 The Blessed One would certainly not speak in such a way.

It is impossible and inconceivable, avuso,

that one might have cultivated and developed the freedom of mind through equanimity, made it a vehicle, made it the basis, pursued it, built it up, made it well even, [292] yet lust can still obsess one's mind. *This is impossible.*

17 For this, avuso, is the ridding of lust, namely, the freedom of mind through equanimity.³³

³² "Discontent," *arati*, which usu refers to dissatisfaction with the life of renunciation.

³³ This text uses the word *rāga*, which, in this context, prob means "delight(ing)" rather than "sensual desire," as in "delighting in taste" (*rasa, rāga*) in **Brahm'āyu S** (M 91,14/2:138), SD 63.8. Interestingly, in **Mahā Rāhul'ovāda S** (M 62/1:424,33-34), *upekkhā* is opposed to *paṭigha*, "aversion," the diametrical opposite of *raga* (SD 3.11). Since *upekkhā* is a state of inner poise beyond both liking and disliking, it serves well as the antidote to the 2 opposing qualities.

(5) The signless freedom

18 Now, bhikshus, a monk might say thus:

'I have cultivated and developed the signless freedom of mind,³⁴
made it a vehicle, made it the basis, pursued it, built it up, made it well even,
yet **my consciousness still follows signs**.³⁵

19 He should be told:

*'It is not so! Venerable, speak not so! Do not misrepresent the Blessed One;
for it is not good to misrepresent the Blessed One.*

20 The Blessed One would certainly not speak in such a way.

It is impossible and inconceivable, avuso,

that one might have cultivated and developed the signless freedom of mind,
made it a vehicle, made it the basis, pursued it, built it up, made it well even,
yet one's consciousness could still follow signs. *This is impossible.*

21 For this, avuso, is the ridding of all signs, namely, the signless freedom of mind.'

(6) Uprooting the "I am" conceit

22 Now, bhikshus, a monk might say thus:

'I have discarded (the view), "I am," and I do not regard (anything as) "This I am,"
yet **the dart of doubt and uncertainty** still continues to overwhelm my mind.³⁶

23 He should be told:

*'It is not so! Venerable, speak not so! Do not misrepresent the Blessed One;
for it is not good to misrepresent the Blessed One.*

24 The Blessed One would certainly not speak in such a way.

It is impossible and inconceivable, avuso,

that when (the view) "I am" has been discarded, and one does not regard (anything as) "This I am,"
the dart of doubt and uncertainty could still obsess the mind and remain therein.

There is no such possibility.

25 For this, avuso, is the ridding of doubt and uncertainty, namely, the uprooting of the conceit, "I am."³⁷

26 These, bhikshus, are **the 6 elements of escape**."

— evaṃ —

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³⁴ *Animittā ceto, vimutti*. Comy glosses "the signless liberation of mind" as "strong insight" (*balava, vipassanā*). But the Dīgha reciters say it is the dhyana-attainment of the fruition of arhathood (*arahatta, phala, samapatti*); it is said to be "signless" because it lacks the signs of lust, etc, the signs of form, etc and the signs of permanence, etc (*sā hi raga, nimitt'ādinañ c'eva rūpa, nimitt'ādinañ ca nicca, nimitt'ādinañ ca abhāvā animittā'ti vuttā*, AA 3:347,17-20).

³⁵ *Nimittānusārī*. Comy explains "**follows signs**" as "following along with the signs mentioned" (*vutta-p, pabhedam nimittam anussaraṇa, sabhāvaṃ*, AA 3:347,21 f). The "signs mentioned," see prec n.

³⁶ *Pana me vicikicchā, kathaṃ. kathaṃ, sallaṃ cittam pariyādāya tiṭṭhati*. On *kathaṃ, kathaṃ*, see SD 32.8 (1.2).

³⁷ In terms of removal of the fetters and the stages of the path, doubt and the view, "This I am," are eliminated with the attainment of streamwinning, but the conceit "I am," with the attainment of arhathood: **Khemaka S** (S 22.-89/2:126-32). Here, the persistence of doubt signifies that someone still has the conceit "I am." See SD 55.7 (2.2.3); also **Me: The nature of conceit** (SD 19.2a).