

The Shorter Discourse on Emptiness (Cūḷasuññata-sutta, *Majjhima-nikāya* 121): translation and commentary

Dharmacari Satyadhana

Dharmacari Satyadhana (Kevin Schanilec) was ordained in the Triratna Buddhist Order in 2002. He has a keen interest in the original meditation methods given by the Buddha and how those methods might be best practiced today. A bureaucrat by day, he lives with his family near Seattle, WA, USA.

Abstract

Comprehensive descriptions of meditation practices are somewhat rare in the Pāli Canon. In the Cūḷasuññata-sutta, the Buddha gives us his approach to traversing the formless spheres (*arūpa-āyatanas*). The Buddha frequently taught the formless spheres to his disciples, usually as the final meditation practice in a sutta. Unfortunately, exactly how such a practice might be done has been surprisingly absent from post-canonical commentaries and modern publications. While the formless spheres are different from and perhaps more subtle than the *rūpa jhānas*, familiarity with and even mastery of the formless spheres is not necessarily a difficult undertaking. This article provides a full translation and detailed commentary on this important sutta, and includes numerous suggestions based on the meditative experiences of the author.

Introduction

Comprehensive descriptions of meditation practices are somewhat rare in the Pāli Canon. In the Cūḷasuññata-sutta, the Buddha gives us his suggested approach to traversing the formless spheres (*arūpa-āyatanas*). While he mentions meditative practice using the formless spheres numerous times, it is only here that we find a detailed set of instructions. This article seeks to provide additional information on this potentially valuable yet surprisingly under-utilized approach to meditation.

Canonical references to the formless spheres are very numerous indeed, including the suttas describing the path to enlightenment for both Sāriputta¹ and Moggallāna.² Remarkably, the Buddha recommended formless sphere practice to his first five disciples as the means for awakening,³ and it was his final meditation teaching before his parinibbāna.⁴ The formless spheres may be combined with other traditional approaches; for example, the Buddha prescribed the 16-step *anāpānasati* practice as the basis for formless sphere practice,⁵ and the *brahma-vihāras* may be used as either precursors or adjuncts.⁶ Within the Triratna Buddhist Order, two of the suggested insight practices, the Contemplation of the Six Elements and Recollection of the Nidāna Chain,⁷ are excerpted from suttas in which the Buddha prescribed continuing on to the formless spheres.⁸ And yet, despite the frequency with which the formless spheres are mentioned, there is surprisingly little said about them, either in post-canonical commentaries or in modern publications.

A threshold question might be: what exactly are the *arūpa* or formless spheres? The Pāli word *āyatana* can mean a sphere or region,

¹ *Majjhima-nikāya* 111.11 *et seq.* References are to Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*.

² *Samyutta-nikāya* 40.5 *et seq.* References are to Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *Connected Discourses of the Buddha*.

³ *Majjhima-nikāya* 26.38 *et seq.*

⁴ *Dīgha-nikāya* 16.3.33. References are to Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*.

⁵ *Samyutta-nikāya* 54.8.

⁶ *Majjhima-nikāya* 52.12 and *Samyutta-nikāya* 46.54 respectively.

⁷ Kamalashila 2012, pp.160–89.

⁸ *Majjhima-nikāya* 140.21 and *Dīgha-nikāya* 15.33, respectively.

or even a practice or exertion. In practice, the formless *āyatanas* are the regions or aspects of experience that are the focus of practice and investigation. Just as a physicist may take the sub-atomic realm as the *āyatana* of her investigations, so too we can take the formless aspects of our experience as our focus.

As for what makes a given sphere ‘formless’, the prefix *a-* in the Pāli word *arūpa* serves the same function as ‘un-’ in English. From this perspective, the negation of form means not only ‘formless’, but can also be seen as something unformed, as in an unformed opinion in which information has not yet been assimilated and interpreted. Experientially, the formless spheres are where we can investigate the four-fold basis of form. For a form to come into being, it needs (i) the faculty of perception, (ii) the notion of an individual ‘thing’ being perceived, (iii) sensory consciousness that detects all of the pertinent attributes of that thing, and (iv) three-dimensional space in which that particular thing is believed to be found. With these four bases for discerning and interpreting experience, we can drive a car, talk to a friend, think specific thoughts and otherwise get on with corporeal life.

However, by taking each of these four aspects of experience as the sphere or focus of investigation, we find that they aren’t what they seem to be. What we call ‘space’ is in fact not a finite property of experience of which we become aware, but rather an arbitrary and therefore limitless creation of the mind that, though useful for daily life, is not something we can conclusively know. Similarly, what we call ‘consciousness’ is really a continuous spectrum of experience that, though conventionally broken up into finite things such as thought, sight and sound, has no inherent limits. Underlying this is the fact that discrete ‘things’, such as trees external to the body or thoughts that arise internally, aren’t actually able to be discerned. Finally, we can see that there is no faculty called ‘perception’ by which we could discern ‘things’ in the first place.

So, ‘formless sphere practice’ as laid out in the sutta is a matter of investigating these four aspects of experience and seeing their illusory nature. As we progress, one sphere is abandoned for the next, since a more subtle focus is necessary. While a noticeable sense of limitless space or other formless aspects of experience may be accessed during various forms of meditation or even during the day, the intent of formless sphere practice is to provide a stable and unmistakable knowledge of them.

While the formless spheres are often referred to as *jhānas*, the Buddha consistently referred to them as *āyatanas*. This distinction is important, in that the formless spheres are not just ways in which to calm the mind, but they can also be both the context for or target of *vipassanā* or insight practice: that is the intent of the sutta. As the formless spheres deal with the most subtle illusions we hold, being able to set such illusions aside even temporarily can provide an ideal perspective from which *vipassanā* can be done, including clear seeing into the illusions of space, consciousness, things and perception which comprise the spheres. As described in the Mahāmālūṅkyaputta-sutta,⁹ the breaking of the lower five fetters can occur while traversing the formless spheres, just as it can happen in the *rūpa-jhānas*.

While there can be some mystery around the formless spheres, it should be emphasized that they are in fact natural ‘states’ of the mind. Consider that deepening *samatha* concentration leads to the *rūpa-jhānas*, where one can temporarily relax one’s identification with the body, thoughts or whatever else is normally discerned as a distinct ‘form’. The *rūpa-jhānas* can arise quite naturally and spontaneously, even in the midst of some activity, should the mind be allowed to relax its grip on experience, but are generally (and even reliably) cultivated in meditation. Likewise, one can spontaneously enter the formless spheres as the mind becomes more deeply concentrated, although in such cases the experience may likely be more *samatha* than *vipassanā* in nature. The formless spheres are thus not manufactured states, but rather signposts along the way as the mind gradually drops assumptions and interpretations that comprise much of our daily lives. That they are potentially available to everyone is illustrated by the fact that the formless spheres were well known by the Brahmanic teachers of the Buddha, and he apparently chose to use the names already in use for each sphere.¹⁰

I should note that accessing the formless spheres does not necessarily require that one first enter *jhāna*, especially once one becomes familiar with them, although such concentration may still be helpful. Also, the formless spheres are not simply extensions or follow-on states from the *rūpa-jhānas*, at least in the way the Buddha suggests we approach them. Though the formless spheres can naturally arise and be free from thought, and thus seem like *jhānas*, the Buddha presents

⁹ *Majjhima-nikāya* 64.

¹⁰ *Majjhima-nikāya* 26.15–16.

here a more intentional approach where some non-discursive thought can arise and, in the case of the sphere of nothingness, even be a focus of the meditation.

Becoming proficient in formless sphere practice can be beneficial at any stage of the spiritual path, giving one an experiential feel for what space, consciousness, things and perception really are(n't). Eventually, the seventh fetter (*arūpa-rāga* or insistent reliance upon the formless) deals directly with lingering attachment to these subtle illusions created by the mind. For one who transcends this fetter, the formless spheres are no longer 'states' to cultivate and maintain, but rather straightforward descriptions of the way things really are. There are no longer notions of limited consciousness to expand, no fixed 'things' to be negated. In a sense, one no longer goes through the formless spheres as a meditation practice, since the insights having to do with perception and the nature of subject/object duality become one's normal perspective on experience. One might say that the Two Truths (conventional and ultimate) are allowed to sit side-by-side without any conflict.

However, regardless of where we are on the path, we can greatly benefit from this approach to practice. I can honestly say that, in many ways, experience has simply not been the same since I first had a stable experience of the formless realms, and that knowledge continues to inform experience to this day. It is hoped that the translation and commentary that follows will help others to understand and engage with this valuable teaching of the Buddha. The text utilized for the translation is that published by the Pāli Text Society.

The Shorter Discourse on Emptiness

Thus have I heard. At one time the Bhagavant, the Blessed One, was dwelling at Savatthi in the Eastern Park, the terraced grounds belonging to Migara's mother. One evening, the venerable Ananda, having risen from his secluded meditation spot, went to the Blessed One and, upon arriving, bowed down and sat to one side.

He then said to the Blessed One: 'Once the Blessed One was residing in the city of Nagaraka, among the Sakyans. We were face to face, and I heard you say "Often do I abide with an abiding of

emptiness.” Did I correctly hear that, correctly grasp it, give correct attention to it, and correctly remember it?’

The Buddha replied ‘Yes, Ananda, you correctly heard it, correctly grasped it, correctly gave attention to it, and correctly remembered it. Even now, I often abide with an abiding of emptiness.’

1. Perception of Forest

1.a ‘Ananda, these terraced grounds of Migara’s mother are empty of the village, of its money and various animals, and are further empty of the village’s people, and there is only this one thing: the focal point dependent upon perceiving ‘forest’. Just so, Ananda, a monk, having removed attention of the mind from the perception of ‘village’, and having removed attention of the mind from the perception of ‘people’, may place his attention on but one thing, a perception of ‘forest’. His mind fully embraces the perception of ‘forest’, and in it becomes clear and calm, becomes stilled and established, and is fully drawn into and settled upon it.’

The sutta was originally set in the forest, away from the local village, whereas we might typically meditate in a room, a shrine hall, or other modern facility. Thus, for purposes of these notes, rather than reference the conditions that existed 2,500 years ago, I will assume you might also be meditating either alone or with others in some sort of structure. I have also slightly condensed this first portion to fit the recurring pattern found in subsequent sections, so it reads somewhat differently than other more literal translations.

In this first step, in a three-fold recurring pattern found in each of the eight stages of the sutta, we release our attention from where it has been and put all that focus on one specific thing. Assuming we are in a suitable meditation setting, whether with or without others, we are no longer out in the world of cities and people, in the *kāma-loka* (world of desire). We need to get to the point where we have taken our mind off that world. Hence we sit ‘having removed attention of the mind’ (*amanasikarivā*, ‘not paying attention’).

Sitting on your cushion, you could ask yourself, ‘Where is the outside world? Where is that unfinished project at work? Where is that argument with my family member?’ In truth, that outside world is, at least for the moment, not in here. You can give yourself permission to

leave it out there, knowing that it will be there when next summoned. It's just you (and maybe others) in a quiet meditation location.

If we are to leave the outside world to its own devices, what then should we focus on? We are instructed to 'place attention' (Pāli *manasikaroti*), or draw the focus to, what is here. For the Buddha and Ananda it was the forest, whereas for us it is the meditation hall or structure, the fellow meditators that might be around us, our cushion or chair, and anything else that comprises 'here'. Even with our eyes shut, we can sense where we are and what is around us to verify that we are indeed here.

By turning our attention to, and making our mind solely focused on, just the physical aspects of where we are, we are creating a temporary *ekatta*. *Ekatta* is sometimes translated as 'non-voidness' or 'singleness': to avoid reification of it, I have chosen 'focal point'. We are placing all of our attention (or at least as much as we can) on that perceived thing in order to preclude the outside world from intruding. It is the sole point of focus for the mind, ideally taking up the entire field of perception. Whatever is perceived is not to be considered 'real' in the sense that it is ultimately non-void: it is simply what we are currently choosing to devote our entire attention to at this time, thus leading to a nominal singleness/focal point.

The Buddha actually gets quite specific about how settled on this *ekatta* we should be. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi translate that the mind 'enters into and acquires confidence, steadiness, and decision' in the object of focus. Further illustration is provided by definitions of the four Pāli words, wherein the mind jumps into, rejoices in, falls into, and pursues (*pakkhandati*) the object of focus, becomes clear and calm (*pasīdati*), stands still and becomes established (*santiṭṭhati*) and is fully drawn into and settles in that focus (*adhimuccati*).

1.b 'He thus ascertains: "There is no longer the three-fold disturbance (tedha darathā) due to his perceiving 'village', and he also ascertains there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to his perceiving 'people'. There is now only a subtler apparent disturbance, because there is now the focal point dependent upon his perception of 'forest'."

In this second step we notice that our field of perception is no longer beset by any cares or distraction from the world outside. Such care or distraction is termed *daratha* in Pāli. There are various ways to define

this word, with the dictionaries offering that it is an ‘anxiety, care, distress’, or ‘a cave’ in the sense that one is in a confining place. Another canonical source equates having any sort of fixation on a previous focus with being afflicted or beset by such attention.¹¹ It might feel like a disturbance, a tether, an encumbrance, being bound up, and/or a challenge: whatever is trying to keep attention rooted somewhere else.

Having thus become settled in our current object of focus, previous disturbances are simply not there, just as distractions generally fade away when focusing on the breath while doing the Mindfulness of Breathing.¹² As such, we have experiential certainty regarding their absence: the Pāli verb is *pajānāti*, ‘to know, ascertain, understand, discern’. The sutta points out that the components of this knowing are tedha or three-fold, in that perception (*saññā*) requires three things: a sense organ, a sense object, and the associated consciousness (*viññāṇa*). So, this three-fold perception process no longer occurs regarding outside disturbances. You could generate from memory the ‘outside world’, but you consciously don’t. By not imagining or recognizing an object, this distraction simply doesn’t occur.

If the previous *darathas* are gone, what remains? Well, it is the current *daratha*, the disturbance associated with ‘here’, which currently occupies our field of perception. However, it is only a smaller quantity (*daratha-mattā*), *mattā* being a ‘measure, quantity’. In this case, the distraction associated with the outside world has been replaced with that of the relatively peaceful surroundings of wherever it is that we are meditating.

The Sutta reminds us that this subtler *daratha* associated with ‘forest’ (or in our case ‘hall’, etc.) does not imply there is an actual forest (hall) around us, but only a provisionally real one, to the extent that it is the current focus of our attention. There is only an apparent unitary, non-void object which provides us with a *daratha*. Also, the Pāli *paticca ekatta*, ‘the focal point dependent upon’ (one’s surroundings in this case), reminds us that it is only because we are thus focusing on our surroundings, strictly for purposes of meditating, that we have this particular focal point and associated disturbance in the first place.

¹¹ *Āṅguttara-nikāya* 9.41 and 9.34.

¹² See for example Kamalashila 2012, p.13.

1.c ‘He ascertains that his field of perception is now empty of any perception of ‘village’, and he ascertains that his field of perception is now empty of any perception of ‘people’. All that remains is a provisional entity, namely, the focal point resulting from now perceiving ‘forest’. He now sees that whatever entity is not in his field of perception, that field is therefore empty of that entity. He also sees that whatever entity remains in his field of perception, that entity does exist in his field of perception. This has been an unmistakable and clear establishment of emptiness in accordance with the way things really are.’

Finally, we take a broader look at our field of perception, our *saññāgata*, which literally means ‘where our perception has gone to, arrived at’. We know and discern that, in this case, the outside world is simply not in our field of perception. It’s not just that it is empty (which it is, in the sense of not having anything substantial to it), but our perception is empty of the notion of it as well. However, it is only this second type of emptiness which we can personally verify within our own experience, as opposed to inferring that external entities are empty, an important distinction. It is by this direct knowledge that we see things *yathā-bhūta*, ‘as they really are’. Such direct, experiential knowledge is *avipallatthā*, ‘not deranged, corrupt, or perverted’, thus ‘free of mistakes’, *parisuddhā*, ‘clean, clear, pure, perfect’, and represents a *suññatā-avakkanti*, ‘an entry into, coming down to and establishment in, emptiness’.

What remains is the current *ekatta*, the provisionally real thing we are focusing on. The verb used for the current *ekatta* is *samanupassati*, which means ‘to see or regard’, as opposed to the more authoritative *pajānāti*, ‘ascertain’. Thus, we just hold it there and do not get too invested in it being real.

2. Perception of Earth

‘Again and further, Ananda, a bhikkhu, having removed attention of the mind from perception of ‘people’, and having removed attention of the mind from perception of ‘forest’, places attention on the focal point dependent upon perceiving ‘earth’. Just as a stretched bull’s hide is free from wrinkles, even so, without being distracted by the features of the earth, he places his attention on the focal point dependent upon perceiving ‘earth’. His mind fully

embraces the perception of ‘earth’, and in it becomes clear and calm, becomes stilled and established, and is fully drawn into and settled upon it.

‘He thus ascertains there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to his perceiving ‘people’, and he also ascertains there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to his perceiving ‘forest’. There is now only a subtler apparent disturbance, because there is now the focal point dependent upon his perception of ‘earth’.

‘He ascertains that his field of perception is now empty of any perception of ‘people’, and he ascertains that his field of perception is now empty of any perception of ‘forest’. All that remains is a provisional entity, namely the focal point resulting from now perceiving ‘earth’.

‘He now sees that whatever entity is not in his field of perception, that field is therefore empty of that entity. He also sees that whatever entity remains in his field of perception, that entity does exist in his field of perception. This has again been an unmistakable and clear establishment of emptiness in accordance with the way things really are.’

We now deepen our contemplation of the *rūpa-loka*, the world of form, but limit our field of perception to ‘earth’. Unlike the previous stage, where focusing on ‘hall’ or ‘forest’ may have been difficult because there were so many things to focus on, now we are down to just one thing.

I suggest focusing on the body as a tangible form of ‘earth’, much as is done in the Contemplation of the Six Elements, in that it is easy to focus on and gives a strong sense of physical dimension and space from which we can enter the first formless sphere. It can also provide a strong element of *samatha*; indeed, getting past this stage will likely be difficult without a good degree of calm and concentration. However, since some mental processes are needed, being in the *rūpa-jhānas* is too much. The breath could also be used here: you could do a period of the Mindfulness of Breathing, drawing all of your attention to that single focus as a *samatha* practice (Step 1 of this stage), and then continue to Steps 2 and 3.

Once attention is settled, you can look and see that the *darathas* associated with your surroundings are gone. The *ekatta* of ‘hall’, so significant just a few minutes ago, is now gone from your field of perception. This is the important *vipassanā* aspect of the practice, a continual state of knowing what it is you perceive and, more importantly, what you no longer perceive.

3. Perception of the Sphere of Limitless Space

‘Again and further, Ananda, a bhikkhu, having removed attention of the mind from perception of ‘forest’, and having removed attention of the mind from perception of ‘earth’, places attention on the focal point dependent upon perceiving ‘the sphere of limitless space’. His mind fully embraces the perception of ‘the sphere of limitless space’, and in it becomes clear and calm, becomes stilled and established, and is fully drawn into and settled upon it.

‘He thus ascertains there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to his perceiving ‘forest’, and he also ascertains there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to his perceiving ‘earth’. There is now only a subtler apparent disturbance, because there is now the focal point dependent upon his perception of ‘the sphere of limitless space’.

‘He ascertains that his field of perception is now empty of any perception of ‘forest’, and he ascertains that his field of perception is now empty of any perception of ‘earth’. All that remains is a provisional entity, namely the focal point resulting from now perceiving ‘the sphere of limitless space’.

‘He now sees that whatever entity is not in his field of perception, that field is therefore empty of that entity. He also sees that whatever entity remains in his field of perception, that entity does exist in his field of perception. This has again been an unmistakable and clear establishment of emptiness in accordance with the way things really are.’

Now we enter into the *arūpa-loka*, the formless spheres. The first formless sphere, the perspective or lens through which your perception

will be focused, is that of limitless space. The Pāli is *ākāsa-anañca-āyatana-saññā*, which can be translated as ‘perception via the sphere of the unlimitedness of space’, or perhaps ‘unlimited space as the sphere of perception’. I note that while *anañca* is commonly translated as ‘infinite’, ‘non-finite’ may lend a less reified sense to it.

Here, ‘space’ is the three-dimensional aspect of existence where things are apparently located, be they trees, fingers or thoughts. What we learn in this sphere is that space is something that we create rather than perceive. Normally, we tend to see things as discrete objects of consciousness, and then assemble a three-dimensional picture in our minds as to where each and every thing is. By doing so, we allot a limited, finite amount of space to each thing, such as our body, the room we are in, other people, and so on. In reality there is no such thing as fixed or finite space. However, to gain a firsthand view of what ‘space’ really is(n’t), we must look directly at the mind.

There are various traditional ways to make the transition to the sphere of limitless space. As contained in the *Visuddhimagga*,¹³ saying ‘Limitless Space’, or perhaps just ‘Space’ may suffice. If not immediately effective, a sense of attacking the formless sphere may work, in that we just keep up with the intoning of the word or phrase until successful.

Another approach borrows from the Mahāmudrā tradition,¹⁴ where we adopt a questioning approach, asking questions like ‘Where is my mind? Where is the limit or boundary of my mind? What is the shape of my mind?’ and so forth. No boundary, shape or anything else is found, and by maintaining this sense of there being no actual limit to the mind, it can become a sphere or perspective in which the true nature of space can be seen.

You might try considering two objects, one near and one farther away. For example, you could use your sternum and the floor underneath you, the person across from you and the tree outside, etc. Now, closing your eyes, try to find the distances to those objects, and also the difference in distance between them. What is quickly realized is that ‘distance’ is a mental construct, something we overlay on experience to try to make logical sense of it all, but which doesn’t inherently exist.

¹³ *Visuddhimagga*, Chapter X.

¹⁴ See for example Milarepa’s ‘Shepherd’s Search for Mind’.

Another method is to imagine sending ‘rays’ of awareness out in all directions, imagining how far one could conceive space as extending. One can quickly realize that what we term ‘space’ is an arbitrary phenomenon. We can in fact imagine space to an infinite extent in all directions, yet all of that imagination occurs as a mental ‘event’.

Eventually, the mind will naturally expand out. When it does happen, it can be something of a jolt or perhaps a bit disorienting. It can also entail some of the lights and physical sensations often associated with the *rūpa-jhānas*, but try to just watch it happen and let it go. It usually appears as what I would describe as a three-dimensional canvas with no discernible limits, maybe not even a center point (i.e., ‘you’). By no longer dividing space into discrete, finite portions, individual things start to lose their distinctiveness and boundaries.

This of course means that what we normally think of our physical ‘selves’ starts to dissolve as well. The sensations that we normally associate with ‘body’ are now much less integrated, if at all. It therefore becomes clear that the mind continually compiles these sensations into a ‘body’ in order to get through daily life. Though we are only in the first formless sphere, this highlights the *vipassanā* aspect of the practice, in that we are already starting to break down the fixed notions we have regarding what and where things are. Even though the illusion of space may reassert itself after the current meditation, the seed has been planted by which space and the separation of subject and object may eventually be seen through. For me, ‘space’ was never the same once I had seen, even temporarily, that it is a mental construct.

Seeing everything now from the perspective of unlimited space, you no longer have anywhere to put things. Dimension and shape are things the mind manufactures on a constant basis, creating a perspective of ‘I’m here, and everything else is there, there and there’. However, you do still have a daratha associated with placing your focus on this sense of limitless space, your current anchor to experience. As fascinating as limitless space can be, it is the next thing to leave behind.

4. Perception of the Sphere of Limitless Consciousness

‘Again and further, Ananda, a bhikkhu, having removed attention of the mind from perception of ‘earth’, and having removed attention of the mind from perception of ‘the sphere of limitless

space’, places attention on the focal point dependent upon perceiving ‘the sphere of limitless consciousness’. His mind fully embraces the perception of ‘the sphere of limitless consciousness’, and in it becomes clear and calm, becomes stilled and established, and is fully drawn into and settled upon it.

‘He thus ascertains there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to his perceiving ‘earth’, and he also ascertains there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to his perceiving ‘the sphere of limitless space’. There is now only a subtler apparent disturbance, because there is now the focal point dependent upon his perception of ‘the sphere of limitless consciousness’.

‘He ascertains that his field of perception is now empty of any perception of ‘earth’, and he ascertains that his field of perception is now empty of any perception of ‘the sphere of limitless space’. All that remains is a provisional entity, namely the focal point resulting from now perceiving ‘the sphere of limitless consciousness’.

‘He now sees that whatever entity is not in his field of perception, that field is therefore empty of that entity. He also sees that whatever entity remains in his field of perception, that entity does exist in his field of perception. This has again been an unmistakable and clear establishment of emptiness in accordance with the way things really are.’

The Pāli is *viññāṇa-anañca-āyatana-saññā*, ‘perception of/via the sphere of the unlimitedness of consciousness’, or perhaps ‘unlimited consciousness which is the sphere of perception’. The traditional way to move into this sphere is to say ‘consciousness’, or ‘limitless’, or ‘limitless consciousness’, and this may be effective.

I have found success in scanning for each of the six sense doors, and upon examination concluding that neither the sense consciousness nor the perceived object are anywhere to be found. For example, I place my mind’s eye on ‘hearing’ and trying to determine where the act of hearing is occurring and where the ‘sound’ is. I quickly realize that there is no finite aspect of consciousness, not even necessarily separate sense doors. In their place is what feels like a

blanket of sensations/sensory data or vibrations saturating the entirety of experience, that doesn't have to be interpreted in any particular way. Another means of accessing this sphere is to ask yourself 'Where is the color "red"?' 'Where is "blue"?' 'Where is the color in between them?' 'How many colors in between these three could there possibly be?' Not only can the first three colors not be found to actually exist, but the fourth question makes clear that there are no bounds to the colors that the mind can create. In bare physical terms, there are an infinite number of wavelengths at which light can be transmitted. Any color, or any other attribute that we can know via consciousness, is arbitrary.

When I 'arrive' within the sphere of limitless consciousness, and use that as my lens of perception, I realize that distinct attributes and characteristics are no longer discernible. I may want to isolate 'blue' or 'the chord of C sharp', but those individual qualities don't actually exist. Consciousness is not finite: it doesn't result in finite or limited attributes, it doesn't return discrete results. The information that consciousness provides does not correspond to any partitioned external (or internal) reality. Rather, it is a constantly changing landscape of indeterminate sensory input, with which the mind artificially partitions and imposes boundaries. In the end, much of what we consider to be 'consciousness' is merely interpretation.

Similar to limitless space, wherein you no longer had anywhere to put things, now you no longer have particular attributes to apply to things by which to differentiate them. This is different from the pure or objectless consciousness developed in the Contemplation of the Six Elements, in that there is no longer something called 'consciousness' which could be pure or lacking an object. Consciousness itself has been penetrated, and all you can say is that there are no limits or boundaries on it or within it.

As you settle into perceiving the unlimited nature of consciousness, relax the tendency to look for particular attributes, such as colors, shapes, etc. It's really all just input; any limit that you place on consciousness, insisting that there is a particular sight, smell, etc., is completely arbitrary. What remains is a dis-integrated set of feelings and sensations. While the mind is able to take this input and assemble 'shape' and 'color', and automatically does so on a daily basis, you can now appreciate that this process of 'creation' is really more like pattern recognition, rather than recognizing some inherently existing quality. By seeing through the illusion of consciousness, this can itself be a

basis for *vipassanā* practice: as described in the Mahāmālunḅyaputta-sutta, one can realize insight here and break the lower five fetters.

Looking back from here, the sense of limitless space that was so big and impressive a few minutes ago is just a memory. You now know that the constant creation of space is something you make, a conditioned phenomenon as the Buddha describes it in the Dhātuvibhaᅅga-sutta,¹⁵ rather than an inherent part of reality. Spoiler alert: this same conclusion will soon be reached regarding this sphere of unlimited consciousness.

An important factor in this progression through the formless spheres is that it is a natural process. While there can be an arbitrary number of *nidānas*, *khandhas*, elements or other potential meditation objects, the formless spheres can spontaneously arise if the mind is allowed to completely settle and fall silent. For example, by continuing to do the Mindfulness of Breathing after the *rūpa-jhānas* have been cultivated, the formless spheres can naturally arise by simply continuing to follow the breath, even if one is not aware of that possibility. As such, while there are other ways to allow liberating *samādhi* to arise, formless sphere practice can be a natural and expedient means.

5. Perception of the Sphere of Nothingness

‘Again and further, Ananda, a bhikkhu, having removed attention of the mind from perception of ‘the sphere of limitless space’, and having removed attention of the mind from perception of ‘the sphere of limitless consciousness’, places attention on the focal point dependent upon perceiving ‘nothingness’. His mind fully embraces the perception of ‘nothingness’, and in it becomes clear and calm, becomes stilled and established, and is fully drawn into and settled upon it.

‘He thus ascertains there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to his perceiving ‘the sphere of limitless space’, and he also ascertains there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to his perceiving ‘the sphere of limitless consciousness’. There is only a subtler apparent disturbance, because there is now the focal point dependent upon his perception of ‘nothingness’.

¹⁵ *Majjhima-nikāya* 140.22.

‘He ascertains that his field of perception is now empty of any perception of ‘the sphere of limitless space’, and he ascertains that his field of perception is now empty of any perception of ‘the sphere of limitless consciousness’. All that remains is a provisional entity, namely the focal point resulting from now perceiving ‘nothingness’.

‘He now sees that whatever entity is not in his field of perception, that field is therefore empty of that entity. He also sees that whatever entity remains in his field of perception, that entity does exist in his field of perception. This has again been an unmistakable and clear establishment of emptiness in accordance with the way things really are.’

The Pāli is *ākiñcañña-āyatana-saññā*: ‘perception of/via/with the sphere of nothing’. The traditional phrases used to access this sphere are ‘There is not’, ‘There is nothing’, ‘Nothing’, or ‘Void, Void’.

I also use the questioning approach, where first I ask myself ‘Where is that particular thing’ to get past whatever object(s) remain, then ‘Where is even the concept of a thing? Where is thingness?’ to settle in. If something starts to materialize in my field of perception, I look for that thing and/or ask where it is, and it fades back into nothingness, or perhaps ‘no-thingness’. In essence, it is a matter of letting go of the concept of ‘things’, that there is any sort of distinction or differentiation even possible within our experience. At this point, the assertion of any particular ‘thing’ amounts to pattern recognition: if certain conditions prevail, the *sāṅkhāra* or habit of calling those patterns ‘tree’ or ‘frustration’ can result.

This is now a much quieter and peaceful place than the previous stage, perhaps somewhat disorienting, like walking into a dark quiet room from a lively party. After settling in, we notice how the daratha of consciousness, the constant urge to identify things and their characteristics, is no longer there. The notion that there can be individual ‘things’ has been dissolved. If only temporarily, we have gone past the three *lakkaṇas* or ‘characteristics’: without ‘things’, there is nothing that can be impermanent, lacking in self or conducive to suffering.

There is one ‘thing’ that must necessarily still persist: the subtle thoughts regarding the practice itself, recalling what we’re

supposed to be focusing on at a given point. Up to this point, the instructions as to where and how to look may have been quietly recalled and relied upon, but now they start to stick out like a sore thumb if we get too wrapped up with them. At this point, try to keep words to an absolute minimum, calling upon them only to the extent needed to continue on with the structure of the practice: bring them to mind and then let them go. There can be a modicum of thought in formless sphere practice, but it doesn't have to intrude or break your concentration, and once you are familiar with the method and the formless spheres themselves the words become unnecessary.

Without 'things', you no longer have any need or use for consciousness, since there is no longer anything to which you can apply any attributes. In fact, 'unlimited consciousness' was itself a thing, an object of perception. As a result, looking back from here, the thing that seemed so real in the previous step is gone: our field of perception is empty of it. Again, it's not just that things themselves are empty (which they are, in the sense of not having anything substantial to them), but our perception is empty of the very notion of them as well. However, this is now becoming a rather fine distinction.

The Buddha's intention when presenting this sutta teaching to Ananda, to present the dwelling in the abode of emptiness, really starts to manifest here. However, there is still the tendency to want to find things, to perceive things. Thus, we need to keep going.

6. Perception of the Sphere of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception

'Again and further, Ananda, a bhikkhu, having removed attention of the mind from perception of 'the sphere of limitless consciousness', and having removed attention of the mind from perception of 'nothingness', places attention on the focal point dependent upon perceiving 'the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception'. His mind fully embraces the perception of 'the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception', and in it becomes clear and calm, becomes stilled and established, and is fully drawn into and settled upon it.

'He thus ascertains there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to his perceiving 'the sphere of limitless consciousness', and he also ascertains there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to

his perceiving ‘nothingness’. There is now only a subtler apparent disturbance, because there is now the focal point dependent upon his perception of ‘the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception’.

‘He ascertains that his field of perception is now empty of any perception of ‘the sphere of limitless consciousness’, and he ascertains that his field of perception is now empty of any perception of ‘nothingness’. All that remains is a provisional entity, namely the focal point resulting from now perceiving ‘the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception’.

‘He now sees that whatever entity is not in his field of perception, that field is therefore empty of that entity. He also sees that whatever entity remains in his field of perception, that entity does exist in his field of perception. This has again been an unmistakable and clear establishment of emptiness in accordance with the way things really are.’

Now we let go of nothingness and try to get a sense of what we mean by ‘perception’. The traditional phrases to use for the transition are ‘isolated’ or ‘peaceful’. In a way, we are withdrawing the final connection to phenomenal existence here, the notion that we have something called ‘perception’ by which things might be detected.

I have also found the questioning approach quite useful, where I try to perceive who or what is doing the perceiving, sometimes called ‘looking for the looker’, or searching for that which corresponds to the word ‘perception’. This might seem like something of a hall of mirrors, an infinite regression, or a dog chasing its tail, but eventually settles down into that ‘isolated’ and ‘peaceful’ quality and generally a sky-like mind. At that point, it becomes obvious that, given our psychophysical constituency, it is simply impossible for us to perceive anything absolutely real, and yet we somehow perceive that fact.

Another way to transition to neither perception nor non-perception is to subtly recognize the six sense doors, the basic elements of experience, and try to consciously perceive some ‘thing’ out of that raw information. You will find that it is impossible, thus experientially realizing that there is no such thing as ‘perception’, yet this fact is clearly perceived (‘nor non-perception’). Every time an incipient

‘thing’ is pursued, it never comes into being – the experiential framework within which this could happen simply doesn’t exist.

The original intention of the sutta, how one abides in emptiness, becomes even more tangible once we are settled in neither perception nor non-perception. Nevertheless, it is an emptiness that knows: it may not know something discrete or concrete, but there is still a definite sense of knowing or, perhaps better, the ability to know. Ironically, you now know that there is really no such thing as perception, since you can’t locate it or pin it down, yet the only way you know perception is non-existent is because you perceive that to be true. How can this be?

The *Visuddhimagga* talks in terms of a ‘subtle perception’ that has no karmic consequences,¹⁶ as opposed to the grosser perception that dominates much of our waking lives. Ananda inquired of both the Buddha and Sāriputta on this matter,¹⁷ and was told that one is in fact still percipient here and in the signless *samādhi* which follows, but one is just not sensitive to it, does not respond to it or make anything of it. From this perspective, it is the gross perception that has fallen away, and the subtler perception is now predominant.

If we misinterpret our innate ability to be percipient only in this subtler way, thus making more of sense experience than we should, the process we just went through would start to reverse itself. Looking back up the trail, we would next assume that there are ‘things’ to perceive, assign those perceived things certain characteristics based on input from consciousness, and then allow them a place in space (and time).

However, as a practice, the Buddha himself suggested working through the formless spheres, backwards and forwards,¹⁸ so that it becomes clear that the formless spheres themselves are illusory, as is the world of form that potentially results. We can thus clearly see that experience is not inherently bounded or characterized by space or even time, nor do phenomena inherently have the attributes that the six sense consciousnesses detect. In fact, the basic notion that there are discrete ‘things’ anywhere within experience is conclusively disproven. Finally, there is the direct realization that, though ‘perceiving’ is occurring as a natural part of embodied existence, there is no faculty

¹⁶ *Visuddhimagga* X.49.

¹⁷ *Āṅguttara-nikāya* 10.6, 10.7, and also 9.37.

¹⁸ *Āṅguttara-nikāya* 9.41.

corresponding to the word ‘perception’ by which real ‘things’ are being perceived.

As such, formless sphere practice is ultimately a matter of letting go, of abandoning the very underpinnings of the dualities that seem to pervade life. Normally, thoughts and images arise and are elaborated upon without any particular fanfare or even awareness that this process is occurring. From the perspective of the formless spheres, the arising of a thought, and especially the adornment of it with further bits and pieces of memory, desire, anxiety, etc. can be very obvious indeed.

7. Perception of the Signless Concentration of Mind

‘Again and further, Ananda, a bhikkhu, having removed attention of the mind from perception of ‘nothingness’, and having removed attention of the mind from perception of ‘neither perception nor non-perception’, places attention on the focal point dependent upon perceiving ‘the signless concentration of mind’. His mind fully embraces the perception of ‘the signless concentration of mind’, and in it becomes clear and calm, becomes stilled and established, and is fully drawn into and settled upon it.

‘He thus ascertains there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to his perceiving ‘nothingness’, and he also ascertains there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to his perceiving ‘neither perception nor non-perception’. There is now only a subtler apparent disturbance, because he is an embodied being with six sense bases.

‘He ascertains that his field of perception is now empty of any perception of ‘nothingness’, and he ascertains that his field of perception is now empty of any perception of ‘neither perception nor non-perception’. All that remains is a provisional entity, namely the focal point resulting from being embodied with six sense bases.

‘He now sees that whatever entity is not in his field of perception, that field is therefore empty of that entity. He also sees that whatever entity remains in his field of perception, that entity does exist in his field of perception. This has again been an unmistakable

and clear establishment of emptiness in accordance with the way things really are.’

To see how and why we habitually misinterpret our experience, we move out of the formless realms and into *animitta-samādhi*, ‘the signless concentration of mind’. It is one of three liberating samādhis: the signless (*animitta*), the desireless (*appanīhita*) and the empty (*suñña*), all of which are ‘available’ upon the arising of one of them: they are three sides of the same coin, as it were. These are descriptors of a mind which has been liberated or freed up from the normal patterns and concerns that otherwise influence its content.

All that has gone before have been perceptive attainments.¹⁹ It is as if we have been walking backwards down a long hallway, closing perceptual doors behind us and making sure they are closed. Closing the door of ‘space making’, we realize that all that is happening is ‘consciousness making’, and so on down the line, until we reach the end of the hall and have to stop. At the stage of neither perception nor non-perception, there can be an unmistakable sense of ‘this is it – you’re done’. In essence, all of the building blocks of phenomenal experience have been at least temporarily set aside: space, consciousness, things and perception are all illusions that, though useful for daily life, are mentally created. There is in fact nothing more to do, or to let go of, in the phenomenal realm.

This is what the Buddha did under his teachers Alāra Kālāma and Udaka Rāmaputta,²⁰ taking the formless spheres to their conclusion and reaching a dead end. And yet, he knew that merely suspending these illusions for a time was not the goal. While these teachers concluded this is the ultimate experience available to us, the Buddha discovered that such was not the case. Merely negating illusions does not give one a full account of what experience actually is all about. The Buddha discovered that, rather than assuming there is a dead end against our backs, we can just turn around and ‘see’ what’s (not) there.

To exit the realm of perceptive attainments, we can essentially turn toward our experience; when we do, we realize there is nothing which we can grasp after, there is no sign of something that we can or should attempt to contact and discern. There are no traditional words or phrases to repeat in order to make this transition, but rather one just

¹⁹ *Samyutta-nikāya* 14.11.

²⁰ *Majjhima-nikāya* 26.15 *et seq.*

drops everything and experiences what is(n't) there. The transition is subtle, a rather slight shift in perspective. By simply turning towards experience, we see that we no longer have to respond to 'signs', whatever it is that might normally signify 'something' that can be discerned or known, even though it seems like we should be doing just that.

Remarkably, even with *animitta-samādhī*, there is still a *daratha* that is attempting to distract or disturb us, that could potentially draw us back into the worlds of formlessness, form and eventually desire. However, now it is not of our choosing: the disturbance, the *daratha*, is the recurring functioning of the six sense bases. If we are alive and conscious, our optical nerves will frequently be impinged upon, our skin will almost always have nerve endings being triggered by something, and our mind will periodically throw this or that up into our field or experience. It is part of being alive, an embodied being in a psychophysical structure. Your current field of perception, as subtle and enigmatic as it can be, is simply the indication that the six sense bases are continuing to function as they always do. In a rather famous passage from the Pali Canon, the Buddha instructed Bahiya of the Bark Garment that 'in the seen there is just the seen, in the heard there is just the heard' and so on; just sensory experience rising and falling. This was a decisive teaching for Bahiya, in that he realized in an instant that this is all that is happening, and all that has ever happened.²¹

8. Perception of the Signless Concentration of Mind – Liberation

'Again and further, Ananda, a bhikkhu, having removed attention of the mind from perception of 'nothingness', and having removed attention of the mind from perception of 'neither perception nor non-perception', places attention on the focal point dependent upon perceiving 'the signless concentration of mind'. His mind fully embraces the perception of 'the signless concentration of mind', and in it becomes clear and calm, becomes stilled and established, and is fully drawn into and settled upon it.

'He thus ascertains 'this signless concentration of mind is itself conditioned and manufactured by the mind. Whatever is

²¹ *Udāna* 1.10.

conditioned and manufactured by the mind is impermanent and subject to cessation.’ For him who knows and sees thus, the mind is liberated from the intoxication of sense desire, the intoxication of better and limitless existence, and the intoxication of ignorance. With liberation, there is the knowledge, ‘Liberated’. He ascertains ‘Birth is at an end, the holy life accomplished, I have done what needed to be done. I shall not return to this world.’

‘He thus ascertains ‘there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to the intoxication of sense desire, there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due the intoxication of existence, and there is no longer the three-fold disturbance due to the intoxication of ignorance. There is now only this most subtle disturbance, because he is an embodied being with six sense bases.’

‘He thus ascertains ‘this field of perception is empty of the intoxication of sense desire, it is empty of the intoxication of better and unlimited existence, and it is empty of the intoxication of ignorance. All that remains is a provisional entity, namely the focal point resulting from being embodied with six sense bases.’

‘He now sees that whatever entity is not in his field of perception, that field is therefore empty of that entity. He also see that whatever entity remains in his field of perception, that entity does exist in his field of perception. This has been a clear and unmistakable establishment of emptiness in accordance with the way things really are, unsurpassed by any other.’

Having left the *arūpa-loka* (formless world) behind, and prior to that the worlds of desire and form (*kāma-loka* and *rūpa-loka*), you simply sit in these perfectly peaceful surroundings: there is nowhere else to be, nothing to do. The three liberations (signless, aimless and empty) naturally manifest and complement each other. It’s not like you have forgotten what those other worlds are like, but you no longer feel compelled to participate in them. This second stage of *animitta-samādhi* is intended to stabilize the experience and fully experience it. Rather than looking back at previous steps, you can just remain aware of the signless concentration of mind itself, and that whatever experience contains is not a sign that there is anything to perceive or experience.

If not already obvious, you can reflect and understand that even *animitta-samādhī*, this sublime form of concentration, is itself conditioned and mentally produced. Even this is subject to *paṭicca-samuppāda*, conditioned co-production. It has arisen because you notice your mind, your experience, to any extent at all. It strikes me that the signless concentration of mind is, essentially, the least you can do, the least your mind can do and still be perceived as mind. And yet, it is still something that is conditioned and created. While there is still an unmistakable sense of knowing, or at least of the ability to know, you know that even this subtle mental state is conditioned. However, it's not something 'created' because you just went all the way through the formless states: all you did was remove the distortions and coverings that concealed this most basic operation of the mind. This is what you were born with; this is the natural state of the mind. To go any further, into the cessation of feeling and perception, is to temporarily suspend all experience whatsoever.

The experience of the signless concentration might be mistaken for Insight itself, but it is still a temporary, mundane state in which actual insight may or may not arise. However, it affords perhaps the clearest vantage point from which to gain an accurate understanding of experience. While insight may arise at any point in the formless spheres, or at any time of the day for that matter, here there are the fewest possible distractions and obstacles.

Because there are no signs of anything, what you know for certain now is that everything which is conditioned and mentally produced is impermanent and subject to cessation, including 'you'. This is therefore an excellent opportunity to, once and for all, look for the 'I', the 'self' that is assumed to exist somewhere. Nothing is hidden, nothing needs to be inferred here: if there is a 'me' somewhere, it would be evident. A brief look is all that may be necessary to directly and experientially know that the 'self' is an illusion and to enter the stream.

From here, the mind can also be liberated from the three *āsavas* or 'intoxications' of sensual desire, existence and ignorance.²² The *āsavas*, from an experiential standpoint, might feel like a haze or distortion that invisibly hangs over your entire experience, something that constantly 'contaminates' experience by interjecting delusion of one sort or another. For example, the *āśava* of sensual desire causes

²² See for example *Majjhima-nikāya* 9.68 *et seq.*

everything and everyone to be evaluated in terms of what you like and what you don't like, bridging the 'gap' between sensation and craving in the *nidāna* chain. However, like the 'self', these *āsavas* are all illusions, even though the circumstantial evidence of sensory experience makes such a good case for their existence.

After the illusion of a fixed 'self' evaporates, the *āsavas*, once concepts on a sheet of paper, now start to become tangible, and even stick out like a sore thumb. At first they might seem overwhelming, but they can be searched for and seen to be illusions as well. As with the self, *animitta-samādhī* can be an ideal 'place' to gain insight into the *āsavas*, completely removed from normal distractions. The *āsavas* are even subtler and thoroughgoing than the self, but through perseverance can also be seen to be illusory, either individually or all at once.²³

At some point, the *āsavas* are completely removed, and as each one disappears, you will know this with certainty. Thus we have the recurring phrase in the Pāli Canon of 'knowledge of destruction of the *āsavas*.' Once all of the *āsavas* are gone, you will know, as the Buddha often stated, 'the mind is liberated, birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived out, what was to be done is done, there is no more of this to come'. At that point, all one is left with is the fact that one is an embodied being with the six sense bases, and at complete freedom therein.

Conclusion

'Ananda, whatever wanderers and holy persons who in the past became established in and abode with an emptiness that was clear and ultimate, they all became established in and abode with an emptiness that was clear and ultimate. Whatever wanderers and holy persons who in the future will become established in and abide with an emptiness that is clear and ultimate, they all will become established in and abide with this very emptiness that is clear and ultimate. Whatever wanderers and holy persons who now established in and abide with an emptiness that is clear and ultimate, they all are established in and abide with this same emptiness that is clear and ultimate. Therefore, Ananda, you should train yourselves: 'I shall become established in and abide with the emptiness that is clear and ultimate.'

²³ See for example *Majjhima-nikāya* 51.26 and 122.14.

That is what the Blessed One said. Delighted, the Venerable Ananda rejoiced in the Blessed One’s words.

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