

Vimutt'āyatana Sutta

The Discourse on the Grounds for Liberation

[Can liberation be won without meditation?]
 (Āṅuttara Nikāya 5.26/3:21-24 = D 33.2.1(25))
 Translated by Piya Tan ©2006

Introduction

1 The joy of the Dharma

This short remarkable sutta presents five different ways whereby the mind can be cultivated to reach liberation. The five grounds for liberation (*vimutt'āyatana*) are as follows:

- (1) listening to the Dharma [§2];
- (2) teaching the Dharma [§3];
- (3) reciting the Dharma [§4];
- (4) reflecting on the Dharma [§5];
- (5) meditation [§6].

Each of these exercises should lead one to “knowing the goal and the Dharma” [“knowing the spirit of the Dharma and the letter of the Dharma”] (*attha,paṭisaṁvedī ca hoti dhamma,paṭisaṁvedī ca*), that is, understanding that true purpose of the Teaching and the wisdom it entails.

The importance of the interesting phrase—“knowing the goal and the Dharma”—is found in at least four other discourses, such as **the Mahā Gopālaka Sutta** (M 33), where the two terms—*attha,veda* and *dhamma,veda*—appear in the same context, that of listening to the Dharma:¹

*Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu Tathāgata-p,pavedite
 dhamma,vinaye desiyamāne
 labhati attha,vedam,
 labhati dhamma,vedam,
 labhati dhammūpasamhitam pāmujjam...*

Here, bhikkhus, a monk, when the Dharma and Vinaya of the Tathagata is being taught, gains inspired knowledge in the goal, gains inspired knowledge in the Dharma, gains joy connected with Dharma;...
 (M 33.10/1:221,80, 33.22/1:224,2-3)

It is interesting to note that *veda*, which usually means “knowledge,” here has the sense of “joy or inspiration” connected with spiritual knowing. As pointed out elsewhere,² *attha,veda* (“inspired knowledge in the goal”) refers to a clear understanding of the purpose of the spiritual life, that is, awakening: this is the quality the streamwinner who is a faith-follower (*saddhā'nusāri*).³ In this sutta, this refers to one who “knows the goal” (*attha,paṭisaṁvedī*). *Dhamma,veda* (“inspired knowledge in the Dharma”) refers to a deep understanding of reality, which characterizes the stream-winner who is a truth-follower (*dhammānusāri*).⁴ In this sutta, this is one who “knows the Dharma” (*dhamma,paṭisaṁvedī*).

2 The way to concentration

This mastery entails the gradual concentration of the mind: thus, “knowing the goal and the Dharma” [“knowing the spirit of the Dharma and the letter of the Dharma”],

¹ See (Agata,phala) Mahānāma S (A 6.10) = SD 15.3.

² See (Agata,phala) Mahānāma S (A 6.10) = SD 15.3 Intro (3.2).

³ One who is filled with resolution (*adhimokkha*) and, in considering the formations as impermanent, gains the faculty of faith, at the path-moment of streamwinning, is called faith follower. (Vism 21.74-78/659 f)

⁴ One who is filled with wisdom (*paññā*) and, in considering the formations as not self, gains the faculty of wisdom, at the moment of stream-winning, is called a truth (or Dharma) follower. (Vism 21.74-78/659 f)

<i>pāmujaṃ jāyati</i>	joy ⁵ arises in him;
<i>pamuditassa pīti jāyati</i>	because of joy, <u>zest</u> arises;
<i>pīti, manassa kāyo passambhati</i>	because of zest, the body ⁶ becomes <u>tranquil</u> ;
<i>passadha, kāyo sukhaṃ vedeti</i>	when the body is tranquil, he feels <u>happiness</u> ;
<i>sukhino cittaṃ samādhīyati</i>	a happy mind becomes <u>concentrated</u> .

The **Āṅuttara Commentary** explains that as we listen to the Dharma, we come to know about the dhyanas, insight, the paths and the fruits; and knowing about them, zest arises in us. On account of that zest, we are able to bring the meditation subject to the level of access concentration (*upacāra samādhi*), develop insight, and attain arhathood. In this connection, it is said: “The mind becomes concentrated.” (AA 3:230)

The importance of this set of stages is attested by its presence in numerous places throughout the Nikāyas, where it usually alludes to the abandoning of the five mental hindrances:⁷

Sāmañña, phala Sutta ⁸	D 2.75a/1:73
Poṭṭhapāda Sutta ⁹	D 9/1:182
Subha Sutta	D 10/1:207
Tevijja Sutta ¹⁰	D 13/1:250
Saṅgīti Sutta ¹¹	D 33/3:241 (x2)
Das’uttara Sutta	D 34/3:279 (x5), 288
Vatth’upama Sutta	M 37/1:37 (x3), 38
Cūḷa Assapura Sutta	M 40/1:283
Pamāda Vihāri Sutta	S 35.97/4:78 (x2), 79 (x2)
Pāṭaliya Sutta	S 42.13/4:352 (x2), 353-358
Bhikkhuṇ’upassaya Sutta	S 47.10/5:156 (x2)
Nandiya Sakka Sutta	S 47.40/5:398 (x3), 399
Parisā Sutta	A 3.93/1:243 f
Vimutt’āyatana Sutta ¹²	A 5.26/3:21, 22 (x2), 23, 25
(Agata, phala) Mahānāma Sutta ¹³	A 6.10/3:285 (x2), 286, 287 (x2), 288
(Anussati) Mahānāma Sutta	A 11.12/5:329, 330 (x2), 331 (x2), 332, 334
Paṭisambhidā, magga	Pm 1:85, 86 (x3)

The first five suttas of **the Book of Tens** (*Dasaka Nipāta*) of the Āṅuttara Nikāya give an extended version of this sequence, one leading to the next right up to liberation itself, thus:¹⁴

<i>kusalāni sīlāni</i>	wholesome moral conduct;
<i>avippaṭisāro</i>	non-regret;
<i>pāmuja</i>	<u>joy</u> ;
<i>pīti</i>	<u>zest</u> ;
<i>passaddhi</i>	<u>tranquillity</u> ;
<i>sukha</i>	<u>happiness</u> ;
<i>samādhi</i>	<u>concentration</u> ;

⁵ Comy explains *pāmuja* or *pāmojja* as “weak zest” (*taruṇa, pīti*) (AA 3:230).

⁶ Comy glosses “body” (*kāya*) here as “the mental body” (*nāma, kāya*), ie, the mind or mental aggregates (feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness) (AA 2:230; ThīA 160): see *Viññāṇa* = SD 17.8a (5.2).

⁷ See Gethin 2001:154 f.

⁸ SD 8.10.

⁹ SD 7.14.

¹⁰ SD 1.8.

¹¹ SD 3.2; 21.5 (this tr).

¹² SD 21.5 (this tr).

¹³ SD 15.3.

¹⁴ See Gethin 2001:154 f.

<i>yathā, bhūta, ñāṇa, dassana</i>	the knowledge and vision of reality;
<i>nibbidā, virāgo</i>	repulsion and dispassion;
<i>vimutti, ñāṇa, dassana</i>	the knowledge and vision of liberation.

The Paññā Sutta (A 8.2), is another discourse related to the Vimutt'āyatana Sutta, addressed to a monk who wishes to succeed in the theory and practice of the Dharma. Eight conditions conducive to such a cultivation are summarized, namely:

- (1) He lives near the teacher, cultivating moral virtue, and shows lovingkindness to the teacher.
- (2) He questions the teacher from time to time.
- (3) Having heard the Dharma, he practises solitude of body and of mind.
- (4) He is morally virtuous, keeping to the monastic training and rules.
- (5) He is learned in the Dharma and has a good memory.
- (6) He is assertive in the Dharma practice and duties.
- (7) He keeps in touch with the order, practises right speech, and enjoys noble silence.
- (8) He constantly observes the rise and fall of the five aggregates.

(A 8.2/4:151-155) = SD 44.13

3 The threefold wisdom

Underlying the five grounds for liberation are **the threefold wisdom** or three levels of knowledge, that is,

- (1) “wisdom through listening” (*suta, mayā paññā*), that is, knowledge arising through receiving teachings, especially a direct transmission from a living teacher;
- (2) “wisdom through thinking” (*cintā, mayā paññā*), that is, knowledge arising through recollection and reflection;
- (3) “wisdom through mental cultivation” (*bhāvanā, mayā paññā*), that is, the understanding arising through meditation, that is, a direct experience of true reality. (D 3:219; Vbh 324)

Applying the threefold wisdom structure to the five grounds of liberation, we can classify them in this manner:

- | | | |
|------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| (1) listening to the Dharma | } | wisdom through listening; |
| (2) teaching the Dharma | | wisdom through thinking; |
| (3) reciting the Dharma | | |
| (4) reflecting on the Dharma | | wisdom through cultivation. |
| (5) meditation | | |

This categorization of the five grounds for liberation is not an hierarchical or progressive one, but one of *emphasis*. In every ground, there are aspects of the threefold wisdom present. In the case of “listening to the Dharma,” for example, “wisdom through listening” would be predominant. But in every case, there is some level of thinking. In the case of “meditation,” however, there is a minimum of thinking, restricted mostly to the beginning of the practice, or after emerging from some level of concentration, to reflect on impermanence, or a related meditation.¹⁵

— — —

¹⁵ For a vertical or progressive treatment of the threefold wisdom, see **Levels of Learning** = SD 40a.4 (5.1).

The Discourse on the Grounds for Liberation

(A 5.26/3:21-24 = D 33.2.1(25))

1 Bhikshus, there are these five grounds¹⁶ for liberation where the unliberated mind of a monk,¹⁷ dwelling heedful and exertive, finds liberation; or where the mental influxes,¹⁸ not wholly destroyed become wholly destroyed, where the unattained unsurpassed safety from the yoke is attained.

What are the five?

(1) Listening to the Dharma: wisdom through listening

2 Here, bhikshus, the teacher or some fellow brahmachari worthy of respect¹⁹ teaches the Dharma to a monk.²⁰

And, bhikshus, as that monk listens to the Dharma taught by the teacher or the respected colleague in the holy life, he knows the goal and he knows the Dharma [he knows the spirit of the Dharma and the letter of the Dharma].²¹

Knowing the goal and knowing the Dharma,
joy arises in him;
because of joy, zest arises;
because of zest, the body becomes tranquil;
when the body is tranquil, he feels happiness;
a happy mind becomes concentrated.²²

This, bhikshus, is the first ground for liberation where the unliberated mind of a monk, dwelling heedful and exertive, finds liberation; or where the mental influxes, not wholly destroyed become wholly destroyed, where the unattained unsurpassed safety from the yoke is attained.

¹⁶ *Āyatanāni = kāraṇāni* (AA 3:230), “cause, reason; ground; motive; means” (DP).

¹⁷ What the **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10) commentary explains of “a monk” (*bhikkhu*), applies here, too: it may refer to either an ordained monastic or anyone who is meditating (DA 3:756; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251). See **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10) Intro §3.1a.

¹⁸ The term *āsava* (lit “inflow”) comes from *ā-savati* “flows in, flows out” (i.e. either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as taints (“deadly taints”, RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), influx, or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists four *āsava*: the influx of (1) sense-desire (*kāma’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence or becoming (*bhava’āsava*), (3) wrong views (*diṭṭh’-āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*) (D 16.2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These four are also known as “floods” (*ogha*) and “yokes” (*yoga*). The list of 3 influxes (omitting the influx of views) [43] is prob older and is found more frequently in the Suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these *āsavas* is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict under *āsava*.

¹⁹ “In the role of a teacher,” *garuṭṭhāniya*, which **Paññā S** (A 8.2/4:151) glosses as “one who is respectable and esteemed, being a condition giving rise to respect” (*gārav’uppatti, paccaya, bhūtam garu, bhāvanīyam*, AA 4:71). Alt trs: “occasioning reverence” (ItA:M 396), or “in the standing of a teacher” (PED). I take *garu, bhāvanīya* (“respected and esteemed”) as dvandva (as at **M 6.3/1:33; A 3:111-114** ×14, 136 ×2, 195 f ×4, 262 ×2, **4:2** ×4, 32, 157 ×4, 361, 5:131): see **Piya Mitta S 2** (A 7.36), where they form two of the qualities of a worthy friend, viz: loving (*piya*), pleasant (*manāpa*), worthy of respect (*garu*), worthy of esteem (*bhāvanīya*), a speaker (*vatta*), one patient with words (*vacana-k, khama*), who converses profoundly (*gambhīraṇ ca katham kathā hoti*), and does not lead one in wrong [unreasonable] ways (*no c’atṭhane niyojeti*) (A 7.36/4:32).

²⁰ *Idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhuno satthā dhammam deseti aññataro vā garu-ṭṭhāniyo sa, brahma, cārī.*

²¹ “He knows... the Dharma,” *attha, paṭisaṁvedī... dhamma, paṭisaṁvedī*. See Intro (1).

²² Here, Comy explains “mind becomes concentrated” (*cittam samādhīyati*) as referring to the samadhi of having attained the fruit of arhathood (*arahatta, phala, samādhinā*, AA 3:230). However, it is clear from the closing para of each section that these methods are capable of making us “learners,” or “where the mental influxes, not wholly destroyed become wholly destroyed,” arhats.

(2) Teaching the Dharma: wisdom through thinking

3 And again, bhikshus, the teacher or some fellow brahmachari worthy of respect *does not teach the Dharma to a monk*, but

he himself teaches the Dharma in detail to others just as he has heard it, just as he has mastered it.²³

Bhikshus, just as this monk [22] teaches the Dharma in detail to others, he knows the goal and he knows the Dharma [he knows the spirit of the Dharma and the letter of the Dharma].

Knowing the goal and knowing the Dharma,
 joy arises in him;
 because of joy, zest arises;
 because of zest, the body becomes tranquil;
 when the body is tranquil, he feels happiness;
 a happy mind becomes concentrated.

This, bhikshus, is the second ground for liberation where the unliberated mind of a monk, dwelling heedful and exertive, finds liberation; or where the mental influxes, not wholly destroyed become wholly destroyed, where the unattained unsurpassed safety from the yoke is attained.

(3) Reciting the Dharma: wisdom through thinking

4 And again, bhikshus, *neither the teacher or some fellow brahmachari worthy of respect, nor he himself teaches the Dharma*, but

he himself recites the Dharma to others just as he has heard it in detail, just as he has mastered it.²⁴

Bhikshus, just as this monk recites the Dharma to others, he knows the goal and he knows the Dharma [he knows the spirit of the Dharma and the letter of the Dharma].

Knowing the goal and knowing the Dharma,
 joy arises in him;
 because of joy, zest arises;
 because of zest, the body becomes tranquil;
 when the body is tranquil, he feels happiness;
 a happy mind becomes concentrated.

This, bhikshus, is the third ground for liberation where the unliberated mind of a monk, dwelling heedful and exertive, finds liberation; or where the mental influxes, not wholly destroyed become wholly destroyed, where the unattained unsurpassed safety from the yoke is attained.

(4) Reflecting on the Dharma: wisdom through thinking

5 And again, bhikshus, *neither the teacher or some fellow brahmachari worthy of respect teaches the Dharma, nor he himself teaches it, nor does he recite it*, but

he himself applies his mind to the Dharma, [23] sustains the thought, mentally reflects on it.²⁵

Bhikshus, just as this monk applies his mind to the Dharma, sustains the thought, mentally reflects on it, he knows the goal and he knows the Dharma [he knows the spirit of the Dharma and the letter of the Dharma].

Knowing the goal and knowing the Dharma,
 joy arises in him;
 because of joy, zest arises;
 because of zest, the body becomes tranquil;
 when the body is tranquil, he feels happiness;
 a happy mind becomes concentrated.

²³ *Api ca kho yathā,sutaṃ yathā,pariyattaṃ dhammaṃ vitthārena paresaṃ deseti. Yathā yathā, bhikkhave, bhikkhu yathā,sutaṃ yathā,pariyattaṃ dhammaṃ vitthārena paresaṃ deseti.*

²⁴ *Api ca kho yathā,sutaṃ yathā,pariyattaṃ dhammaṃ vitthārena sajjhāyaṃ karoti.*

²⁵ *Api ca kho yathā,sutaṃ yathā,pariyattaṃ dhammaṃ cetasā anuvitakketi anuvicāreti manasānupekkhati.*

This, bhikshus, is the fourth ground for liberation where the unliberated mind of a monk, dwelling heedful and exertive, finds liberation; or where the mental influxes, not wholly destroyed become wholly destroyed, where the unattained unsurpassed safety from the yoke is attained.

(5) Meditating: wisdom through cultivation

6 And again, bhikshus, *neither the teacher or some fellow brahmachari worthy of respect teaches the Dharma, nor he himself teaches it, nor does he recite it, nor does he reflect on it, but he himself **properly grasps some concentration-sign**, properly considers it, applies his mind to it, well penetrating it with wisdom.*²⁶

Bhikshus, just as this monk properly grasps some concentration-sign, having properly considered it, having applied his mind to it, having well penetrated it with wisdom, knows the goal and he knows the Dharma [he knows the spirit of the Dharma and the letter of the Dharma].

Knowing the goal and knowing the Dharma,
joy arises in him;
because of joy, zest arises;
because of zest, the body becomes tranquil;
when the body is tranquil, he feels happiness;
a happy mind becomes concentrated.

This, bhikshus, is the fifth ground for liberation where the unliberated mind of a monk, dwelling heedful and exertive, finds liberation; or where the mental influxes, not wholly destroyed become wholly destroyed, where the unattained unsurpassed safety from the yoke is attained.

These, bhikshus, are the five grounds for liberation where the unliberated mind of a monk, dwelling heedful and exertive, finds liberation; or where the mental influxes, not wholly destroyed become wholly destroyed, where the unattained unsurpassed safety from the yoke is attained.

— evaṃ —

041122; 060320; 071115; 090303

²⁶ *Api ca khv-assa aññataraṃ samādhī, nimittaṃ suggahitaṃ hoti sumanasikataṃ sūpadhāritaṃ suppaṭividdhaṃ paññāya.*