



EVAM ME SUTTAṀ

This is how I heard it

by Patrick Kearney

Week three: Texts and practices

And what, friend, is the deliverance of mind through emptiness (*suññatā cetovimutti*)? Here a bhikkhu, who has gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, reflects in this way: “This is empty of a self or of what belongs to a self.” This is called the deliverance of mind through emptiness. (M 1.297-98)

Mahāvedalla Sutta, Cūlayamakavagga, Mūlapaṇṇāsapāli, Majjhima Nikāya.
 Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The middle length discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications 1995: 394. (Translation modified.)

Introduction

We have seen how the *dhamma* as teaching is structured orally, as a kind of relational database in the minds of those who memorise the teachings. The database is made up of tables that are linked by common fields - lists that share items with other lists - and by individual items that, through synonym, create hypertext links throughout the database. This structure creates an extremely sophisticated and complex composition that operates both synchronically and diachronically. A synchronic structure refers to what is happening now; a diachronic structure refers to what is happening over time. In the *dhamma*, these structures are conditional relationships. For example, in the four noble truths, the second and third truths refer to how craving (*taṇhā*) conditions pain (*dukkha*). This illustrates a fundamental conditional relationship, and, depending on circumstances, this relationship can appear as synchronic or diachronic. Desperately wanting *x*, pain arises immediately along with the wanting, because the wanting itself is painful (synchronic); or, wanting *x*, I am motivated to act in such a way that I create a painful situation later (diachronic).

This structure also characterises the *dhamma* as practice. The practice, too, has a complex structure in which one aspect is linked to another, in conditional relationships that are both synchronic and diachronic. Tonight we will look at *suttas* that reveal this structure through the practice of emptiness (*suññatā*).

Verses and chorus

The *suttas* are chants, and are full of repetitions. When we look at the patterns of repetitions we discover something quite familiar to us: verses and chorus. A song is usually structured in this way. The verses provide some kind of progressive narrative, a series of events that unfold over time (diachronic). Each verse is separated by a chorus, which, because it is repeated, remains the same regardless of its place within the narrative (synchronic). Later, when we recall the song, what are we most likely to remember? Often what stays in our mind is the chorus, and from repeating it we gradually come to remember the verses, and maybe even the order in which they occurred. So we could say that the essential message of the song *is* the chorus, and the verses, the narrative within which the chorus is embedded, are secondary. Further, the chorus is “true” for

each verse, regardless of the specific event being narrated, or of the order within which the verses occur. And the chorus remains true even if certain verses are dropped out, or are replaced by other verses. (This last phenomenon is common in traditional folk songs, which also emerge from an oral tradition.)

Here we will look at how this structure enables us to read *suttas* concerned with showing the path that leads to awakening, the texts that fill out the fourth noble truth. When we speak of a “path” or “way,” then we evoke a linear or diachronic process. A path leads from here to there; it implies progress, moving through successive locations in order to arrive at a specific location at the end of this sequence. In the same way, a meditative path implies a sequence of experiences, each one of which prepares the mind for the next, which in its totality makes up an ordered linear progression. But one of the problems Buddhologists have faced in interpreting the *suttas* is that they contain a number of practice sequences which are not necessarily compatible with each other.

Buddhologists committed to historical criticism would naturally try to resolve this problem by breaking up the path texts into chronological order, to discover the original and therefore authentic path structure, and would not be bothered if all the others were labelled mistakes made subsequently by the tradition. Practitioners reading these same *suttas* may take a similar approach. They may assert that the Buddha laid down one true way to practice, contained in one true meditation “technique,” and reject as invalid inventions any approach that does not correspond to this one true technique. Practitioner critics would differ from the Buddhologists in their reluctance to reject texts sanctified by the tradition as wrong, but rather would try to reconcile them with their particular approach to the practice. Let us take one path text and use it to illustrate the problem we are talking about, and suggest another way of reading these texts that takes into account their oral structure as outlined above.

Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta (M52) From Aṭṭhakanāgara

Introduction

Here is how I heard it (*evaṃ me suttaṃ*). Once when Venerable Ānanda was living at Beluvagāma near Vesālī, the householder Dasama of Aṭṭhakanāgara arrived at Pāṭaliputta for some business or other. He went to a certain bhikkhu in Kukkuṭa’s Park, greeted him respectfully, sat down at one side and asked, “Where does Venerable Ānanda live now, bhante? I wish to see Venerable Ānanda.”

“Venerable Ānanda is living at Beluvagāma near Vesālī, householder.”

After the householder Dasama completed his business at Pāṭaliputta, he went to Venerable Ānanda at Beluvagāma near Vesālī, greeted him respectfully, sat down at one side and asked, “Venerable Ānanda, has any one thing (*eka dhamma*) been proclaimed by the Blessed One who knows and sees, accomplished and fully awakened, wherein if a bhikkhu abides diligent, ardent, and resolute, his unliberated mind comes to be liberated, his undestroyed taints (*āsava*s) come to be destroyed, and he attains the supreme security from bondage that he had not attained before?”

“Yes, householder, one such thing has been proclaimed by the Blessed One.”

“What is that one thing, Venerable Ānanda?”

Four rūpa jhānas

“Here, householder, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first *jhāna*, which is accompanied by applied and sustained application, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. He considers this and understands (*pajānāti*) it in this way: ‘This first *jhāna* is formed (*abhisankhataṃ*) and volitionally created (*abhisāñcetaṃ*). But whatever is formed and volitionally created is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the taints. But if he does not attain the destruction of the taints, then because of that desire for *dhamma*, that delight in *dhamma*, with the destruction of the five lower fetters he becomes one due to reappear spontaneously (in the pure abodes) and there attain final *nibbāna* without ever returning from that world. This is one thing proclaimed by the Blessed One who knows and sees, accomplished and fully awakened, wherein if a bhikkhu abides diligent, ardent, and resolute, his unliberated mind comes to be liberated, his undestroyed taints come to be destroyed, and he attains the supreme security from bondage that he had not attained before.

“Again, with the stilling of applied and sustained application, a bhikkhu enters and abides in the second *jhāna* ... He considers this and understands it in this way: ‘This second *jhāna* is formed and volitionally created. But whatever is formed and volitionally created is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the taints. ... This too is one thing proclaimed by the Blessed One ...

“Again, with the fading away as well of rapture, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the third *jhāna* ... He considers this and understands it in this way: ‘This third *jhāna* is formed and volitionally created. But whatever is formed and volitionally created is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the taints. ... This too is one thing proclaimed by the Blessed One ...

“Again, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain ... a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the fourth *jhāna* ... He considers this and understands it in this way: ‘This fourth *jhāna* is formed and volitionally created. But whatever is formed and volitionally created is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the taints. ... This too is one thing proclaimed by the Blessed One ...

Four brahma-vihāras

“Again, a bhikkhu abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with love (*mettā*), likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth; so above, below, around, and everywhere, and to all as to himself, he abides pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with love, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility or ill will. He considers this and understands it in this way: ‘This deliverance of mind through love is formed and volitionally created. But whatever is formed and volitionally created is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the taints. ... This too is one thing proclaimed by the Blessed One ...

“Again, a bhikkhu abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with compassion (*karuṇā*) ... without ill will. He considers this and understands it in this way: ‘This deliverance of mind through compassion is formed and volitionally created. But whatever is formed and volitionally created is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the taints. ... This too is one thing proclaimed by the Blessed One ...

“Again, a bhikkhu abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with joy (*muditā*) ... without ill will. He considers this and understands it in this way: ‘This deliverance of mind through joy is

formed and volitionally created. But whatever is formed and volitionally created is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the taints. ... This too is one thing proclaimed by the Blessed One ...

“Again, a bhikkhu abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with equanimity (*upekkhā*) ... without ill will. He considers this and understands it in this way: ‘This deliverance of mind through equanimity is formed and volitionally created. But whatever is formed and volitionally created is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the taints. ... This too is one thing proclaimed by the Blessed One ...

Three arūpa jhānas

“Again, with the complete surmounting of perceptions of form, with the disappearance of perceptions of sensory impact, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that ‘space is infinite,’ a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the sphere of infinite space. He considers this and understands it in this way: ‘This attainment of the sphere of infinite space is formed and volitionally created. But whatever is formed and volitionally created is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the taints. ... This too is one thing proclaimed by the Blessed One ...

“Again, by completely surmounting the sphere of infinite space, aware that ‘consciousness is infinite,’ a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the sphere of infinite consciousness. He considers this and understands it in this way: ‘This attainment of the sphere of infinite consciousness is formed and volitionally created. But whatever is formed and volitionally created is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the taints. ... This too is one thing proclaimed by the Blessed One ...

“Again, by completely surmounting the sphere of infinite consciousness, aware that ‘there is nothing,’ a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the sphere of nothingness. He considers this and understands it in this way: ‘This attainment of the sphere of nothingness is formed and volitionally created. But whatever is formed and volitionally created is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the taints. But if he does not attain the destruction of the taints, then because of that desire for *dhamma*, that delight in *dhamma*, with the destruction of the five lower fetters he becomes one due to reappear spontaneously (in the pure abodes) and there attain final *nibbāna* without ever returning from that world. This too is one thing proclaimed by the Blessed One who knows and sees, accomplished and fully awakened, wherein if a bhikkhu abides diligent, ardent, and resolute, his unliberated mind comes to be liberated, his undestroyed taints come to be destroyed, and he attains the supreme security from bondage that he had not attained before.”

Eleven doors to the deathless

When Venerable Ānanda had spoken, the householder Dasama of Aṭṭhakanāgara said to him, “Venerable Ānanda, just as if a man seeking one entrance to a hidden treasure came all at once upon eleven entrances to a hidden treasure, so too, while I was seeking one door to the deathless, I have come all at once to hear of eleven doors to the deathless. Just as if a man had a house with eleven doors and when that house caught on fire, he could flee to safety by any one of these eleven doors, so I can flee to safety by any one of these eleven doors to the deathless. Bhante, these sectarians will even seek a teacher’s fee for their teachers; why shouldn’t I make an offering to Venerable Ānanda?”

Then the householder Dasama of Aṭṭhakanāgara assembled the *saṅgha* of bhikkhus from Pāṭaliputta and Vesālī, and with his own hands he served and satisfied them with various kinds of good food. He presented a pair of cloths to each bhikkhu, and he presented a triple robe to Venerable Ānanda, and he had a dwelling worth five hundred built for Venerable Ānanda.

Gahapattivagga, Majjhimaṇṇāsapāli, Majjhima Nikāya.

Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The middle length discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications 1995: 454-59. (Translation modified.)

Comment

Serenity and insight

This discourse is about the “one thing” (*eka dhamma*) which will result in the full liberation of a practitioner. What is that one thing? The Buddha’s answer takes the form of a linear path, one that requires time to complete. We can see the stages of this path in terms of a number of verses, numbering eleven in all: four *rūpa jhānas*; four *brahma vihāras*; and three *arūpa jhānas*. These meditative states represent a progressive development of concentration (*samādhi*), and so show the development of serenity (*samatha*) meditation. The progression shown here is unusual only in that the *brahma vihāras* are inserted between the *rūpa* and *arūpa jhānas*. The *rūpa jhānas* (material absorptions) are states of concentration in which the normal material world continues to function; the *arūpa jhānas* (immaterial absorptions) are states of concentration in which the mind is so refined that the normal material world has disappeared. These eight levels of absorption constitute a logical progression from the gross to the subtle; from the concentrated to the super-concentrated. The *brahma vihāras* (sublime states) are, in this sense, restatements of the four *rūpa jhānas*, since, practised as a serenity exercise, the states of love (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*) and joy (*muditā*) can take the practitioner to the level of third *rūpa jhāna*, while that of equanimity (*upekkhā*) can take her to the fourth *rūpa jhāna*. In any event, the verses take us through the progressive development of serenity meditation.

The chorus shows us the insight (*vipassanā*) aspect of the practice. This is summed up by the statement:

He considers this (serenity attainment) and understands (*pajānāti*) it in this way: ‘This (attainment) is formed (*abhisankhataṃ*) and volitionally created (*abhisañcetaṃ*). But whatever is formed and volitionally created is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ Standing upon that, he attains the destruction of the taints. But if he does not attain the destruction of the taints, then because of that desire for *dhamma*, that delight in *dhamma*, with the destruction of the five lower fetters he becomes one due to reappear spontaneously (in the pure abodes) and there attain final *nibbāna* without ever returning from that world.

The same consideration and understanding operates regardless of the level of serenity; regardless of the linear position along the path. At any point along this path, what constitutes the path can be seen to be “formed (*abhisankhataṃ*) and volitionally created (*abhisañcetaṃ*).” That which is “formed” is a formation, something made up of parts, something which is what it is because of the coming together of things other than itself. A formation is “impermanent, subject to cessation,” because whatever is made up of parts will, sooner or later, break up into those parts. Similarly, that which is “volitionally created” is also formed, but specifically formed by choice, volition or intention (*cetanā*). Volitional creations constitute the sphere of human activity which corresponds to the sphere of moral responsibility. They are those aspects of our lives for which we have no choice but to take responsibility, because they are those aspects of our lives which are formed by our choices.

This passage echoes Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta in two ways. Firstly, the promise that the “one thing” of seeing this experience here and now as formed and volitionally created is enough to guarantee full liberation or the state of non-return, the next highest stage. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta ends with this guarantee:

Truly, bhikkhus, whoever practises these four domains of attention like this for seven years can expect one of two results: either perfect insight here and now; or, if a touch of clinging remains, the state of non-return.

Forget about seven years! Whoever practises these four domains of attention like this for six years ... five years ... four years ... three years ... two years ... one year ... seven months ... six months ... five months ... two weeks ... seven days can expect one of two results: either perfect insight here and now; or, if a touch of clinging remains, the state of non-return. (M 1.62-63)

Secondly, the shift of attention from the state of absorption to seeing the constructed nature of absorption itself represents a shift of attention from the meditation object to the nature of the mind that is absorbed in the meditation object. This is *paṭisati* (reflexive attention), turning the attention around 180 degrees, back to the meditator herself. The result is *paṭivipassanā* (reflexive insight), which also appears at a crucial turning point in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the point where the meditator shifts from seeing that phenomena arise and cease, to seeing arising and cessation itself.

[S]he lives ... contemplating arising phenomena as body; or she lives contemplating ceasing phenomena as body; or she lives contemplating both arising and ceasing phenomena as body. Or her attention is established that “there is body,” to the extent necessary for understanding (*ñāṇa*), and to the extent necessary for reflexive attention (*paṭisati*).

And she lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. (M 1.56)

Diachronic and synchronic

The structure of verse and chorus in the text corresponds to the structure of serenity and insight in the practice, and insight, like the chorus, operates in the same way regardless of one’s position along the linear path of meditative development. Insight cuts through everything, and in memorising this *sutta* the reciter/hearer is most likely to have the insight-chorus penetrate into his mind. Whatever meditation state he is experiencing, this state is “formed and volitionally created;” it is something which he is doing, and it is seeing and understanding the doing itself which generates liberating insight.

Notice the surprise and delight of Dasama. He wanted the “one thing” necessary for liberation; he got eleven. “Just as if a man had a house with eleven doors and when that house caught on fire, he could flee to safety by any one of these eleven doors, so I can flee to safety by any one of these eleven doors to the deathless.” Of course, one is tempted to think there are many more than eleven doors available. Ānanda already had these eleven verses in the database, ready to be pulled out and displayed when desired. This particular set is purely illustrative. Ānanda could have chosen others, and this is fundamental to the structure of this discourse. *Any* set of progressive meditation exercises would serve to set up the basic structure of verses (progressive development over time) and chorus (immediate insight into *this, now*). It is the chorus, showing the nature of insight, which is central.

Entry into emptiness

Immediate insight into *this, now* is sometimes presented in the *suttas* as the entry into emptiness (*suññatā avakkam*). Here we will look at a *sutta* which teaches emptiness, and continues to illustrate

the relationship between verse and chorus, serenity and insight, and diachronic and synchronic, we have seen above.

Culasuññata Sutta **Smaller discourse on emptiness (M121)**

Introduction

Here is how I heard it (*evaṃ me suttaṃ*). Once the Blessed One was living at Sāvattḥī in the Eastern Park, in the Palace of Migara's Mother. Then, when it was evening, Venerable Ānanda rose from meditation, went to the Blessed One, greeted him respectfully, sat down at one side and said, "Bhante, once the Blessed One was living the Sakyan country at a town of the Sakyans named Nagaraka. There, bhante, I heard and learned this from Blessed One's own lips: 'Now, Ānanda, I often abide in emptiness.' Did I hear that correctly, bhante, did I learn that correctly, attend to that correctly, remember that correctly?"

"Certainly, Ānanda, you heard that correctly, learned that correctly, attended to that correctly, remembered that correctly. As formerly, Ānanda, so now too I often abide in emptiness.

Perception of forest

"Ānanda, just as this Palace of Migara's Mother is empty of elephants, cattle, horses, and mares, empty of gold and silver, of the assembly of men and women, and there is present only this non-emptiness, namely, the unity (*ekattaṃ*) dependent on the *saṅgha* of bhikkhus; so too, a bhikkhu - not attending to the perception of village, not attending to the perception of people - attends to the unity dependent on the perception of forest. His mind enters into that perception of forest, becoming confident, settled and clear. He understands in this way: 'Whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of village, those are not present here; whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of people, those are not present here. There is present only this amount of disturbance, namely, the unity dependent on the perception of forest.' He understands: 'This field of perception is empty of the perception of village; this field of perception is empty of the perception of people. There is present only this non-emptiness, namely, the unity dependent on the perception of forest.' In this way he regards it as empty of what is not there. Whatever remains, he understands as present: 'There is this.' This, Ānanda, is his genuine, undistorted, pure entry into emptiness.

Perception of earth

"Again, Ānanda, a bhikkhu - not attending to the perception of people, not attending to the perception of forest - attends to the unity dependent on the perception of earth. His mind enters into that perception of earth, becoming confident, settled and clear. Just as a bull's hide becomes free from folds when fully stretched with a hundred pegs; so too, a bhikkhu - not attending to any of the ridges and hollows of this earth, to the rivers and ravines, the tracts of stumps and thorns, the mountains and uneven places - attends to the unity dependent on the perception of earth. His mind enters into that perception of earth, becoming confident, settled and clear. He understands: 'Whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of people, those are not present here; whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of forest, those are not present here. There is present only this amount of disturbance, namely, the unity dependent on the perception of earth.' He understands: 'This field of perception is empty of the perception of people; this field of perception is empty of the perception of forest. There is present

only this non-emptiness, namely, the unity dependent on the perception of earth.' In this way he regards it as empty of what is not there. Whatever remains, he understands as present: 'There is this.' This too, Ānanda, is his genuine, undistorted, pure entry into emptiness.

Perception of infinite space

"Again, Ānanda, a bhikkhu - not attending to the perception of forest, not attending to the perception of earth - attends to the unity dependent on the perception of the sphere of infinite space. His mind enters into that perception of the sphere of infinite space, becoming confident, settled and clear. He understands: 'Whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of forest, those are not present here; whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of earth, those are not present here. There is present only this amount of disturbance, namely, the unity dependent on the perception of the sphere of infinite space.' He understands: 'This field of perception is empty of the perception of forest; this field of perception is empty of the perception of earth. There is present only this non-emptiness, namely, the unity dependent on the perception of the sphere of infinite space.' In this way he regards it as empty of what is not there. Whatever remains, he understands as present: 'There is this.' This too, Ānanda, is his genuine, undistorted, pure entry into emptiness.

Perception of infinite consciousness

"Again, Ānanda, a bhikkhu - not attending to the perception of earth, not attending to the perception of the sphere of infinite space - attends to the unity dependent on the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness. His mind enters into that perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness, becoming confident, settled and clear. He understands: 'Whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of earth, those are not present here; whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of the sphere of infinite space, those are not present here. There is present only this amount of disturbance, namely, the unity dependent on the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness.' He understands: 'This field of perception is empty of the perception of earth; this field of perception is empty of the perception of the sphere of infinite space. There is present only this non-emptiness, namely, the unity dependent on the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness.' In this way he regards it as empty of what is not there. Whatever remains, he understands as present: 'There is this.' This too, Ānanda, is his genuine, undistorted, pure entry into emptiness.

Perception of nothingness

"Again, Ānanda, a bhikkhu - not attending to the perception of the sphere of infinite space, not attending to the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness - attends to the unity dependent on the perception of the sphere of nothingness. His mind enters into that perception of the sphere of nothingness, becoming confident, settled and clear. He understands: 'Whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of the sphere of infinite space, those are not present here; whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness, those are not present here. There is present only this amount of disturbance, namely, the unity dependent on the perception of the sphere of nothingness.' He understands: 'This field of perception is empty of the perception of the sphere of infinite space; this field of perception is empty of the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness. There is present only this non-emptiness, namely, the unity dependent on the perception of the sphere of nothingness.' In this way he regards it as empty of what is not there. Whatever remains, he understands as present: 'There is this.' This too, Ānanda, is his genuine, undistorted, pure entry into emptiness.

Perception of neither-perception-nor-non-perception

“Again, Ānanda, a bhikkhu - not attending to the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness, not attending to the perception of the sphere of nothingness - attends to the unity dependent on the perception of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. His mind enters into that perception of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, becoming confident, settled and clear. He understands: ‘Whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness, those are not present here; whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of the sphere of nothingness, those are not present here. There is present only this amount of disturbance, namely, the unity dependent on the perception of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.’ He understands: ‘This field of perception is empty of the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness; this field of perception is empty of the perception of the sphere of nothingness. There is present only this non-emptiness, namely, the unity dependent on the perception of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.’ In this way he regards it as empty of what is not there. Whatever remains, he understands as present: ‘There is this.’ This too, Ananda, is his genuine, undistorted, pure entry into emptiness.

Perception of the six spheres

“Again, Ānanda, a bhikkhu - not attending to the perception of the sphere of nothingness, not attending to the perception of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception - attends to the unity dependent on the signless concentration of mind. His mind enters into that signless concentration of mind, becoming confident, settled and clear. He understands: ‘Whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of the sphere of nothingness, those are not present here; whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, those are not present here. There is present only this amount of disturbance, namely, that connected with the six spheres that are dependent on this body and conditioned by life.’ He understands: ‘This field of perception is empty of the perception of the sphere of nothingness; this field of perception is empty of the perception of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. There is present only this non-emptiness, namely, that connected with the six spheres that are dependent on this body and conditioned by life.’ In this way he regards it as empty of what is not there. Whatever remains, he understands as present: ‘There is this.’ This too, Ānanda, is his genuine, undistorted, pure entry into emptiness.

“Again, Ānanda, a bhikkhu - not attending to the perception of the sphere of nothingness, not attending to the perception of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception - attends to the unity dependent on the signless concentration of mind. His mind enters into that signless concentration of mind, becoming confident, settled and clear. He understands: ‘This signless concentration of mind is formed (*abhisankhataṃ*) and volitionally created (*abhisañcetaṃ*). But whatever is formed and volitionally created is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ When he knows and sees in this way, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensuality (*kāma āsava*), from the taint of becoming (*bhava āsava*), and from the taint of ignorance (*avijja āsava*). When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’ He understands: ‘Birth is destroyed, the spiritual life has been lived, what had to be done is done, there is no more of this.’

“He understands: ‘Whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the taint of sensuality, those are not present here; whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the taint of becoming, those are not present here; whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the taint of ignorance, those are not present here. There is present only this amount of disturbance, namely, that connected with the six spheres that are dependent on this body and conditioned by life.’ He understands: ‘This field of perception is empty of the taint of sensuality; this field of perception is empty of the taint of becoming; this field of perception is empty of the taint of

ignorance. There is present only this non-emptiness, namely, that connected with the six spheres that are dependent on this body and conditioned by life.' In this way he regards it as empty of what is not there. Whatever remains, he understands as present: 'There is this.' This too, Ānanda, is his genuine, undistorted, pure entry into emptiness, supreme and unsurpassed.

Conclusion

"Ānanda, whatever *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* in the past entered upon and abided in pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness, all entered upon and abided in this same pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness. Whatever *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* in the future will enter upon and abide in pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness, all will enter upon and abide in this same pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness. Whatever *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* in the present enter upon and abide in pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness, all enter upon and abide in this same pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness. Therefore, Ānanda, you should train thus: 'We will enter upon and abide in pure, supreme, unsurpassed emptiness.'"

This is what the Blessed One said. Venerable Ānanda was satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One's words.

Suññatavagga, Uparipañṇāsapāli, Majjhima Nikāya.

Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The middle length discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications 1995: 965-70. (Translation modified.)

Comment

Verses and chorus

Here again we have a basic structure of verses and chorus. The verses take us, again, through a linear progression, here one of the increasingly subtle nature of the "field of perception" and its emptiness. We begin with the perception of forest, which is normal perception but in a situation where the mind can settle down, escaping from the normal stresses and strains of urban life. Then we have the "perception of earth" (*paṭhavī saññā*), which is shorthand for the four *rūpa jhānas* referred to above, when the meditation object is the earth element (*paṭhavī dhātu*). Then we have the four *arūpa jhānas*, which again constitute progressively more subtle stages of absorption. Each stage constitutes a basis for meditation, an object which the practitioner uses to become "confident, settled and clear" (refer to Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta). And for each of these progressive (diachronic) verses we have the same (synchronic) chorus:

He understands: 'This field of perception is empty of the perception of *x*. There is present only this non-emptiness, namely, the unity dependent on the perception of *y*.' In this way he regards it as empty of what is not there. Whatever remains, he understands as present: "There is this." This, Ānanda, is his genuine, undistorted, pure entry into emptiness.

"There is this" (*idam atthi*). The entry into emptiness is one of full intimacy with *this, now*. Another way the tradition speaks of this insight is with the term *tathatā*. One of the oldest titles of the Buddha is *tathāgata*, one who is gone to (*gata*) or come from (*āgata*) a state of such or thus (*tathā*). *Tathā* refers to our experience when we are fully intimate with just-this-right-now; and when we are fully intimate with just-this-now we do not yearn for anything else. A similar term is *tathatā*, "just-this-ness," turning "just-this" into an abstract noun. *Tathatā* is the way things are, just as they are. We experience *tathatā* when we cease adding any concepts to our experience, when just-this really is just-this. When nothing extra is added to experience there is no duality of subject and object, so there is no-one who suffers, no-one to whom suffering occurs. There is just the purity of experience itself.

Once when I was doing a retreat at Wat Suan Mokkh, Ajahn Buddhādāsa's forest monastery in southern Thailand, the Ajahn was teaching us about *tathatā*. It was the wet season, and we had to tramp through rain and slush from dormitory to meditation hall to toilets to dharma hall, where we assembled each day to hear a *dhamma* talk from Ajahn Buddhādāsa. We were a sodden bunch, sitting there in wet clothes on damp hessian bags laid out on a concrete floor. Ajahn Buddhādāsa spoke about the rain. It's raining, he said, and you think this is bad, because you are always wet, always wading through mush. Meanwhile, there are rice farmers over the hill who are dancing with joy because of this rain, because they now know they can feed their families for the next year. You think the rain is bad; the farmers think the rain is good; but you're both wrong. The rain is just wet.

This is the radical simplicity of *tathatā*, of the entry into emptiness. The rain is just wet. When I am fully intimate with this fact, there is no room for creating a narrative around my experience: "If only the sun would shine for a change! When will I be dry again!" Being fully intimate with just this, right now, there is no *dukkha* because there is no room to wish that anything be different from what it is. There is no room for the arising of *taṇhā* (craving), and without *taṇhā* there can be no *dukkha*.

The entry into emptiness is another way of expressing the experience of reflexive attention (*paṭisati*) and reflexive insight (*paṭivipassanā*), which constitute the door to the deathless described in Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta. As there, the same understanding operates regardless of the linear position along the path, for any point along the path can be an entry into emptiness. And again, the progression along the path is provided by the development of *samādhi* in serenity meditation.

Parallel structures

But this *sutta* is more complex in its structure than Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta. It does not convey just a progressive development of serenity, cut through at each point with insight. After listing the *jhānas*, the Buddha then moves to two further verses, each of them the "signless concentration of mind" (*animittaṃ ceto-samādhi*). This concentration uses as its object the mind-body process as it arises and ceases. The "signs" that are missing here are those of permanence (*niccatā*), satisfaction (*sukhatā*) and self (*attatā*); "signless" concentration refers to the contemplation of phenomena as impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) and not-self (*anattā*).

In signless concentration the meditation objects are "the six spheres that are dependent on this body and conditioned by life." To understand what has happened at this point, we must recall how the *jhānas* are divided into material (*rūpa*) and immaterial (*arūpa*) absorptions. These are not just subjective levels of concentration, but objective levels of existence within the universe (*loka*). The *devas* ("shining ones" or gods) live in heavenly worlds which, depending on their level of subtlety, are (fine-) material (*rūpa loka*) or immaterial (*arūpa loka*). The six sense spheres of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind belong to a "lower" and far more gross level of existence, that of the world of desire or sensuality (*kāma loka*). In other words, this progression in verses does not constitute a further development of serenity, but a sudden about turn to an entirely different order of existence. We are back in a progressive structure, but one which runs parallel to, rather than extending from, what went before. We are, as it were, in a parallel universe.

But one in which the same chorus applies. This universe corresponds to that of insight (*vipassanā*) meditation. Signless concentration is the concentration used in insight meditation, and uses the mind-body process as its object. It can therefore take place within this *kāma loka* of normal human experience. The application of the chorus, however, shows us that this, too, is an "entry into emptiness," and therefore a means of liberation. Further, the next verse again involves the signless concentration of mind into the six spheres, and here the practitioner turns his attention around 180 degrees in an act of reflexive attention to the concentrated mind itself:

His mind enters into that signless concentration of mind, becoming confident, settled and clear. He understands: 'This signless concentration of mind is formed and volitionally created. But whatever is formed and volitionally created is impermanent, subject to cessation.' When he knows and sees in this way, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensuality (*kāma āsava*), from the taint of becoming (*bhava āsava*), and from the taint of ignorance (*avijja āsava*). When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: 'It is liberated.' He understands: 'Birth is destroyed, the spiritual life has been lived, what had to be done is done, there is no more of this.'

This passage also refers us to the "doors to the deathless" in Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta, linking the structure of the path in the two *suttas*. While pointing to different aspects of the practice - the entry into emptiness on the one hand, and insight into that which is impermanent and subject to cessation on the other - these *suttas* indicate how the same liberating insight can arise in different ways, at different levels of concentration, using different meditation objects. Underlying all this diversity there is a fundamental unity, a unity revealed in the structure of *dhamma*.

Conclusion

What do these *suttas* tell us about the nature of the practice? Given the sophistication and complexity of the underlying structures of *dhamma* revealed by just two brief and relatively simple discourses, it seems unlikely that any one way of approaching the practice could be adequate to the myriad possibilities presented by the complete database. The database which is the *dhamma* encompasses a variety of trajectories, and these trajectories are not just theoretical, useful for constructing sermons, but practical and existential. They present ways of constructing paths of practice. So it seems that any reading of the *suttas* that sees "one true technique," or even one true trajectory, is open to the suggestion that it is at best overly simplistic, that it does not take into account the extraordinary complexity and sophistication of the *dhamma* presented by the Buddha. This implies that our approach to meditation practice needs to be creative, and not tied down to established methods that are developed as a "mass production" approach to teaching meditation. This may be indicated by the Buddha's simile of the raft in the Alagaddūpama Sutta (See Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi: 228)

Bhikkhus, suppose a man in the course of a journey saw a great expanse of water, whose near shore was dangerous and fearful and whose further shore was safe and free from fear, but there was no ferryboat or bridge going to the far shore. Then he thought: "There is this great expanse of water ... Suppose I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bind them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore." And then the man collected grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bound them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with his hands and feet, he got safely across to the far shore.

Usually this simile is explained focusing on what happened to the raft on the further shore; but here we can focus on what happened on this shore, where we are located. There is no ready-made ferry or bridge; the Buddha provides the raw materials from which a raft suitable for the individual can be constructed. Each one of us must construct our own raft, but we do so from the materials available, and these are provided in the *suttas*, the word of the Buddha. But it is not a case that, in the area of practice, one size fits all. One *structure* fits all, but how that structure is to be applied to any one case, or how it manifests in any one instance, can vary greatly. For the rest of this course we will look at *suttas* devoted specifically to meditation practice, see how practitioners have read them, and ask whether there is one true way to read them, and therefore one true way to practice.