VIÑÑĀṆĀṆCAYATANA, the "sphere of boundless consciousness", is the second of the four immaterial attainments (see also ARJPA etc.) According to the standard description given in the discourse, this sphere is to be attained by overcoming the preceding sphere of boundless space, sabbaso ākāśaṁcayatanaṁ samatikkamma, and by giving attention to the idea of boundless consciousness (e.g. M. II, 13). The Vīheṭuṇga explains that the actual attainment comes about by directing attention to the space touched by consciousness during the previous attainment of the sphere of boundless space, taṁ yeva ākāsaṁ viññāṇa phuttham manastikaroti (Vibh. 262). That is, in terms of actual experience, to attain the sphere of boundless consciousness requires that mind takes consciousness itself as the object, and this consciousness is devoid of content apart from awareness of all pervasive space.

By reason of the method of attainment, the element of the sphere of boundless consciousness, viññāṇācayatana-dhātu, is based on the element of the sphere of boundless space (S. II, 150). The relationship between the two is such that a re-arising of perceptions related to boundless space is an obstruction to be overcome in order to stabilize the attainment of boundless consciousness (S. IV, 267; A. IV, 417; A. IV, 444). The happiness experienced during the attainment
of boundless consciousness is superior to the happiness of attaining the sphere of boundless space (M. I, 399). Moreover, the life span of one reborn in the realm of boundless consciousness lasts for altogether forty-thousand eons and is thus twice as long as the life span to be expected on rebirth in the realm of boundless space, (A. I, 267).

The sphere of boundless consciousness is the sixth in a series of altogether seven stations of consciousness, viññanāthathā (D. III, 253); the fifth of altogether eight liberations, vimokkha (D. III, 262), alternatively referred to as "directions", dīsā (M. III, 222); the seventh of altogether nine abodes of beings, sattvikā (D. III, 263); and the sixth of altogether nine successive dwellings or else nine successive cessations, anupubbavipāka or anupubbanirodhā (D. III, 265; D. III, 266). Another list that covers ten kasiṣṇas includes the viññāṇapakasīṇa as the last in the series (M. II, 15). This viññāṇa-kasiṣṇa is reckoned supreme among the ten kasiṣṇas (A. V, 60), and is described as boundless in all directions and unified, uddhāsa adho tiriyā adhavā paccānahā. This description suggests that the viññāṇapakasīṇa stands for the same type of experience that is elsewhere referred to by the term viññāṇavatāna. The commentaries confirm this impression, explaining that the expression viññāṇapakasīṇa refers to taking boundless consciousness as the object and thereby reaching the sphere of boundless consciousness (AA. II, 77).

Notably, the detailed treatment of the kasiṣṇas in the Visuddhimagga does not cover the consciousness kasiṣṇa (Vism. 118-177), though the term occurs in the same work as part of a list of objects for insight, abhijñā (Vism. 609; quoting Ps. I, 6). The Abhidhamma explains that the consciousness kasiṣṇa was not included in the treatment of kasiṣṇas because it belongs to the development of the immaterial attainments (Dhs. I. 186). In fact, the Nettipakkarama reckons the space kasiṣṇa and the consciousness kasiṣṇa as belonging to the realm of insight, vipassana, while the other eight kasiṣṇas are assigned to tranquility meditation (Nett. 89). This distinction appears artificial and the reason for the absence of the consciousness kasiṣṇa in the Visuddhimagga treatment may rather be that once the expression kasiṣṇa is understood to stand only for a meditation device, it becomes difficult to imagine what a consciousness kasiṣṇa might be. The references in the discourses to a viññāṇapakasīṇa rather suggest that the original implication of the term kasiṣṇa was quite literally the all pervasive 'totality', kritis, of an experience, for the development of which the meditation devices described in the commentaries under the heading of kasiṣṇa are merely the tools (see also KASIṣṇA).

The experience of the totality of boundless consciousness takes place through mind-consciousness alone and does not involve the other sense-faculties (M. I, 293). Mental factors present during the attainment of the sphere of boundless consciousness are one-pointedness of the mind, contact, feeling, perception, volition, mind, aspiration, resolution, energy, mindfulness, equanimity and attention (M. III, 27). The type of perception present during this attainment is a "subtle but true perception of boundless consciousness", viññāṇapakasīṇa-sukhama-sacca-saṇāṇā (D. I, 184).

It is perhaps not surprising that such a sublime attainment is prone to leading those who experience it to metaphysical speculations. This much can be seen from the Brahmajāta Sutta's listing of grounds that lead to the arising of annihilationist views, one of which involves the identification of the sphere of boundless consciousness as a self (D. I, 35; see also VIÇHAVATĀNÇHĀ). That is, the perception of boundless consciousness has quite a propensity to lead to deluded type of imaginings and thence to the genesis of delight and appropriation in terms of 'mine' (M. I, 2). To have reached such attainment could also become the cause for developing conceit and despising others (M. III, 44). Though with the attainment of the sphere of boundless consciousness one has gone beyond Māra's vision (M. I, 159); and the same attainment features among the range of meditation experiences the Buddha attained on the eve of his passing away (D. II, 156 or S. I, 158); from an early Buddhist perspective this profound attainment should be reckoned as merely a peaceful dwelling (M. I, 41). It should be contemplated as a product of mental volition and thence as impermanent and subject to cessation (M. I, 352); or else each of its mental aggregate components should be seen as impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self (M. I, 436), in order to progress towards final liberation.

Anālayo
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