

A gradual entry into emptiness - Depicted in the early Buddhist discourses*

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Abstract

With the present paper I explore meditation on emptiness based on material from the early Buddhist discourses. My presentation begins by introducing the Chinese *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* (1), a text of central importance for meditation on emptiness, followed by providing a translation of this discourse (2). Subsequent to the translation, I survey differences between the parallel versions that are of particular relevance to my topic (3), based on which I then explore the practical implications of the instructions given in the discourse (4). Next I turn to the *Mahāsuññata-sutta* and its parallels (5). Based on a translation of the first part of the *Madhyama-āgama* version of this discourse (6), I place meditation on emptiness within a wider practical context (7).

1. Introduction to the Shorter Discourse on Emptiness

The textual basis I use for describing “early Buddhist” meditation on emptiness are the discourses found in the four main Pali *Nikāyas* and their counterparts in the Chinese *Āgamas*, together with relevant material that has been preserved in Sanskrit fragments and in Tibetan translation.¹ These discourses represent the earliest strata of Buddhist texts available to us and are thus of prime importance for ascertaining the beginning stages of the Buddhist way of emptiness meditation.

The theme of the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* in the *Majjhima-nikāya* is the depiction of a gradual meditative approach to the realization of emptiness.² This discourse has two parallels: a discourse in the

* I am indebted to Guo Gu, Shi Kong Mu and Giuliana Martini for commenting on a draft version of the present paper.

¹ On the notion of emptiness cf. also, e.g., Lamotte 1970/1976: 1995-2043, Karunaratne 1988: 44-53, Choong 1999, Anālayo 2007, Pāsādika 2007, Skilling 2007 and Yinshun in Huifeng 2009.

² MN 121 at MN I 104,1 to 109,17.

Thai International Journal of Buddhist Studies III (2012): 25-56.

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Madhyama-āgama preserved in Chinese translation, probably stemming from a Sarvāstivāda line of transmission,³ and a discourse extant in Tibetan translation,⁴ stemming from a Mūlasarvāstivāda line of transmission. In what follows, I translate the Chinese *Madhyama-āgama* version as a basis for a closer study of the meditative entry into emptiness, depicted in the three parallel versions.

2. Translation of the Shorter Discourse on Emptiness⁵

1. Thus have I heard. At one time, the Buddha was dwelling at Sāvathī, staying in the Eastern Park, in the Mansion of Migāra's Mother. [737a]

2. At that time, in the afternoon, the venerable Ānanda rose from sitting in meditation and approached the Buddha. Having paid homage at the Buddha's feet, he stepped back, stood to one side and said:

3. "At one time the Blessed One was dwelling among the Sakyans, in a town of the Sakyans named Nagaraka. At that time, I heard the Blessed One speak like this: 'Ānanda, I often dwell in emptiness.' Did I understand well, receive well, and remember well that saying by the Blessed One?" Then the Blessed One replied: "Ānanda, you truly understood well, received well, and remembered well that saying by me. Why? From then until now, I often dwell in emptiness.

4. "Ānanda, just as this Mansion of Migāra's Mother is empty of elephants, of horses, of cattle, of sheep, of wealth, of grain, and of male and female slaves;⁶ yet there is this non-emptiness: [the presence] of

³ Lü 1963: 242, Waldschmidt 1980: 136, Enomoto 1984, Mayeda 1985: 98, Enomoto 1986: 21, Minh Chau 1991: 27 and Oberlies 2003: 48.

⁴ D 290 or Q 956, edited in Skilling 1994: 146-186.

⁵ The translated text corresponds to MĀ 190 at T I 736c27 to 738a1. In order to facilitate comparison with the translation of MN 121 in Ñānamoli 1995/2005: 965-970, I adopt the same paragraph numbering. For the same reason of ease of comparison, here and below I use Pāli terminology, without thereby intending to take a position on the original language of the *Madhyama-āgama* or on Pāli terminology being in principle preferable. In what follows, I only take up selected differences in the notes to the translation. A comparison of MĀ 190 with MN 121, based on translated extracts from both, can be found in Choong 1999: 66-76. A study of all three versions, including the Tibetan version, can be found in Schmithausen 1981: 232-239, Skilling 1997: 335-363 (cf. also Skilling 2007: 233-235) and Anālayo 2011b: 683-688.

⁶ MN 121 at MN III 104,15 indicates that the Mansion of Migāra's Mother is empty of elephants, cattle, horses, mares, empty of gold and silver, and empty of congregations of men and women; for a survey of the considerably longer listing in the Tibetan version cf. Skilling 1997: 348f and 363 (table 32).





just the community of monks.⁷ Thus, Ānanda, whatever is not present, I therefore see as empty;⁸ and whatever else is present, I see as truly present. Ānanda, this is called truly dwelling in emptiness,⁹ without distortion.¹⁰

“Ānanda, if a monk wishes to dwell much in emptiness, that monk should not give attention to the perceptions of village and not give attention to the perceptions of people, but should frequently give attention to the unitary perception of forest.¹¹

“In this way he knows that this is empty of the perception of village, empty of the perception of people. Yet there is this non-emptiness: just the unitary perception of forest.¹² [He knows]: ‘Whatever weariness because of the perception of village there might be – that is not present for me. Whatever weariness because of the perception of people there might be – that is also not present for me. There is only the weariness because of the unitary perception of forest.’ Whatever is not present, he therefore sees as empty; whatever else is present, he sees as truly present. Ānanda, this is called truly dwelling in emptiness, without distortion.

5. “Again, Ānanda, if a monk wishes to dwell much in emptiness, that monk should not give attention to the perceptions of people and not give attention to the perception of forest, but should frequently give attention to the unitary perception of earth. If that monk sees this earth as having hills and hollows, with clusters of snakes, with clumps of thorn-bushes, with sand and rocks, steep mountains and deep rivers, he should not attend to it so. If [instead] he sees this earth as level and flat like the

⁷ MN 121 at MN III 104,17 qualifies this as a unitary experience in dependence on the community of monks; for a discussion of the Tibetan equivalent cf. Skilling 1997: 349.

⁸ In MN 121 at MN III 104,18 the subject of the sentence is a monk. The Tibetan version does not explicitly identify the subject.

⁹ MN 121 at MN III 105,2 additionally qualifies this entry into emptiness as “pure”, *parisuddha*.

¹⁰ MN 121 at MN III 104,19 proceeds differently, as it follows the description of what is absent in the Mansion of Migāra’s Mother by directly turning to the perception of the forest. The Tibetan version agrees with MĀ 190.

¹¹ MĀ 190 at T I 737a13: 無事想, literally “perception of no thing”. The same expression 無事 functions elsewhere in the *Madhyama-āgama* as a counterpart to *arañña*, cf., e.g., MĀ 26 at T I 454c27 and its parallel MN 69 at MN I 469,3. MN 121 at MN III 104,20 adds that the monk’s mind enters into perception of the forest and becomes steady.

¹² MN 121 at MN III 104,22 has first the reflection on the disturbances and then the reflection on what the present perception is empty of. The Tibetan version agrees with MĀ 190.





palm of a hand, then his manner of looking at it is beneficial and should be frequently attended to.¹³

“Ānanda, it is just as a cow hide which, when stretched and fastened with a hundred pegs, being fully stretched, has no wrinkles and no creases.¹⁴ [Similarly], if he sees this earth as having hills and hollows, with clusters of snakes, with clumps of thorn-bushes, with sand and rocks, steep mountains and deep rivers, he should not attend to it so. If [instead] he sees this earth as level and flat like the palm of his hand, then his manner of looking at it is beneficial and should be frequently attended to.

“In this way he knows that this is empty of the perception of people and empty of the perception of forest. Yet there is this non-emptiness: just the unitary perception of earth. [He knows]: ‘Whatever weariness because of the perception of people there might be [737b] – that is not present for me; whatever weariness because of the perception of forest there might be – that is also not present for me. There is only the weariness because of the unitary perception of earth.’ Whatever is not present, he therefore sees as empty; whatever else is present, he sees as truly present. Ānanda, this is called truly dwelling in emptiness, without distortion.

6. “Again, Ānanda, if a monk wishes to dwell much in emptiness, that monk should not give attention to the perception of forest and not give attention to the perception of earth, but should frequently give attention to the unitary perception of the sphere of infinite space.

“In this way he knows that this is empty of the perception of forest and empty of the perception of earth. Yet there is this non-emptiness: just the unitary perception of the sphere of infinite space. [He knows]: ‘Whatever weariness because of the perception of forest there might be – that is not present for me; whatever weariness because of the perception of earth there might be – that is also not present for me. There is only the weariness because of the unitary perception of the sphere of infinite space.’ Whatever is not present, he therefore sees as empty; whatever else is present, he sees as truly present. Ānanda, this is called truly dwelling in emptiness, without distortion.

¹³ The present illustration of the manner in which the earth should be attended to, found also in the Tibetan version, Skilling 1994: 156,9, is not provided in MN 121.

¹⁴ Elsewhere this simile illustrates a particular torture administered to evildoers in hell, where the tongue is stretched out and fixed by a hundred pegs, cf., e.g., MĀ 199 at T I 760b28, EĀ 50.5 at T II 810c27 and Jā 541 at Jā VI 112,31.





7. “Again, Ānanda, if a monk wishes to dwell much in emptiness, that monk should not give attention to the perception of earth and not give attention to the perception of the sphere of infinite space, but should frequently give attention to the unitary perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness.

“In this way he knows that this is empty of the perception of earth and empty of the perception of the sphere of infinite space. Yet there is this non-emptiness: just the unitary perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness. [He knows]: ‘Whatever weariness because of the perception of earth there might be – that is not present for me; whatever weariness because of the perception of the sphere of infinite space there might be – that is also not present for me. There is only the weariness because of the unitary perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness.’ Whatever is not present, he therefore sees as empty; whatever else is present, he sees as truly present. Ānanda, this is called truly dwelling in emptiness, without distortion.

8. “Again, Ānanda, if a monk wishes to dwell much in emptiness, that monk should not give attention to the perception of the sphere of infinite space and not give attention to the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness, but should frequently give attention to the unitary perception of the sphere of nothingness.

“In this way he knows that this is empty of the perception of the sphere of infinite space and empty of the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness. Yet there is this non-emptiness: just the unitary perception of the sphere of nothingness. [He knows]: ‘Whatever weariness because of the perception of the sphere of infinite space there may be – that is not present for me; whatever weariness because of the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness there may be – that is also not present for me. There is only the weariness because of the unitary perception of the sphere of nothingness.’ Whatever is not present, he therefore sees as empty; whatever else is present, he sees as truly present. Ānanda, this is called truly dwelling in emptiness, without distortion.¹⁵ [737c]

10. “Again, Ānanda, if a monk wishes to dwell much in emptiness, that monk should not give attention to the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness and not give attention to the perception of

¹⁵ MN 121 at MN III 107,8 continues at this point with the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, corresponding to §9 in Nānamoli 1995/2005: 968. This step is not found in MĀ 190 or in the Tibetan version.





the sphere of nothingness, but should frequently give attention to the unitary signless concentration of the mind.¹⁶

“In this way he knows that this is empty of the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness and empty of the perception of the sphere of nothingness. Yet there is this non-emptiness: just the unitary signless concentration of the mind. [He knows]: ‘Whatever weariness because of the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness there might be – that is not present for me; whatever weariness because of the perception of the sphere of nothingness there might be – that is also not present for me. There is only the weariness because of the unitary signless concentration of the mind.’ Whatever is not present, he therefore sees as empty; whatever else is present, he sees as truly present. Ānanda, this is called truly dwelling in emptiness, without distortion.¹⁷

11. “He thinks: ‘My [experience] of the signless concentration of the mind is rooted – it is rooted in formations, it is rooted in intentions. What is rooted in formations, rooted in intentions, I do not delight in that, I do not seek that, I should not dwell in that.’¹⁸ Knowing thus, seeing thus, his mind is liberated from the influx of sensual desire, from the influx of existence, and from the influx of ignorance. Being liberated, he knows he is liberated. He knows as it truly is that birth is ended, the holy life has been established, what had to be done has been done, there will be no further experiencing of existence.

“In this way he knows that this is empty of the influx of sensual desire, empty of the influx of existence, and empty of the influx of ignorance. Yet there is this non-emptiness: just this body of mine with its six sense-spheres and the life faculty. [He knows]:

12. “‘Whatever weariness because of the influx of sensual desire there might be – that is not present for me; whatever weariness because of the influx of existence ... because of the influx of ignorance there

¹⁶ MĀ190 at T I 737c3 actually speaks of “unconscious concentration of the mind”, 無想心定. My translation is based on the assumption that the present reading results from a confusion in the original of 想 with 相, two characters often mixed up with each other in Chinese translations; cf. Anālayo 2011b: 274 note 54. My suggested emendation to 無相心定 corresponds to the “signless concentration of the mind”, *animitta cetosamādhī*, found in MN 121 at MN III 107,28, which has its Tibetan counterpart in the “signless element”, *mtshan ma med pa'i dbyings*, Skilling 1994: 172,5; cf. also Choong 1999: 71 and Anālayo 2011b: 686 note 15.

¹⁷ MN 121 at MN III 108,10 continues at this point by repeating once more the description of attending to the signless concentration of the mind.

¹⁸ The insight reflection employed at this point in MN 121 at MN III 108,15 directs attention instead to the fact that the signless concentration of the mind is conditioned and therefore impermanent. The Tibetan version is similar to MĀ 190.





might be – that is also not present for me. There is only the weariness because of this body of mine with its six sense-spheres and the life faculty.’ Whatever is not present, he therefore sees as empty; whatever else is present, he sees as truly present. Ānanda, this is called truly dwelling in emptiness, without distortion,¹⁹ namely the eradication of the influxes, the influx-free and unconditioned liberation of the mind.

13. “Ānanda, whatever Tathāgatas,²⁰ free of attachment and rightly awakened, there have been in the past, they all truly dwelled in this emptiness, without distortion, namely in the eradication of the influxes, the influx-free and unconditioned liberation of the mind.²¹

“Ānanda, whatever Tathāgatas, free of attachment and rightly awakened, there will be in the future, they will all truly dwell in this emptiness, without distortion, namely in the eradication of the influxes, the influx-free and unconditioned liberation of the mind.

“Ānanda, I, who am the Tathāgata now, free of attachment and rightly awakened, I also truly dwell in this emptiness, without distortion, namely in the eradication of the influxes, the influx-free and unconditioned liberation of the mind.

“Ānanda, you should train yourself like this: ‘I shall also truly dwell in this emptiness, without distortion, namely in the eradication of the influxes, the influx-free and unconditioned liberation of the mind.’ Ānanda, you should train yourself like this.”

The Buddha spoke like this. [738a] Having heard what the Buddha said, the venerable Ānanda and the monks delighted in it and received it respectfully.

¹⁹ MN 121 at MN III 109,1 qualifies this entry into emptiness as supreme and as unsurpassed, *paramānuttarā*. The Tibetan version in Skilling 1994: 178,2 agrees that at this point the entry into emptiness has become unsurpassed, *stong pa nyid la ’jug pa bla na med pa*.

²⁰ MN 121 at MN III 109,2 instead speaks of recluses and Brahmins; the Tibetan version agrees with MĀ 190. Since the discourse as a whole is a detailed exposition of the Buddha’s statement that he often dwelled in emptiness, it would be natural for the conclusion to refer to the dwelling in emptiness of a Tathāgata. Ps IV 154,16 understands the expression “recluses and Brahmins” in MN 121 to intend only Buddhas and their disciples in the present context. In fact, according to MN 11 at MN I 66,3 and its parallels MĀ 103 at T I 591a20 and EĀ 27.2 at T II 644a16 heterodox recluses and Brahmins did not really understand the problem posed by clinging to a doctrine of self, so that one would not expect MN 121 to propose that heterodox recluses and Brahmins were able to dwell in supreme emptiness.

²¹ MN 121 does not refer to the eradication of the influxes and the liberation of the mind; the Tibetan version agrees with MĀ 190.





3. Comparative Study of the Shorter Discourse on Emptiness

The meditation on emptiness presented in the above discourse shows several variations when compared to the Pāli account. Placing the three extant versions side by side, the following sequence of themes emerges:

Chinese & Tibetan	Pāli
1) community of monks	forest (= 2)
2) forest	earth (= 3)
3) earth	infinite space (= 4)
4) infinite space	infinite consciousness (= 5)
5) infinite consciousness	nothingness (= 6)
6) nothingness	neither-perception-nor-non-perception
7) signlessness	signlessness (= 7)
8) destruction of influxes	signlessness (= 7)
	destruction of influxes (= 8)

One noteworthy difference is that the perception of the community of monks forms a distinct stage of practice in the *Madhyama-āgama* and Tibetan version, whereas the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* begins by mentioning that the Mansion of Migāra's Mother is empty of animals, with only the community of monks being present, but then directly turns to the perception of the forest. The progression in the Chinese and Tibetan version conforms better to the basic pattern observed throughout all versions. In contrast, in the Pāli version it is not immediately evident in what way the presence of the community of monks leads to the perception of the forest.²²

Another difference is that the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* takes up neither-perception-nor-non-perception, a step not mentioned in the parallel versions. The *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* thereby explicitly treats neither-

²² MN 121 at MN III 104,18 begins its description of attending to the perception of the forest by indicating that the practising monk disregards the perceptions of village and of people. While the perception of village would presumably correspond to the earlier mentioned elephants, cattle, horses, mares, gold, silver, and congregations of men and women that are absent from the Mansion of Migāra's Mother, the perception of people would only be overcome once the perception of the community of monks has been left behind. This supports the impression that a loss of text might have occurred here, suggesting the possibility that the original would have covered giving attention to the perception of the community of monks as a distinct step in the gradual entry into emptiness, followed by turning to the perception of forest as a subsequent step.





perception-nor-non-perception as a perception on a par with the other perceptions mentioned previously.²³

Considering this issue in a wider context, several other discourses do employ the term “perception” in relation to the fourth immaterial sphere.²⁴ However, this might be just a manner of speaking, since the actual experience of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, as its name indicates, is a type of experience outside the range of what can still be properly considered a “perception”. This becomes evident from a number of discourses which, in order to describe the whole range of possible experiences, distinguish between beings with perceptual experiences, those that do not have perceptual experiences (i.e., which are unconscious), and beings with the experience of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.²⁵ By employing a separate category for neither-perception-nor-non-perception, these discourses indicate that this type of experience is neither a perceptual experience, nor a form of unconsciousness. That the fourth immaterial attainment does not fully qualify as a type of perception also becomes evident from other passages, according to which the third immaterial attainment already constitutes the pinnacle of perception.²⁶

A set of discourses in the *Samyutta-nikāya* describes Mahā-moggallāna’s gradual progression through the four immaterial attainments, a progress that culminates in his practice of the signless

²³ MN 121 at MN III 108,2: “he understands: ‘this perceptual experience is empty of perceptions of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception’”, *suññam idaṃ saññāgataṃ nevasaññānāsaññāyatanaṣaṅghāya ti pajānāti*.

²⁴ The expression *nevasaññānāsaññāyatanaṣaṅghā* can be found, e.g., in MN 106 at MN II 265,30, AN 9.33 at AN IV 414,8, AN 9.42 at AN IV 451,18, AN 10.6 at AN V 7,17, AN 11.7 at AN V 318,19, AN 11.10 at AN V 326,2, and AN 11.19 at AN V 353,25. The corresponding expression 非有想非無想處想 or 非想非非想入處想 can be found in MĀ 168 at T I 701b7 and in SĀ 926 at T II 236a29 (parallel to AN 11.10).

²⁵ SN 45.139 at SN V 42,1, AN 4.34 at AN II 34,14, AN 5.32 at AN III 35,24 and AN 10.15 at AN V 21,13. Such a distinction is also found in a Chinese parallel to SN 45.139, SĀ 902 at T II 225c23, and in a Tibetan parallel to AN 4.34, D 4094 *ju* 97a2 or Q 5595 *tu* 110b7, although another Chinese parallel to AN 4.34, EĀ 21.1 at T II 602a7, does not mention beings with the experience of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

²⁶ MN 102 at MN II 230,2 and AN 10.29 at AN V 63,21; cf. also the discussion in Skilling 1997: 356. The Tibetan parallel to MN 102 in Skilling 1994: 318,5 makes the same stipulation. This much is also the case for a Tibetan parallel to AN 10.29, D 4094 *ju* 272a3 or Q 5595 *thu* 15b3, whereas a Chinese parallel, MĀ 215 at T I 799c22, only describes the disenchantment of the noble disciple with all types of perception, without explicitly indicating that the third immaterial attainment is the highest among them (although the same is implicit in its presentation). Another reference to the third immaterial attainment as the highest among perceptions can be found among Sanskrit fragments of the *Prṣṭhapāla-sūtra*, Melzer 2006: 262 (§36.44).





concentration of the mind.²⁷ Thus this set of discourses depicts a meditative development that moves through the same stages as the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*. The difference is, however, that Mahāmoggallāna's meditative progression is part of his development of concentrative mastery. In contrast, in the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* the point at issue is not the attainment of an immaterial sphere as such, but the use of the corresponding perception for the purpose of insight into emptiness.

When it comes to the development of insight, one in fact often finds that only the first three immaterial attainments are mentioned. This is the case, for example, in a passage in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* related to deeper stages of insight which surveys types of perceptions during which sensory experience is absent.²⁸ Since sensory experience is certainly also absent during the attainment of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, the only reason why the fourth immaterial attainment is not included in this context would be because the nature of this experience does no longer fit the context, presumably because it is no longer truly a type of perception.

Again, insight contemplations described in the *Aṭṭhakanāgara-sutta* and the *Mahāmālunkya-sutta* do not mention the fourth immaterial attainment in a series of meditative experiences that include the other three immaterial attainments,²⁹ presumably because the nature of

²⁷ SN 40.9 at SN IV 269,4. While the preceding steps of his practice of the immaterial attainments in SN 40.5-8 do not seem to have a Chinese counterpart, Mahāmoggallāna's attainment of signlessness is also recorded in the parallel SĀ 502 at T II 132b18, and his gradual progression through the lower absorptions is described in SĀ 501 at T II 132a18.

²⁸ AN 9.37 at AN IV 427,12 presents the three immaterial attainments as examples for an experience where, although the sense-doors are present, their objects and the corresponding spheres are not experienced. This discourse follows the three immaterial attainments with another type of meditation, described as not being inclined towards, nor away, and as having realisation as its fruit. Harvey 1986: 27 suggests that this meditation could also be a form of *animitta samādhi*. His suggestion finds confirmation in the partial parallel SĀ 557 at T II 146a16, which indeed speaks of this concentration as a "signless concentration of the mind", 無相心三昧 (SĀ 557 corresponds only to the part of AN 9.37 concerning the discussion between Ānanda and the nun, it does not have the earlier treatment of experience in which sense objects are absent). Thus AN 9.37 seems to have a sequence of meditative experiences closely similar to the Chinese and Tibetan parallels to MN 121.

²⁹ MN 52 at MN I 352,33 and MN 64 at MN I 437,6. The parallels to MN 52, MĀ 217 at T I 802b27 and T 92 at T I 916c8, differ in as much as they do include the fourth immaterial attainment in their treatment. Maithrimurthi 1999: 97 note 136 comments that in this case the reference to the fourth immaterial attainment was probably added mechanically, i.e., by way of conforming to the complete set of four immaterial attainments. The parallel to MN 64, MĀ 205 at T I 780a17, agrees with the Pāli version on taking the exposition only up to the third immaterial attainment. The same pattern would also apply to the corresponding realms of rebirth, since AN 3.114 at AN I 267





neither-perception-nor-non-perception is not apt for the development of insight described in these discourses.³⁰ The same may well apply to the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*, which is also concerned with the development of insight based on deeper concentration experiences.

In fact, the similarity of sequence between several steps of the present gradual entry into emptiness and the standard exposition of the immaterial attainments found elsewhere could easily have been responsible for an intrusion, perhaps quite unintentional, of the fourth immaterial attainment into the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* during the transmission of the discourse.³¹ In contrast, it seems much less probable that a reference to the fourth immaterial attainment would have been accidentally lost in the Chinese and Tibetan versions, and it would be even more difficult to conceive of a reason for its intentional omission. In sum, it seems probable that neither-perception-nor-non-perception should not be included as a step in the gradual approach to emptiness.

A third difference is the double mention of the signless concentration of the mind in the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*. This is unexpected, as it no longer conforms to the pattern of overcoming a particular weariness or disturbance with each of the successive steps, a pattern observed elsewhere throughout all versions.³² This gives the impression that an error occurred in the Pāli version. This hypothesis receives support from the fact that already in relation to the first instance of signlessness the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* mentions the body and the six senses together with the life faculty.³³ Here the Chinese and Tibetan versions offer a more straightforward perspective, since it makes better sense to speak of the six sense-spheres as that which is still left after the destruction of the influxes has been attained. Once the influxes are destroyed, sensory

to 268 describes how a noble disciple, on being reborn in one or the other immaterial realm, will attain final Nirvāṇa there, a presentation that also does not include the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

³⁰ Cf. AN 9.36 at AN IV 426,9, according to which penetration to [liberating] insight, *āññāpaṭivedha*, is possible as long as perception is still present, with a parallel in a *sūtra* quotation in the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, Pradhan 1950: 69,15, already noted by Schmithausen 1981: 224 and Ruegg 1989: 200.

³¹ As von Hinüber 1996/1997: 31 explains, “pieces of texts known by heart may intrude into almost any context once there is a corresponding key word”.

³² Schmithausen 1981: 237 comments that “this appears strange in a text which up to this point had strictly followed a pattern of ... progressive spiritual stages. In such a framework, the two final sections give the impression of being either two juxtaposed alternative versions or a juxtaposition of an original and a revised version of the final portion”.

³³ MN 121 at MN III 108,4. Tanto 2004, however, argues in favour of the present formulation in MN 121.





experience is indeed what is still left. The same qualification does not fit signless concentration of the mind so well, which by its very absence of signs would be aloof from sensory experience.

Thus in regard to the three differences discussed above, the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse and its Tibetan parallel appear to have preserved a preferable sequence of steps for the gradual entry into emptiness.

4. Implications of the Shorter Discourse on Emptiness

Following the indications given in the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse and its Tibetan parallel, the gradual meditation on emptiness would proceed as follows:

1. empty of animals and wealth & not empty of community of monks
2. empty of people (including monks) & not empty of forest
3. empty of forest & not empty of earth
4. empty of earth (as solidity) & not empty of infinite space
5. empty of infinite space & not empty of infinite consciousness
6. empty of infinite consciousness & not empty of nothingness
7. empty of nothingness & not empty of signlessness
8. empty of influxes & not empty of body with six senses and life faculty

1. The first of these steps begins by directing attention to the place at which, according to all versions, Ānanda and the Buddha were staying. That is, when asked about dwelling in emptiness, the Buddha is shown to turn to the immediately present and ordinary situation, taking this as a stepping-stone for a gradual entry into emptiness. With this step, a unifying feature found in the Mansion of Migāra's Mother is given attention, namely the presence of the other monks. The monks would all have been shaven-headed, with similar robes. This would facilitate viewing them as a unitary object, not as distinct individuals. This unified vision would then stand in contrast to the variegated perceptions one would have when being in a village and seeing various animals, etc.

2. With the second step, the unitary perception of the monks is replaced by a similarly unitary perception that is based on something more stable than the monks, some of which might have been moving around, namely the forest representing the landscape surrounding the Mansion





of Migāra's Mother.³⁴ The perception of the forest is also more encompassing, since the entirety of this landscape can be included under the heading of the perception of forest, whereas the earlier perception of monks took up a more limited object out of the present situation. On a symbolic level, the perception of the forest also brings in the theme of seclusion, a necessary foundation for the deeper levels of mental tranquillity and insight that the subsequent steps in the gradual entry into emptiness require. Overall, a shift to a more comprehensive and stable perception appears to be the key aspect at this stage.

3. The third step then proceeds from forest to earth. As the three versions of the discourse indicate, the point in this progression is to disregard any variation – such as different aspects of the vegetation or irregularities in the earth's surface – and instead develop a perception of earth from a unitary viewpoint, just as if the earth had been made completely straight like a stretched hide or like looking at the flat palm of one's hand. The point, here, is to proceed to a perception of earth as such, representative of the notion of solidity, which constitutes the chief implication of earth as one of the four elements in Buddhist thought.³⁵

Thus at this juncture the mode of viewing begins to employ abstraction. The employment of an abstract concept that to some extent goes beyond what is perceived by the eye – in the present case the notion of solidity – appears to be the distinct contribution of this particular step.

4. Next the notion of solidity is replaced by infinite space. This part of the gradual entry into emptiness thus enters known terrain in early Buddhist meditation practice, as a similar progression is the basis for the attainment of the immaterial spheres. Such attainment would take place after successful mastery of the fourth absorption. The meditation object previously used for absorption attainment, which due to the unification of the mind during absorption attainment had become an all-embracing experience, then needs to be replaced by the notion of infinite space. In other words, the boundlessness of the former object remains, but the object itself is allowed to disappear.

The same basic pattern applies to the gradual entry into emptiness, where the unitary perception of earth qua solidity is replaced by attending

³⁴ Hayashima 1962 notes that the early Buddhist conception of emptiness was closely related to the solitary and remote lifestyle of the Buddha and his disciples, something particularly evident in the present instance.

³⁵ Cf., e.g., MN 28 at MN I 185,16 and its parallel MĀ 30 at T I 464c7, which agree on summing up the characteristic of the internal earth element (manifesting in various aspects of the body) as what is "solid", *kakkhaḷa*/堅.





to the space that had been covered by this perception of earth, which by further development then results in the perception of infinite space. In this way, the experience of matter is left behind and the meditative experience would be pervaded by a sense of being unobstructed and not established anywhere.

5. The next step follows the same dynamic that underlies a progress through the immaterial attainments, which now requires turning attention back to the mind itself. By earlier becoming absorbed in the notion of infinite space, consciousness has become infinite itself. Letting go of the notion of space and turning attention back to the mind then enables the development of the perception of infinite consciousness.

With this step of practice, the meditator becomes aware of consciousness as the very foundation of subjective experience. Needless to say, early Buddhism does not consider consciousness or the mind to be the source of the external world. But as far as subjective experience is concerned, consciousness is its very foundation and no experience is possible without consciousness. Hence with this step, space is left behind and infinite consciousness becomes the pervasive theme of the meditative experience.

6. With the sixth step the comparison with the immaterial attainments continues to hold, in that the experience of infinite consciousness is now attended to as something insubstantial in every respect, resulting in the notion that there is nothing. In this way, the perception of nothingness is developed. Judging from the overall dynamics of the present discourse, out of three possible approaches to attaining the perception of nothingness, delineated in the *Añenjasappāya-sutta* and its parallels, the one best suited to the present context would be the reflection that “this is empty of a self and what pertains to a self”.³⁶

Undertaken in this way, attending to nothingness revolves around the realization that there is nothing at all that could qualify as a self, nothing to be identified with and nothing to be considered as one’s personal possession. A sense of disowning or dispossessing would pervade this stage of the gradual entry into emptiness, where by successfully establishing the perception of nothingness any notion of an ‘I’ or ‘my’, however subtle it may be, is left behind.

7. The seventh step departs from the pattern set by the immaterial attainments. Instead of continuing abstraction to a point where the nature of perception itself is sublimated, the practice proceeds beyond

³⁶ MN 106 at MN II 263,26, MĀ 75 at T I 542c18 and D 4094 *ju* 228b6 or Q 5595 *tu* 261a6; for a comparative study, together with a translation of MĀ 75, cf. Anālayo 2009a.





the notion of nothingness by directing the mind to signlessness. Simply stated, attending to the signless means that those features and aspects of an object by which one recognizes things – the signs – are disregarded. While signlessness is one of the aspects of Nirvāṇa and thus can refer to the experience of awakening, it can also stand for various other levels of meditative experience in which the recognizing tendency of the mind has been transcended.³⁷

The present stage thus completes the previous progression through ever more refined perceptions by turning to the very nature of perception itself and letting go of any notion or concept in the mind whatsoever, even letting go of the concept of nothingness.

8. With the eighth step the gradual emptying of perception becomes the basis for the final touch of liberating insight. The parallel versions express this insight in slightly different terms. While they agree in highlighting that the present experience of signlessness is of a conditioned nature, the Pāli discourse additionally draws attention to its impermanence, whereas the Chinese and Tibetan versions mention the need to avoid delighting in the present meditative experience. In spite of such difference, the basic implications appear to be the same and could perhaps best be covered under the term *virāga*, which at the same time stands for “dispassion” (= absence of delight) as well as for “fading away” (= impermanence).³⁸ From a practical perspective, impermanence and the absence of delight can be considered two sides of the same coin.

At this point, by giving up even the most subtle holding on to any experience of emptiness, the true realization of supreme emptiness becomes possible (the epithet “supreme” being explicitly employed at this final stage in the Pāli and Tibetan versions). For supreme emptiness, the preceding gradual emptying of perception formed the preparation. Throughout this gradual progress, a crucial theme taken up at the present juncture – conditionality – was kept present in terms of the types of weariness overcome or still present “because of” one’s meditative experience. This recurrent directing the awareness of the meditator to conditionality reflects the close relationship between realization of emptiness and dependent arising.

³⁷ For a detailed study of *animitta* cf. Harvey 1986, on the *nimitta* in general cf. Anālayo 2003a. An additional perspective on signlessness could also be found in SĀ 80 at T II 20b4, according to which it is impossible to develop signlessness without at first developing concentration on emptiness, whereas “having attained emptiness, it is possible to develop signlessness”, 得空已, 能起無相.

³⁸ On the significance of *virāga* cf. Anālayo 2009c.





With the present final step, the conditioned nature of all stages in the gradual entry into emptiness is then left behind through realization of the unconditioned. What remains, after this supreme accomplishment in emptiness, is simply the continuity of life, exemplified by the body and the senses together with the life faculty.

In sum, with these different stages of transcendence, a gradual refinement of experience appears to take place. Beginning with perceptions of the actual situation in which the discourse was situated, the progression leaves behind matter (4) and then even its opposite of space (5). Next comes a going beyond awareness of the experiencing mind (6), followed by leaving behind even the signs required for the formation of concepts (7). Eventually this leads up to a letting go of all emptiness experiences thus far. However sublime these may be, they are to be viewed as merely a conditioned product of the mind in order to arrive at the supreme emptiness of liberating the mind from defilements (8). In other words, while the previous steps require a progressive letting go within the realm of perceptual experience, the last requires letting go of experience itself.

Regarding the practical implementation of this gradual entry into emptiness, the parallel versions make several points worthy of mention. One of these is that the recurrent reference to unitary perception makes it clear that the various perceptions are to be cultivated from a firm basis of concentration, so as to result in what is characteristic of absorption experience: unification of the mind.³⁹

When this has been successfully achieved, the task is to recognize clearly the nature of what has been attained in terms of “this is empty of” what has just been transcended, as well as a clear recognition of what the present experience is not empty of. That is, by directing awareness to nothingness, for example, experience has become empty of the perceptions of infinite space and infinite consciousness, but the perception of nothingness remains. This is what the present experience is not empty of. It is precisely this non-emptiness that needs to be left behind in order to proceed further. In other words, a clear recognition of this non-emptiness is what enables progress in the gradual meditation on emptiness. This mode of contemplation marks the decisive difference between the gradual entry into emptiness and a mere attainment of the immaterial spheres of infinite space, infinite consciousness, etc., as such.

³⁹ MN 43 at MN I 294,31 and the parallels to MN 44, MĀ 210 at T I 788c20 and D 4094, *ju* 8a2 or Q 5595 *tu* 8b8 (translated in Anālayo 2011a: 12), agree on reckoning *cittekaggatā*, 一心, *sems rtse gcig pa*, as characteristic of already the first absorption.





The clear recognition of what the present experience is empty of and what it is not empty of is in all versions explicitly phrased in terms of a “weariness” or even “disturbance” overcome or still being present.⁴⁰ This expression may well have been chosen on purpose to drive home the truth of *dukkha*. The gradual entry into emptiness involves a progression through ever more refined perceptions based on attaining deeper levels of concentration, whose respective attainment requires a clear awareness of what needs to be let go of – referred to as weariness or disturbance – for further progress. By qualifying what is to be left behind and what is to be attained similarly as types of “weariness”, the instructions appear to be aimed at ensuring that each stage in the gradual entry into emptiness is seen as merely a stepping stone, a type of weariness somewhat more refined than those previously experienced, yet, still something to become weary of and something that still pertains to the realm of what is conditioned.

Once the different stages of this gradual progress through ever subtler types of weariness have led up to the destruction of the influxes, according to the Pāli and Tibetan versions a type of emptiness has been reached that alone deserves to be reckoned supreme. In other words, the gradual approach to emptiness quite explicitly recognizes that there can be a variety of emptiness experiences. Yet, emptiness in its true sense is only attained when the mind has become void of defilements.

Another noteworthy aspect of the above procedure for developing a genuine and undistorted approach to emptiness is that the whole progression revolves around a qualification. Emptiness is not presented as a kind of entity. Instead, it constitutes a method of meditation. Even when the *Cūlasuññata-sutta* employs the noun “emptiness” in regard to the final step in the series, the issue at stake is still a qualification of experience as “empty of”, in this case as empty of the influxes. Qualifying something as “empty of” simply means that it is “devoid of” something else. This concurs with a consistent emphasis in the early discourses on the quality of being empty, instead of an abstract state of emptiness.

Exploring this a little further, the discourses often refer to an “empty place”, which being empty of people and other potential disturbances and distractions finds inclusion among a standard listing of locations conducive to meditative seclusion, together with the root of a tree or

⁴⁰ On the corresponding Pāli and Tibetan expressions cf. the discussion in Skilling 1997: 352-355.





a forest.⁴¹ The same ordinary sense of being empty of people finds employment in a simile that describes a man who, while attempting to escape a group of enemies set on killing him, comes to an empty village. Deeper connotations come to the fore in the explanation given for this simile, according to which the empty village stands for the empty nature of the six senses.⁴² Just as the poor man will find nothing in the empty village that could help him in his predicament, so the six senses turn out to be just empty and unsubstantial. The way in which the six senses can be qualified as empty can be deduced from another discourse, which explains the implications of the dictum that the entire world is empty. The world is empty in the sense that the eye is empty of a self or anything that could belong to a self,⁴³ as is the case for the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body and the mind.

The same sense of being “empty of” applies in relation to selfhood, when all aspects of personal experience are considered to be “empty of” a self and of what belongs to a self. To assert emptiness in terms of the absence of a permanent self, however, does not imply a denial of the conditioned and impermanent continuity of the five aggregates. These exist as changing processes and to know that which is still there in terms of “it is present” is according to the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* and its parallels a necessary aspect of a genuine and undistorted approach to emptiness.

While emptiness is central in the progress to full awakening depicted in the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* and its parallels, the same versions also clarify that insight into emptiness alone does not suffice. The important transition from signlessness to the destruction of the influxes requires recognizing the conditioned nature of such experience and its impermanence – according to the Pāli version – or else its inherent

⁴¹ E.g. SN 55.1 at SN V 311,8: *suññāgāragato*, with its counterpart in SĀ 803 at T II 206a23: 空露地, where the meditative practice undertaken at such an empty place is mindfulness of breathing.

⁴² SN 35.197 at SN IV 174,32 and its parallels SĀ 1172 at T II 313c15 and EĀ 31.6 at T II 670a8; cf. also fragment Or. 15009/252v8 in Nagashima 2009: 261.

⁴³ SN 35.85 at SN IV 54,7 proclaims that the eye is “empty of a self and empty of what belongs to a self”, *suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā*. The formulation in the parallel SĀ 232 at T II 56b24 (translated in Choong 2004: 73) differs in as much as it indicates that “the eye is empty, it is empty of being permanent, of being perpetual and of having an unchanging nature, and it is empty of anything belonging to a self”, 眼空, 常恒不變易法空, 我所空. Baba 2004: 944 explains that this type of presentation makes use of “expressions of emptiness that are more recent than those in the first four Pāli Nikāyas”, as a similar phrase can be found in historically later works, such as Paṭi I 109,10; cf. also Lamotte 1973/1993: 18 and Choong 2000: 93. Another instance of an apparent later development has been noted by de Jong 2000: 177 (quoting Mori), where in Chinese Āgama texts a reference to emptiness appears to have been added to passages that in the Pāli discourses speak just of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self.





unsatisfactoriness – according to the Chinese and Tibetan versions. That is, the other two characteristics need also be brought in to complete the maturation of insight. This much can also be deduced from the Greater Discourse on Emptiness, which, in a way, contextualizes the meditative experience of emptiness.

5. Introduction to the Greater Discourse on Emptiness

Similar to the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*, the *Mahāsuññata-sutta* has parallels in the *Madhyama-āgama* and in a discourse preserved in Tibetan translation. The three versions begin with the Buddha referring to his own dwelling in emptiness, followed by describing how a monk may come to abide in emptiness as well. This pattern of proceeding from the Buddha's own experience of emptiness to the way a monk can achieve the same is reminiscent of the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* and thus points to an intimate relationship between the two discourses. In what follows, I translate the first part of the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Mahāsuññata-sutta*, followed by a brief evaluation.

6. Translation of the First Part of the Greater Discourse on Emptiness⁴⁴

1. Thus have I heard. At one time, the Buddha was dwelling among the Sakyans at Kapilavatthu, staying in the Nigrodha Park.

2. At that time, when the night was over, towards dawn, the Blessed One put on his [outer] robe, took his bowl and entered Kapilavatthu to beg for alms-food. Having completed his meal, in the afternoon he went to the dwelling of Kāḷākhemaka the Sakyan. At that time, in the dwelling of Kāḷākhemaka the Sakyan numerous beds and seats had been set out, [indicating that] many monks were staying there. Then, the Blessed One came out of the dwelling of Kāḷākhemaka the Sakyan and went to the dwelling of Ghāṭā the Sakyan.

At that time, the venerable Ānanda and many monks had congregated in the dwelling of Ghāṭā the Sakyan to make robes. The venerable Ānanda saw from afar that the Buddha was coming. Having seen this,

⁴⁴ The translated excerpt from MĀ 191 ranges from T I 738a5 to 739b21, paralleling §§1-17 in the translation of MN 122 by Ñāṇamoli 1995/2005: 971-975. The parts corresponding to the translated extract can be found in MN 122 at MN I 109,19 to 115,9 and D 291 or Q 957, edited in Skilling 1994: 188-241. In what follows, I only take up selected differences in the notes to the translation. A comparative study of MĀ 191 and MN 122 can be found in Choong 1999: 79-84, for studies that also cover the Tibetan discourse cf. Skilling 1997: 365-400 (cf. also Skilling 2007: 235-237) and Anālayo 2011b: 688-701.





he came out to receive the Buddha, took the Buddha's [outer] robe and bowl, and returned to prepare a bed and seat and draw water for washing his feet.

When the Buddha had washed his feet and had sat down on the seat prepared by the venerable Ānanda in the dwelling of Ghāṭā the Sakyan, he said: "Ānanda, in the dwelling of Kāḷākhemaka the Sakyan numerous beds and seats have been set out, [indicating that] many monks are staying there."

The venerable Ānanda said: "Yes, indeed, Blessed One, in the dwelling of Kāḷākhemaka the Sakyan numerous beds and seats have been set out, [indicating that] many monks are staying there. Why? We are now making robes."

3. Then, the Blessed One told Ānanda: "A monk should not desire vociferous talk, delight in vociferous talk, associate with vociferous talk, desire company, delight in company, associate with company, not desiring to be separated from company, not delighting in dwelling alone in remote places.

"If a monk desires vociferous talk, delights in vociferous talk, associates with vociferous talk, desires company, delights in company, associates with company, not desiring to be separated from company, not delighting in dwelling alone in remote places, then it is impossible for him to attain, easily and without difficulty, that which is called happiness: noble happiness, the happiness of dispassion, the happiness of separation, the happiness of stillness, the happiness [that leads to] full awakening, the non-worldly happiness, the happiness [that is not affected by] birth and death.

"Ānanda, if a monk does not desire vociferous talk, does not delight in vociferous talk, does not associate with vociferous talk, does not desire company, does not delight in company, does not associate with company, desiring to be separated from company, constantly delighting in dwelling alone in remote places, then it is certainly possible for him to attain, easily and without difficulty, that which is called happiness: noble happiness, the happiness of dispassion, the happiness of separation, the happiness of stillness, the happiness [that leads to] full awakening, the non-worldly happiness, the happiness [that is not affected by] birth and death. [738b]

4. "Ānanda, a monk should not desire vociferous talk, delight in vociferous talk, associate with vociferous talk, desire company, delight in company, associate with company, not desiring to be separated from company, not delighting in dwelling alone in remote places. If a monk desires vociferous talk, delights in vociferous talk, associates with vociferous talk, desires company, delights in company, associates with company, not desiring to be separated from company, not delighting in





dwelling alone in remote places, then it is impossible for him to attain either the temporary liberation of mind that is delightful or the permanent liberation of mind that is unshakeable.

“Ānanda, if a monk does not desire vociferous talk, does not delight in vociferous talk, does not associate with vociferous talk, does not desire company, does not delight in company, does not associate with company, desiring to be separated from company, constantly delighting in dwelling alone in remote places, then it is certainly possible for him to attain either the temporary liberation of mind that is delightful or the permanent liberation of mind that is unshakeable.

5. “Why? I do not see a single form that I might desire or delight in,⁴⁵ [since] with the decay and change of that form there would at some time arise sorrow and lamentation, sadness, suffering, and vexation.

6. “For this reason, I fully and completely awoke to this other abiding, namely dwelling in emptiness externally by transcending all perception of form.⁴⁶ Ānanda, when I dwell in this abiding, there arises joy. I experience this joy throughout the whole body with right mindfulness and right comprehension. There arises rapture ... there arises tranquillity ... there arises happiness ... there arises concentration. Thus I experience this concentration throughout the whole body with right mindfulness and right comprehension.⁴⁷

“Ānanda, there may be monks, nuns, male lay followers, or female lay followers who together come to see me. Then, behaving in such a way toward them, being in such a mental state, secluded and delighting in dispassion, I teach them the Dharma to encourage and help them.

7. “Ānanda, if a monk wishes to dwell much in emptiness, then that monk should keep the mind internally established in tranquillity so that it becomes unified and concentrated. Having kept the mind internally established in tranquillity so that it becomes unified and concentrated, he should attend to emptiness internally. Ānanda, if a monk speaks like

⁴⁵ In MN 122 at MN III 111,2 the statement on delighting in form is made in general, not in relation to the Buddha himself. The Tibetan version agrees with MĀ 191.

⁴⁶ According to MN 122 at MN III 111,7, the Buddha’s dwelling in emptiness was rather “internally” and by “not giving attention to any sign”. The Tibetan version agrees with MĀ 191. Here the presentation in MN 122 seems preferable, cf. in more detail Anālayo 2011b: 690-692.

⁴⁷ MN 122 does not describe the arising of joy, etc. The Tibetan version agrees with MĀ 191.





this:⁴⁸ ‘Without keeping the mind internally established in tranquillity so that it becomes unified and concentrated, I attend to emptiness internally’, you should know that that monk will [just] greatly trouble himself. Ānanda, how does a monk keep the mind internally established in tranquillity so that it becomes unified and concentrated?

8. “A monk completely drenches and pervades this body with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion [experienced in the first absorption], so that no part [of his body] is not pervaded by the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion.⁴⁹ Ānanda, it is just as a person taking a bath, who has placed bath powder in a vessel, sprinkles it with water and kneads it into a ball, so that every bit of it, inside and out, is completely drenched and pervaded with the water, with none seeping out. In the same way, Ānanda, a monk completely drenches and pervades this body with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, so that there is no part [of his body] that is not pervaded by rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. [738c] Ānanda, in this way a monk should keep the mind internally established in tranquillity so that it becomes unified and concentrated.

9. “Keeping the mind internally established in tranquillity so that it becomes unified and concentrated, he should attend to emptiness internally. Having attended to emptiness internally, his mind is perturbed, does not advance and progress, does not attain spotlessness, is not established, and is not released in regard to emptiness internally.

“Ānanda, if a monk, while he is contemplating, comes to know that on attending to emptiness internally his mind is perturbed, does not advance and progress, does not attain spotlessness, is not established, and is not released in regard to emptiness internally, then that monk should attend to emptiness externally. Having attended to emptiness externally, his mind is perturbed, does not advance and progress, does not attain spotlessness, is not established, and is not released in regard to emptiness externally.

“Ānanda, if a monk, while he is contemplating, comes to know that on attending to emptiness externally his mind is perturbed, does not advance and progress, does not attain spotlessness, is not established, and is not released in regard to emptiness externally, then that monk should attend to emptiness internally and externally. Having attended to emptiness internally and externally, his mind is perturbed, does not

⁴⁸ Such a statement and its consequences are not taken up in MN 122. The Tibetan version agrees with MĀ 191.

⁴⁹ MN 122 at MN III 111,21 instead lists the four absorptions, without, however, describing their effect on the body.





advance and progress, does not attain spotlessness, is not established, and is not released in regard to emptiness internally and externally.

“Ānanda, if a monk, while he is contemplating, comes to know that on attending to emptiness internally and externally his mind is perturbed, does not advance and progress, does not attain spotlessness, is not established, and not released in regard to emptiness internally and externally, then that monk should attend to imperturbability. Having attended to imperturbability, his mind is perturbed, does not advance and progress, does not attain spotlessness, is not established, and is not released in regard to imperturbability.

10. “Ānanda, if a monk, while he is contemplating, comes to know that on attending to imperturbability his mind is perturbed, does not advance and progress, does not attain spotlessness, is not established, and is not released through imperturbability, then that monk should repeatedly direct his mind to this or that concentration,⁵⁰ repeatedly practice it, repeatedly soften [the mind] so that it becomes joyful and tender, absorbed in the pleasure of seclusion.

“Repeatedly directing his mind to this or that concentration, repeatedly practicing it, repeatedly softening [the mind], so that it becomes joyful and tender, absorbed in the pleasure of seclusion, he should accomplish dwelling in emptiness internally. Having accomplished dwelling in emptiness internally, the mind becomes imperturbable, advances and progresses, attains spotlessness, is established, and is released in regard to emptiness internally. Ānanda, if a monk, while he is contemplating, comes to know that he has accomplished dwelling in emptiness internally, that the mind has become imperturbable, advances and progresses, attains spotlessness, is established, and is released in regard to emptiness internally – then this is reckoned his right comprehension.

“Ānanda, the monk should then accomplish dwelling in emptiness externally. Having accomplished dwelling in emptiness externally, the mind becomes imperturbable, advances and progresses, attains spotlessness, is established, and is released in regard to emptiness externally. [739a] Ānanda, if a monk, while he is contemplating, comes to know that he has accomplished dwelling in emptiness externally, that the mind has become imperturbable, advances and progresses, attains

⁵⁰ My translation is based on emending the reading 彼彼心 in MĀ 191 at MN I 738c20 in conformity with a repetition of the present phrase two lines below, which just reads 彼心. Regarding the subsequent reference to this and that concentration, 彼彼定, MN 122 at MN III 112,15 instead recommends focussing on the previously [developed] sign of concentration, the *samādhinimita*.





spotlessness, is established, and is released in regard to emptiness externally – then this is reckoned his right comprehension.

“Ānanda, the monk should then accomplish dwelling in emptiness internally and externally. Having accomplished dwelling in emptiness internally and externally, the mind becomes imperturbable, advances and progresses, attains spotlessness, is established, and is released in regard to emptiness internally and externally. Ānanda, if a monk, while he is contemplating, comes to know that he has accomplished dwelling in emptiness internally and externally, that the mind has become imperturbable, advances and progresses, attains spotlessness, is established, and is released in regard to emptiness internally and externally – then this is reckoned his right comprehension.

“Ānanda, he should then accomplish dwelling in imperturbability. Having accomplished dwelling in imperturbability, the mind becomes imperturbable, advances and progresses, attains spotlessness, is established, and is released in regard to imperturbability. Ānanda, if while contemplating a monk comes to know that he has accomplished dwelling in imperturbability, that the mind has become imperturbable, advances and progresses, attains spotlessness, is established, and is released in regard to imperturbability – then this is reckoned his right comprehension.

11. “Ānanda, if a monk who is dwelling in this abiding of the mind wishes to practice walking meditation, then that monk goes out of his meditation hut and practices walking meditation in the open, in the shade of the hut, with his faculties settled within, the mind not directed outwards or backwards, perceiving [only] what is in front. Having practiced walking meditation like this, his mind does not give rise to covetousness, sadness, or any [other] evil or unwholesome state – this is reckoned his right comprehension.

“Ānanda, if a monk who is dwelling in this abiding of the mind wishes to sit in concentration, then that monk leaves the walking meditation, goes to the end of the walking meditation path, spreads his sitting mat, and sits down cross-legged. Having sat in concentration like this, his mind does not give rise to covetousness, sadness, or any [other] evil or unwholesome state – this is reckoned his right comprehension.⁵¹

⁵¹ Instead of giving detailed instructions on the undertaking of walking and sitting meditation, MN 122 at MN III 112,31 mentions all four postures, but without detailed explanations; the Tibetan version agrees in this respect with MĀ 191. A description of walking meditation similar to the present instance in MĀ 191 can be found in AN 7.58 at AN IV 87,2, where it functions as a method to overcome drowsiness.





13. “Ānanda, if a monk who is dwelling in this abiding of the mind wishes to think thoughts, then as regards the three evil and unwholesome thoughts – thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill-will, and thoughts of harming – these three evil and unwholesome thoughts that monk should not think. [Instead], as regards the three wholesome thoughts – thoughts of desirelessness, thoughts of non-ill-will, and thoughts of non-harming – these three wholesome thoughts he should think. Having thought like this, his mind does not give rise to covetousness, sadness, or any [other] evil or unwholesome state – this is reckoned his right comprehension.⁵²

12. “Ānanda, if a monk who is dwelling in this abiding of the mind wishes to speak, then as regards talking ignoble talk related to what is not beneficial – such as talk about kings, talk about thieves, talk about battles and quarrels, talk about food and drink, talk about robes, talk about married women, talk about girls, talk about adulterous women, talk about the world, talk about wrong practices, talk about what is in the ocean – the monk does not talk such types of irrelevant talk.⁵³

“[Instead], as regards talking noble talk that is related to what is beneficial, that makes the mind malleable, [739b] free of darkness and the hindrances – such as talking talk about giving, talk about morality, talk about concentration, talk about wisdom, talk about liberation, talk about knowledge and vision of liberation, talk about self-effacement, talk about not socializing, talk about fewness of wishes, talk about contentment, talk about dispassion, talk about abandoning, talk about cessation, talk about sitting in meditation, talk about dependent arising, such talk [proper] for recluses – [the monk talks such talk]. Having talked like this, his mind does not give rise to covetousness, sadness, or any [other] evil or unwholesome state – this is reckoned his right comprehension.

14. “Again, Ānanda, there are five cords of sensual pleasure that are pleasurable, that the mind thinks about, that are connected with craving and sensual desire: forms known by the eye, sounds known by the ear, odours known by the nose, flavours known by the tongue, and tangibles known by the body.

⁵² MN 122 at MN III 113,12 adopts a different sequence, as it first turns to talking (§12) and then to thinking (§13); the Tibetan version agrees with MĀ 191. As the general pattern in this part of the discourse moves from formal meditation to less formal activities, the progression in the Chinese and Tibetan versions from thoughts to conversation fits this pattern better.

⁵³ On the different listings of irrelevant types of talk in *Majjhima-nikāya* and *Madhyama-āgama* discourses cf. Anālayo 2009b: 139.





15. “If a monk’s mind turns to contemplation and, in regard to these five cords of sensual pleasures, he comes under the influence of these cords of sensual pleasures, then his mind will dwell among them. Why? Sooner or later, in regard to these five cords of sensual pleasures, [if] one comes under the influence of these cords of sensual pleasures, the mind dwells among them.

“Ānanda, if a monk, while he is contemplating, comes to know that in regard to these five cords of sensual pleasures he has come under the influence of these cords of sensual pleasures, that his mind is dwelling among them, then that monk should contemplate the impermanence of these various cords of sensual pleasures, contemplate their decay, contemplate their fading away, contemplate their abandoning, contemplate their cessation, contemplate abandoning them, giving them up, and separating from them.⁵⁴ Then, whatever he has of desire and defilement regarding these five cords of sensual pleasures will soon cease. Ānanda, if while contemplating like this a monk knows that whatever he had of desire and defilement in regard to these five cords of sensual pleasures has been abandoned – this is reckoned his right comprehension.

16. “Again, Ānanda, there are the five aggregates affected by clinging. The form aggregate affected by clinging ... feeling ... perception ... formations and the consciousness aggregate affected by clinging. The monk should contemplate their rise and fall thus: ‘This is material form, this is the arising of material form, this is the cessation of material form, this is feeling ... perception ... formations ... this is consciousness, this is the arising of consciousness, this is the cessation of consciousness.’

17. “Then whatever conceit of an ‘I’ he has in regard to these five aggregates affected by clinging, that will soon cease. Ānanda, if the monk, while he is contemplating like this, comes to know that whatever conceit of an ‘I’ he had in regard to these five aggregates affected by clinging has ceased – this is reckoned his right comprehension.

18. “Ānanda, these states are entirely desirable, entirely delightful, entirely [worth] thinking about.⁵⁵ They are without influxes, without clinging, beyond the reach of Māra, beyond the reach of the Evil One, beyond the reach of all evil and unwholesome states that defile and are the root of future becoming, that result in vexation and *dukkha*, and that are the cause of birth, old age, disease, and death. This is reckoned

⁵⁴ The presentation in MN 122 at MN III 114,25 differs and does not provide instructions on what should be done to overcome the attraction of the five cords of sensual desire. The Tibetan version agrees with MĀ 191.

⁵⁵ My translation of 法 as a plural form takes a lead from the wording in MN 122 at MN III 115,8: *ime ... dhammā*.





accomplishment in diligence.⁵⁶ Why? All Tathāgatas, who are without attachment and fully awakened, attained awakening through diligence. Through the faculty of diligence, innumerable wholesome states arise that are in accordance with the requisites of awakening. Ānanda, for this reason you should train like this: ‘I will also be accomplished in diligence’ – you should train like this.’⁵⁷

7. Study of the First Part of the Greater Discourse on Emptiness

Unlike the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*, the *Mahāsuññata-sutta* and its parallels do not depict a gradual approach to emptiness, but rather indicate that a monk who has been unable to stabilize his meditative experience of emptiness needs to strengthen his concentration. This provides an important indication relevant to the practice depicted in the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* as well, in that for the mind to progress through the unitary perceptions in the gradual entry into emptiness, a basis in mental tranquillity is an essential requirement.

Another significant indication given in the *Mahāsuññata-sutta* and its parallels is that they explicitly indicate that emptiness comprises what is internal as well as what is external. This well reflects the attitude taken in this respect in early Buddhist thought, where notions of emptiness and insubstantiality are considered as applicable without restriction to the entire gamut of existence, be this oneself, others, or any other aspect of the external world.⁵⁸

The *Mahāsuññata-sutta* and its parallels also indicate how emptiness can be related to everyday activities, once comprehensive dwelling in emptiness has been achieved in all respects – internally, externally and internally-and-externally. The three versions agree that this takes place by staying aloof from desire and aversion, an aloofness that is combined with clear comprehension of what is taking place. The same indication is also made in the *Pinḍapātāpārisuddhi-sutta* and its Chinese parallel, which describe how a monk who wishes to dwell in emptiness – a theme that relates this discourse to the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* and *Mahāsuññata-sutta* – should examine if, while going to beg for alms, anything has

⁵⁶ This remark and the following exposition on diligence are without a counterpart in MN 122.

⁵⁷ Similar to MN 122, MĀ 191 continues by taking up the case of the proper behaviour of a faithful disciple, etc.

⁵⁸ Cf., e.g., Sn 937, according to which the entire world is without any essence.





caused the arising of desire in his mind.⁵⁹ If desire has arisen, the monk should make a firm effort to overcome it.

Another passage relevant to the theme of dwelling in emptiness during everyday activities can be found in a succinct instruction, according to which in the seen there should be just the seen, in the heard there should be just the heard, in what is experienced there should be just the experienced and in what is cognized there should be just the cognized. One who dwells like this will not be established in what is seen, heard, etc., be neither here, nor there, nor in between – thereby transcending *dukkha*.⁶⁰

According to a detailed elaboration of this instruction, the task to remain with just what is seen, etc., requires not giving attention to the “sign” of attraction,⁶¹ a term that provides a connection to the theme of ‘sign’-lessness mentioned as the last step in the gradual entry into emptiness depicted in the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*. Thus, maintaining emptiness during every day activities requires remaining balanced with any sensory input by not giving in to those features and aspects of perceived objects – their signs – that may cause desire or aversion.

The *Mahāsuññata-sutta* and its parallels also turn to the five cords of sensual desire. Before that, however, they indicate what type of thought and talk is compatible with dwelling in emptiness. Properly dwelling in emptiness thus requires refraining from unwholesome thoughts, avoiding worldly conversations and staying aloof from sensual attraction. Engaging in sensuality is therefore clearly not compatible with what early Buddhist thought reckons to be true dwelling in emptiness. In other words, from an early Buddhist viewpoint, a genuine realization of emptiness has an inseparable relationship to ethical conduct.

With this much accomplished, the *Mahāsuññata-sutta* and its parallels bring up the topic of conceit, whose removal requires contemplating the impermanent nature of the five aggregates. They thereby relate emptiness to the topic of impermanence, as was the case in the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*. Contemplation of the impermanent nature of the

⁵⁹ MN 151 at MN III 294,11 and SĀ 236 at T II 57b15; on this passage cf. also Baums 2009: 353.

⁶⁰ SN 35.95 at SN IV 73,4 and its parallel SĀ 312 at T II 90a12 and D 4094 *ju* 241b3 or Q 5595 *tu* 276a2. The potential of this succinct instruction is reflected in a case reported in Ud 1.10 at Ud 8,8, where the non-Buddhist ascetic Bāhiya receives the same instruction during his first meeting with the Buddha and thereon attains full awakening on the spot; cf. also Anālayo 2003b: 229-232 and Nānananda 2005: 318f and 323-342.

⁶¹ SN 35.95 at SN IV 73,18 speaks of the *nimitta*, which has its counterpart in 相 and *rgyu mtshan* in SĀ 312 at T II 90a21 and D 4094 *ju* 241b6 or Q 5595 *tu* 276a6.





five aggregates thus can be considered to form the *Mahāsuññata-sutta*'s counterpart to the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*'s development of insight in relation to signlessness, both of which are meant for the same purpose: the attainment of supreme emptiness through the destruction of the influxes.

“Contemplate the world as empty,
Mogharāja, always mindful!
Root out the underlying view of self,
Like this, you will transcend death.
[When] contemplating the world like this,
The King of Death does not catch sight of you.”⁶²

Abbreviations:

AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i> (PTS)
D	Derge edition
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
Jā	<i>Jātaka</i> (PTS)
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i> (PTS)
Paṭis	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i> (PTS)
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i> (PTS)
Q	<i>Qianlong</i> (Peking) edition
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i> (PTS)
Sn	<i>Suttanipāta</i> (PTS)
T	Taishō edition (CBETA)
Ud	<i>Udāna</i> (PTS)

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⁶² Sn 1119: *suññato lokaṃ avekkhassu, mogharāja sadā sato, attānudiṭṭhiṃ ūhacca, evaṃ maccutaro siyā, evaṃ lokaṃ avekkhantaṃ, maccurājā na passatī ti.*





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