

AN INTERPRETATION OF 'RELEASED ON BOTH SIDES'
(UBHATO-BHĀGA-VIMUTTI),
AND THE RAMIFICATIONS FOR THE STUDY
OF EARLY BUDDHISM¹

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1

In the *Tapussa Sutta* (TS) of the *Aṅguttara-Nikāya* (A IV.448; *navaka-nipāta, mahāvagga, XLI*), the Buddha describes his own path to liberation. When he was still just a Bodhisatta, he attained the four *jhānas* and then the four formless spheres (the infinity of space, the infinity of consciousness, nothingness, and neither-consciousness-nor-unconsciousness). Finally, after reaching the 'cessation of consciousness and sensation' (*saññāvedayitanirodha*; henceforth 'cessation'), his corruptions (*āsavā*) were destroyed by insight (*paññāya*).² This means that the Buddha attained liberation whilst in the state of cessation. However, the Buddha did not acknowledge (*neva paccaññāsīm*) his awakening to the world until he attained and emerged from the nine meditative states (*nava anupubbavihārāsamāpattiyo*) in forward and reverse order (*anulomapaṭilomam*).³ One half of this requirement had been fulfilled (the meditative states in forward order), and so it seems that the Buddha could not declare his liberation to the world until he had emerged from the meditative states in reverse

¹ Originally presented at the UKABS conference, SOAS, 3 July 2001. All Pāli citations are from Pāli Text Society editions. Pāli text in parenthesis is the reading that is included in the Burmese text of the *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana*, Vipassanā Research Institute (VRI) version 3. The word *vimokkha* is written *vimokha* and *vimokkha* in the PTS and VRI editions. I follow the PTS readings editions, although they do not consistently adopt one form or another. In the main body of the text, I always use the form *vimokha*.

² A IV. 448.4.

³ A IV. 448.8.

order.⁴ This done, he declared his awakening to the world, following which the knowledge and vision arose in him 'unshakeable is my liberation of the mind, this is my last birth, now there is no more re-becoming'.⁵

In the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (DCPS),⁶ we are told a different story: the object of liberating insight for the Buddha is 'the pure knowledge and vision of the Four Noble Truths, [each] in [their] three revolutions [and] twelve modes [in total]'.⁷ The format in which the Buddha's liberation is described uses exactly the same construction as the TS *yāvakīvañ... neva tāvāhaṃ... abhisambuddho ti paccaññāsīṃ*.⁸ Similarly, in all other accounts of the Bodhisatta's awakening where the same pericope occurs, the Buddha declares his liberation to the world immediately after he had attained liberating insight (without mentioning any meditative states); immediately following this is the realisation that he is in his last birth and that there is no more re-becoming.⁹ All of these cases differ from the DCPS in that the object of liberation is not the Four Noble Truths. This is of little matter: they are obviously only mechanical applications of the same pericope in different contexts. The DCPS is a special case, for it is traditionally held to be the Buddha's first sermon. The Buddha's description of the content of his liberating insight in this Sutta is therefore of great

⁴ Reading *anuloma-* with *samāpajjīṃ pi* and *-paṭilomaṃ* with *vuṭṭhahim pi* in the phrase ... *na evaṃ anulomapaṭilomaṃ samāpajjīṃ pi vuṭṭhahim pi*. In other words, at the point of attaining liberation, the Buddha has only done half of what needs to be done to make his declaration to the world: he has attained the meditative states necessary for liberation, but has not regressed back through them and returned to a more normal state of mind in which he can make the declaration to the world.

⁵ A IV.48.18.

⁶ S V. 420 ff.

⁷ S V. 422.

⁸ S V.420.

⁹ S II.170-1, 173, III.28-30, 59, IV.11-12, V.203, 205-6, 228, 422; A I.258-60, IV.56, 304, 448.

A I.260, S II.173, S III.30 and S IV.11-12 differ in that they describe what beings (*sattā*) must do to attain liberation. But these passages follow and merely repeat what has been described for the Bodhisatta.

importance. In addition, the description of the Four Noble Truths as the content of the Buddha's liberating insight is attested in the *Khandhaka* of the Vinaya-pitaka (Vin), in a form that repeats the DCPS verbatim.¹⁰ Even the same *yāvakīvañ* pericope is used. What is more, the most common theory of liberating insight in the Sutta-pitaka makes the Four Noble Truths the content of liberating insight: one need only mention the path described in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* and all the other identical descriptions in the *Silakkhandhavagga* of the *Dīgha-Nikāya*. Other autobiographical suttas where the Four Noble Truths are the object of the Bodhisatta's liberating insight are the *Bhayabherava Sutta* (M No.4), the *Dvedhāvitakka Sutta* (M No.19), the *Mahā-Saccaka Sutta* (M No.36) and the *Bodhirājakumāra Sutta* (M No.85).

We therefore have two alternative theories of the Buddha's liberation. In one (the TS), the Buddha passes through the formless meditations and attains liberating insight whilst in the state of cessation. From this state the Buddha must return in order to declare his liberation to the world, and indeed to know that he is in his last birth. The authors of the other account (DCPS, Vin) did not see the need to add such a pericope: after liberating insight (into the Four Noble Truths), the issue of returning from a transcendental state in order to declare liberating insight to the world and to have the knowledge of being in one's last birth is not addressed. Nothing is said about the meditative states. However, when the Four Noble Truths are the object of liberating insight, they are usually preceded by the four *jhānas*. It is probable that the same tradition is behind the DCPS account. If this is so, we can conclude that the realisation of the Truths in the DCPS, as well as the subsequent declaration and knowledge of no more rebirth, is understood to occur in the fourth *jhāna*. In any case, the tradition behind the DCPS did not see the need to distinguish these different events in terms of meditative states. The TS set itself off from this idea: it asserted that the Buddha's liberating insight is of a different order to the subsequent declaration and knowledge that there is no more rebirth.

These two theories are contradictory. Firstly, the object of liberating insight is different. Secondly, the meditative state in

¹⁰ Vinaya-pitaka, *Mahāvagga* 10-11.

which liberating insight is attained is different: *saññāvedayitanirodha* for the TS, unstated in the DCPS (possibly the fourth *jhāna*, and certainly not *saññāvedayitanirodha*). We have two different theories of liberating insight. They were probably held by different groups of early Buddhists. Is there any other evidence in the Sutta-piṭaka that these two theories of liberating insight are rivals?

2

At the very end of the *Mahānidāna Sutta* (*Dīgha-Nikāya*),¹¹ the Buddha explains what he means by the term *ubhato-bhāga-vimutto*, ‘released on both sides’. The two ‘sides’ or aspects of liberation are, not surprisingly, meditation and insight. The insight component is said to be the attainment of the ‘corruptionless (*anāsavaṃ*) release of mind (*cetovimuttiṃ*), release by insight (*paññāvimuttiṃ*), here and now because of the destruction of the corruptions (*āsavaṇaṃ ca khayā*)’.¹² In other words, it is what is essential for the attainment of liberation. It is, however, a standard formula used to describe liberating insight – usually it comes after the four *jhānas*, or it is an alternative to the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths (which is usually the final liberating knowledge of three that come after the four *jhānas*).¹³ The meditative aspect of ‘release on both sides’ is the ability to attain the eight *vimokhas* – and these include the formless spheres found in the TS – in forward and reverse order, wherever, whenever and for however long one wishes.¹⁴ This makes the attainment of the formless spheres irrelevant to the attainment of liberation: compared with

¹¹ The section D II.68.25-71.29 has no connection to the rest of the Sutta. It is certainly a later stratum of the *Mahānidāna Sutta*.

¹² D II.71.22.

¹³ The pericope replaces 4NT (i.e. it is the third of the three knowledges) without any meditation mentioned at: D III.281; M I.35, 71, 367, 482, 496, II.22, III.12, 99; S II.214, V.305; A I.256, III.19, 29, 83, 281, V.14, 36, 200, 340.

The pericope comes after four *jhānas* without being part of the three knowledges at: D III.78; A I.220-1, 236, II.23, 36, 37, 214, III.114, 119, 131, 134-5, 142, 262, IV.140, 141, 314, 315, V.10, 12, 132, 210.

The pericope comes after four *jhānas* and replaces 4NT (i.e. is the third of three knowledges at: M I.357, 358; A V.69.

¹⁴ D II.71.18 ff.

the TS, their soteriological value is demeaned. In addition, the Sutta adds that “there is no other ‘release on both sides’ higher or loftier than this release on both sides”.¹⁵ So the authors of this section of the *Mahānidāna Sutta* must have been aware of a different version of the concept, and they wished to stress that their idea was the better one. What is the other version of ‘release on both sides’ to which it is a reaction? Does it have the same derogatory appraisal of the formless attainments?

The only other relevant version of ‘released on both sides’ is found in the *Kiṭāgiri Sutta* (M I.447-9).¹⁶ There, it tops a hierarchical list of seven types of spiritual aspirant. Richard Gombrich has examined some of the terms in the list and concluded that it is a late scheme.¹⁷ It is the highest two attainments that are of interest. Second from top is the one released by insight (*paññāvimutto*). He does not attain the formless meditations, but his corruptions are destroyed by insight.¹⁸ The highest individual is the one ‘released on both sides’. He attains the formless meditations and his corruptions are destroyed by insight.¹⁹ The factor that differentiates him from the one released by insight is the fact that he has attained the ‘calm formless *vimokhas*’ (just like it is in the *Mahānidāna Sutta*). Both types are liberated, but it seems that the one ‘released on both sides’ has a more complete type of liberation because of his meditative skill. But there is more to it than that. The notion of ‘release on both sides’ does not have the same negative appraisal of the formless spheres as does the *Mahānidāna Sutta*. It seems identical to the path of formless meditation that we have seen in the TS where, after having attained the highest *vimokha* (cessation), one attains the liber-

¹⁵ D II.71.25.

¹⁶ *ubhato-bhāga-vimutti* also occurs in the same context, as one term of a sevenfold list, but without any explanation, in the following places: D III.105, 265; M I.439, A I.73-4; A IV.10, 77-8, 215, A V.23.

¹⁷ Richard Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began* (London 1966), pp.106-7: ‘I think that almost every feature of the list of seven types can be traced back to scholasticism in this sense: a dependence upon words, at the cost of disregarding what those words were originally intended to describe’.

¹⁸ M I.477.38.

¹⁹ M I.477.26.

ating insight that destroys the corruptions. I draw this conclusion because the *Kīṭāgiri Sutta* says that it is only after having attained the formless *vimokhas* (the summit of which is cessation) that one's corruptions are destroyed by insight.²⁰ In other words, I think that this version of 'released on both sides' means that the adept is meant to attain the formless *vimokhas* in succession before attaining liberating insight whilst in the state of cessation.

What on earth is going on here? One might think that the Sutta-piṭaka does not allow for the possibility that experiences of liberation can be qualitatively different. But this is not the case. The path to liberation which progresses through the *jhānas* and culminates in understanding the Four Noble Truths seems to be completely different from the progression through the formless *vimokhas* that ends in cessation and *paññā*. In each case the practices that bear directly on liberation and the state of liberation itself are envisaged in different ways. Put quite simply, it is hard to imagine that the same spiritual teacher could have taught both methods and goals.²¹ In the *Kīṭāgiri Sutta*, the highest spiritual

²⁰ I think the gerund *phassitvā* followed by *paññāya c' assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti* is sequential – the corruptions are destroyed once the eight *vimokhas* have been attained in sequence. We can compare the standard description of the attainment of cessation and insight with the version of 'released on both sides' here.

M I.160.7: *puna ca paraṃ bhikkhave bhikkhu sabbaso nevasaññānā-saññāyatanaṃ samatikkamma saññāvedayitanirodhaṃ upsampajja viharati, paññāva c' assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti.*

M I.477.30: *ekacco puggalo ye te santā vimokhā atikkamma rūpe āruppā te kāyena phassitvā viharati, paññāya c' assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti.*

Both versions describe the transcendence of the earlier stages followed by an identical pericope used for the attainment of insight. The sequence and final stage of it are identical. Only the *Kīṭāgiri Sutta* is more succinct. It is not difficult to explain why it is so succinct: it is trying to put in one sentence the whole formless path that ends in liberating insight. How else would an author condense the formless path into one sentence?

²¹ I cannot expand upon this point here. My feeling is that the formless path gradually reduces awareness until it ceases, whereas awareness is present in the fourth *jhāna* (*upekḥāsati parisuddhi*: 'the purification of indifference and awareness'); this makes these paths irreconcilably different.

type termed *ubhato-bhāga-vimutti* resembles the aspirant who has progressed through the formless meditations and attained cessation along with insight – just like the Bodhisatta had done in the TS. I propose that the list of spiritual types found in the *Kīṭāgiri Sutta*, or at least the highest types in its hierarchy, was formulated by those early Buddhists who advocated formless meditation as a path to liberation. With the term *ubhato-vibhāga-vimutti* placed above *paññā-vimutto*, they wanted to say that their version of the path and goal was superior to those paths that avoided formless meditation. But, as we saw in the *Mahānidāna Sutta*, this move was not appreciated by all, perhaps by the majority of the early Saṅgha. Some argued against the idea by proposing a rival notion of 'released on both sides', in which the position of the formless *vimokhas* and cessation was little more than ornamental. And their version of liberating insight is in line with the path of *jhāna*.

3

There are a number of suttas that are quite hostile to the idea that the path of formless meditation is orthoprax Buddhism. For example, the *Mahā-Cunda Sutta* (A III.355-6 = *chakka-nipāta* XLVI) describes a debate between preachers (*dharmayogā bhikkhū*) and meditators (*jhāyī bhikkhū*). The former are said to penetrate the doctrine (*atthapada*, literally 'purposeful words') with their insight (*paññā*); the latter are said to touch the deathless realm (*amatam dhātum*) with the body (*kāyena phusitvā*), a phrase that is synonymous with the attainment of the *vimokhas* and cessation.²² Both camps are completely at odds with each other, and the debate seems to be between intellectual and non-conceptual theories of liberating insight.²³ There is further evidence: in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (D II.156), there is a debate about the meditative state in which the Buddha died. Ānanda thinks that after passing through the four *jhānas* in succession, and

²² *Kāyena* + *√phus* applied to the eight *vimokhas* at: A II.87, 89-91. It is applied to the formless states (*āruppas*) at: M I.33, 477-9; S II.118, 123' A II.316, A V.11-12. It is applied to the *jhānas* only by association with the formless states (i.e. in the *anupubbavīhāra* schemes) at: A IV.451-53.

²³ Louis de La Vallée Poussin pointed this out with reference to the same text in the article 'Musīla et Nārada'. *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* 5, 1937, pp.189-222.

then the four formless *vimokhas*, the Buddha has gone into Parinibbāna (i.e. died), But Anuruddha corrects him – the Buddha has only attained the ‘cessation of consciousness and sensation’. It is then said that the Buddha retraced his steps until he was again in the first *jhāna*. Finally, he ascended to the fourth *jhāna* and entered Parinibbāna. Is this an accurate historical account? Surely, a better explanation is that the state in which the Buddha died was vitally important, and the advocates of different spiritual practices wished to have him die in the meditative state that they held to be the most soteriologically relevant. This is not an historically accurate account, but the result of an argument between the advocates of two different meditative practices (and hence theories of liberating insight). If this is so, we see that the advocates of the four *jhānas* had the upper hand in the debate.

In these two examples, the formless meditations have two rivals: an intellectual theory of liberating insight, and the *jhānas*. It is possible that these two rival theories might have been held by one and the same group of monks: the liberating insight into the *atthapada* of the *Mahā-Cunda Sutta* might refer to the liberating insight into the Four Noble Truths (after the attainment of the four *jhānas*).

This brings us back to the TS, DCPS, the *Mahānidāna Sutta* and the *Kiṭāgiri Sutta*. Given the debate concerning the soteriological efficacy of the formless meditations, it seems quite clear what is going on. Let me plot the probable course of events. The *Mahānidāna Sutta* knows that the *Kiṭāgiri Sutta* is an attempt to elevate the path of formless meditation. It therefore suggests an alternative version of *ubhato-bhāga-vimutti* where the attainment of the formless realms has less importance – they are not part of a more complete type of liberation, but are in fact dispensable, just a quite pointless meditative skill. On the contrary, what is soteriologically relevant for the *Mahānidāna Sutta* is a version of insight that is associated with the path of the four *jhānas*. With the TS and DCPS, we see the same two competing theories: the formless meditations as a path to a non-conceptual sort of liberation for the former, and the Four Noble Truths (most obviously connected with the *jhānas*) as part of an intellectual theory of liberating insight for the latter. The TS makes a point of mentioning meditative states, deliberately setting it off from the DCPS

tradition. It is therefore later than the DCPS. Arranging the texts chronologically, we have the DCPS first. Then we have the TS and probably the *Kiṭāgiri Sutta*, roughly contemporaneous. Finally, latest of all is the latter section of the *Mahānidāna Sutta*.

In attempting to interpret the term *ubhato-bhāga-vimutti*, we are thrown into a world of doctrinal debate that has received little attention in the study of early Buddhism. There are many divergent opinions in the early texts and one cannot simply claim that the doctrinal formulations of the four *Nikāyas* form a homogeneous whole. What implications are there for the study of early Buddhism?

First of all, opinion about the purpose of the formless *vimokhas* was varied. The position held by some, that *saññā-vedayitanirodha* is the indispensable prerequisite for liberation is one that receives less attention. Originally, this idea was probably only a minor view. The four *jhānas* are less problematic: it is asserted over and over again that they alone are the meditative states necessary for the attainment of liberation. It is therefore more likely that they represent the earlier doctrinal understanding. I seriously doubt that the understanding that the attainment of cessation is the necessary prerequisite for the attainment of liberation belonged to the earliest phase of Buddhist thought.

Secondly, my analysis of the TS and DCPS questions the authenticity of some autobiographical accounts of the Buddha’s life. There are three key events in the Buddha’s life that would have been crucial for making doctrinal points: the awakening, the first sermon, and the Parinibbāna. All these accounts, as we have them in various suttas, might have undergone numerous editorial phases because of the wish to make doctrinal points. We saw this process in operation in the account of the meditative states attained at the time of the Buddha’s Parinibbāna. How else can we explain the texts?

One might think that this sort of approach will only lead to negative results and explain the material away. But I do not see it like this at all. The positive outcome should be that we should gain a better understanding of how the suttas came to assume their extant form. We might therefore be able to stratify the ideas and regain the earliest doctrinal formulation – what is closest to the

Buddha. The *Tapussa Sutta* might never have been uttered by the Buddha, but by drawing out doctrinal inconsistencies and debate in the early material, we might be able to find out what he did say.

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RED RUST, ROBBERS AND RICE FIELDS:
WOMEN'S PART IN THE PRECIPITATION OF THE
DECLINE OF THE DHAMMA

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The lack of a current female monastic Order in Theravāda Buddhism is often substantiated by reason of the Buddha's initial reluctance to ordain women and by his alleged prediction that the lifetime of the true Dhamma would be significantly diminished by their presence. I have argued previously¹ that the argument of his reluctance is seriously flawed; I intend in this paper to demonstrate that the real precipitation of the decline of the Dhamma was in fact facilitated by the monk Sudinna and that there is no textual evidence, other than the story in *Cullavagga X*, that women were at all culpable.

It is said in *Cullavagga X*,

If, Ānanda, women had not obtained the going forth from home into homelessness in the dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, the Brahma-faring, Ānanda, would have lasted long, true dhamma would have endured for a thousand years. But since, Ānanda, women have gone forth ... in the dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-Finder, now, Ānanda, the Brahma-faring will not last long, true dhamma will endure only for five hundred years (Vin II: 256).²

The Buddha then proceeds to liken the presence of women in the Saṅgha to a household with few men which would easily fall prey to robbers, a diseased rice field and a sugar-cane field attacked by red rust. This is the only reference to women's culpability in the downfall of the teachings. Elsewhere in the Vinaya (see below), the Saṅgha as a whole is cautioned over its behaviour and its effect

¹ See my article 'A Whisper in the Silence: Nuns before Mahāpajāpati', *BSR* 17, 2 (2000), pp.167-73.

² I.B. Horner, tr., *The Book of the Discipline* (= *BD*, 5 vols, PTS) V, p.356.