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**The Three Gateways to Liberation:
An Essay in Buddhist Theological
Hermeneutics**

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To Ven. Fausto Taiten Guareschi, my Teacher

Nothing special... everyday *satori*

Contents

Abstract	4
Abbreviations	5
Introduction	6
1. The Three Gateways to Liberation in the Theravāda tradition	8
2. The Three Gateways to Liberation in Sarvāstivāda and in Indian Mahāyāna sources	26
3. The Three Gateways to Liberation reinterpreted in East Asian Buddhism: Japanese Sōtō Zen	39
Conclusion	50
Bibliography	52

Abstract

This dissertation analyses the three gateways to liberation – *suññatā/śūnyatā* (emptiness), *animitta/ānimitta* (signlessness) and *appaṇihita/apraṇihita* (wishlessness/undirectedness) – across the Buddhist interpretative spectrum, illustrating – both diachronically and synchronically – points of convergence and divergence in different traditions: Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda, Indian Mahāyāna and Sōtō Zen. The three gateways to liberation appear as a fertile, multidimensional concept, insofar as they denote a variety of inter-related ideas: supramundane meditative states – and thus doors to liberation, and aspects of *Nibbāna/Nirvāṇa*.

Moreover, the idea of three gateways to liberation emerges as a powerful interpretative tool to illuminate the relationship between two problematically incongruous realms – the conditioned and the Unconditioned – as they appear to be perfectly poised in-between them, operating as a swinging threshold connecting path and goal, partaking of some of the qualities of *Nirvāṇa/Nibbāna*, without yet exhausting its wholly transcendent nature. Although belonging to the conditioned sphere of the path – since they are approached via high meditative states (which are constructed and produced), the doors to liberation nonetheless open the mind to the boundless vista of ‘that which is beyond’ – the ultimate goal: *Nibbāna/Nirvāṇa*.

Finally, this dissertation elucidates the close relationship and progressive overlapping between the conditioned and the unconditioned realm in the Buddhist traditions, beginning with some hints in the Theravāda school (emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness as aspects of *Nibbāna*), through Indian Mahāyāna non-dual understanding of *Samśāra* and *Nirvāṇa* reflected in the gateways sharing its qualities, and finishing with utter assimilation in Sōtō Zen, where practice (the path) is simply expression and realization of Awakening (the goal).

Although there is patently a semantic shift across traditions with regards to the meaning and the status of the three gateways to liberation, a fruitful ambivalence is nevertheless present across the interpretative spectrum.

Abbreviations

In this dissertation, the references to the Pāli texts are to their translations in English (see also Bibliography)

A. *Āṅuttara Nikāya*, (tr. by F.L. Woodward and E.M. Hare), *The Book of Gradual Sayings*, 5 vols., London, Pali Text Society, 1932-6

Asl. *Aṭṭhasālinī* (Buddhaghosa's Commentary on The *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*), (tr. by Pe Maung Tin), *The Expositor* – 2 vols., London, Pali Text Society, 1920 and 1921

D. *Dīgha Nikāya*, (tr. by T.W. and C.A.F. Rhys Davids), *Dialogues of the Buddha*, 3 vols., London, Pali Text Society, 1899-1921

Dhp. *Dhammapada*, (tr. by Nārada Thera), *The Dhammapada*, London, John Murray, 1954

Dhs. *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* (tr. by C.A.F. Rhys Davids), *Compendium of States or Phenomena - A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics*, London, Pali Text Society, 1900, 3rd edition 1974

M. *Majjhima Nikāya*, (tr. by I.B. Horner), *Middle Length Sayings*, 3 vols, London, Pali Text Society, 1954-9

Nett. *Nettipakaraṇaṃ*, (tr. by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli), *The Guide*, London, Pali Text Society, 1962 and 1967

Ps. *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (tr. by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli), *The Path of Discrimination*, London, Pali Text Society, 1982 and 1997

SN. *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, (tr. by C.A.F. Rhys Davids and F. L. Woodward), *The Book of Kindred Sayings*, 5 vols., London, Pali Text Society, 1917-30

Vism. *Visuddhimagga* [of Buddhaghosa], (tr. by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli), *The Path of Purification*, Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, 3rd edition, 1975

Introduction

Aims and objectives

This dissertation aims to analyse the three gateways to liberation – *suññatā/sūnyatā* (emptiness), *animitta/ānimitta* (signlessness) and *appaṇihita/apraṇihita* (wishlessness/undirectedness) – across the Buddhist interpretative spectrum in order to illustrate, both diachronically and synchronically, points of convergence and divergence in different traditions. In particular, it aspires to reveal how the three gateways to liberation are a very interesting and peculiar teaching, especially for the Theravāda tradition, as they contain a philosophical and soteriological seed (as a ‘symptom of thought’, ‘the unsaid’, ‘unthought’, in hermeneutical parlance) of two dimensions:

a) *Nirvāṇa* as un-conditioned, and so beyond the conditioned path (the path does not produce it), thus as ultimately somewhat beyond our efforts to achieve it, and we can only prepare for it with right effort;¹

b) higher reaches of the path (the aforementioned gateways as types of *vipassanā-samādhi*) as nevertheless sharing some aspects with *Nirvāṇa*, as they partake of its nature as empty, signless and undirected, thus acting as threshold symbol and metaphor for the goal.

My further objective is to show how this twofold dimension is more overtly elucidated in Indian Mahāyāna and Sōtō Zen traditions (where there seems to be a fluid overlapping - in Mahāyāna - if not an utter coincidence - in Sōtō Zen - of path and goal), yet it is nonetheless already strongly present – as a seed - in the Theravāda tradition, albeit ‘un-said’ and ‘germinating’, as the path does not produce the goal (which is un-conditioned), yet higher states of the path share some elements with the goal and so seem not totally other from it.

Finally, I hope to be able to open the field for further research into the interpretative potential of the concept of the three gateways to liberation from a more contemporary perspective, both philosophical and theological, illustrating the fruitful tension and the apparent contradiction within traditions, which is, I believe, symptomatic of great aliveness of the *Dharma*, and calls for a hermeneutical approach focused on aesthetic, ludic and symbolic dimensions of Buddhist religion.

¹ Peter Harvey (supervisor) commented on this point as follows: ‘well, one famous image is that *Nirvāṇa* is like a mountain, which is already (timelessly) there, and the path is what leads a person to experience it personally. An important part of that path is right effort (and see how much effort/energy crops up in the 37 dhammas conducive to awakening (*bodhipakkhiya-dhammas*)’. Although this is indisputable, my interest here is to illustrate a different tendency within Buddhist tradition, more apophatic and fruitfully ambivalent.

Methodology

My approach is mostly philosophical² and theological³, as a practising Buddhist who is attempting to reflect critically on his own faith (theology as intelligent faith), whilst proceeding with scholarly rigour ('critical, constructive theology' as Makransky puts it). Paraphrasing Ruegg's position, Buddhism has developed a coherent 'soteriological method that is theoretically intelligible and satisfying', in which 'soteriology, gnoseology and epistemology have been closely bound up with each other'⁴. My philosophical approach would be phenomenological and hermeneutical, attempting to tread the middle way between emic and etic⁵ approaches, paying attention to historical-philological gains, yet embracing creative interpretations of living communities in dialogue with the texts.

² Mostly following the phenomenological and hermeneutical tradition.

³ Theology as the critical reflection on one's own faith, as the discourse on the ultimate reality and as a constructive interpretation concerning truth, value and transformative power of Buddhism. As Makransky (2000: 18-9) says: 'scholars... seek ways to respond both to their own culture's normative interest in Buddhism and to the inner necessity of Buddhist tradition to reflect critically upon itself and find new ways to express itself. Their hope is that, as in the past, such new reflection rooted in long community experience may contribute to authentic new understanding... This is the broad project of contemporary "Buddhist theology."'

⁴ Ruegg, 1995: 151.

⁵ 'Emic' refers to a self-consciously insider's perspective (culturally engaged) and 'etic' to a self-consciously outsider's perspective (a more culturally neutral viewpoint). For further clarification on these terms in anthropology, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emic_and_etic.

1. The Three Gateways to Liberation in the Theravāda tradition

The three gateways to liberation (*vimokkha-mukhas*) in the Pali Canon: the four main *Nikāyas*

The three gateways to liberation (signlessness, wishlessness and emptiness)⁶ are mentioned a few times in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, albeit neither in a philosophically precise and univocal manner nor always consistently all three of them together.

In the *Dīgha Nikāya* (D.III.220, Walshe, p. 486), they are briefly referred to as kinds of *samādhi*: ‘Three more kinds of concentration [*samādhi*]: on emptiness, the “signless”, desireless (*suññato samādhi, animitto samādhi, appaṇihito samādhi*).’

A longer and more detailed exposition of two of the *vimokkha-mukhas* – (emptiness and signlessness) is presented in the *Majjhima Nikāya* - M.III.108 (*Cūlasuññata Sutta*, The Shorter Discourse on Emptiness). In this discourse, Ānanda asks the Buddha to confirm his understanding that he once heard the Lord say that he often abides in emptiness (*suññatāvihāra*). The Buddha confirms Ānanda’s correct learning and speaks of the state of signless concentration of mind- *animitto cetosamādhi* – as attained after having passed through the four formless *jhānas* (the base of infinite space, the base of infinite consciousness, the base of nothingness and the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception).

⁶ There are many translations of the Pāli terms ‘*animitta*’, ‘*appaṇihita*’ and ‘*suññatā*’. ‘*Animitta*’ is generally translated as signless (or signlessness/the signless – *animittatā* - if a noun is required to clarify the meaning). ‘*Suññatā*’ is rendered with either voidness or emptiness (the adjective of which would be *suññā*, void/empty). I choose to use emptiness (or empty) for my analysis (unless in citations where voidness/void is used) because it is the term that is more frequently used in Mahāyāna and Zen contexts too, providing a bridge between the traditions. With regards to ‘*appaṇihita*’, there are - on the other hand – a great number of different translations: ‘desireless’, ‘wishless’, ‘aimless’, ‘undirected’, ‘unhankered’, and ‘dispositionless’. The Pali-English Dictionary explains *appaṇihita* as the negative of *paṇihita*, (which is the past participle of *paṇidahati*: to put forth, put down to, apply, direct, intend; aspire to, long for, pray for), and the term is taken to mean: applied, directed, intent, bent on. With regards to *appaṇihita*, the PED (2004: 403) says: ‘in connection with *samādhi* and *vimokkha* seems to mean “free from all longings”’. Conze (1967: 67) further comments: ‘The word *a-pra-ṇi-hita* [Sanskrit for *appaṇihita*] means literally that one “places nothing in front”, and it designates someone who makes no plans for the future, has no hopes for it, who is aimless, not bent on anything, without predilection or desire for the objects of perception rejected by the concentration on the Signless’. In this dissertation, ‘wishless’ will be preferred in most cases - with the important proviso that this term is to be taken in its meaning of without a *longed-for* wish, purpose, aim or goal which is *clung to*, thus emphasising (especially from a Zen perspective, as it is not explicitly there in the early material) the religious attitude of *ludic* engagement with the Sacred, a concept that will be clarified in following chapters. At times, ‘undirected’ will also be used, especially when referring to *Nibbāna* as ‘the undirected’, that which is not conditioned by our desiring and goal-directed intentions and projections.

Again, Ānanda, a Bhikkhu – not attending to the perception of the base of nothingness, not attending to the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception- attends to the signless dependent on the signless concentration of mind [*animitto cetosamādhi*]. His mind enters into that signless concentration of mind and acquires confidence, steadiness and resolution. He understands thus: “This signless concentration of mind is conditioned and volitionally produced. But whatever is conditioned and volitionally produced is impermanent, subject to cessation.” When he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: “It is liberated.” He understands: “Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.”⁷

Here the Buddha is clearly referring to the attainment of liberation, Arahantship, using the canonical stock phrases of the destruction of the taints, the knowledge of liberation and the end of *Saṃsāra* with the attainment of *Nibbāna* within this very life (albeit with remainder⁸ of fuel/grasping⁹ - *sa-upādi-sesa*). The Buddha concludes his teaching by reminding Ānanda that all *samaṇas* and *Brahmins* have the ability to abide ‘in pure, supreme, unsurpassed voidness’, encouraging his attendant (and all his *saṅgha* with him) to ‘train thus: “We will enter upon and abide in pure, supreme, unsurpassed voidness.”’

We find here a connection between three dimensions: the signless concentration of mind as a very lofty meditative state (which seems beyond the four formless *jhāna*, as it is entered upon by not attending to the previous two states, *i.e.* ‘not attending to the perception of the base of nothingness, not attending to the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception’ as stated in M.III.108); ‘the fruition attainment of voidness (*suññataphala-samāpatti*), which is the fruition attainment of arahantship that is entered by focusing upon the void aspect of *Nibbāna*’¹⁰ (although with the proviso that this relates to later *Abhidhamma* ideas - the *Sutta* meaning (s) may not be exactly the same); and the liberation attained by insight into the impermanence¹¹ of that very signless concentration of mind, which is still conditioned and volitionally produced, yet acts as a perfect springboard into the unconditioned realm of *Nibbāna*. In this passage - to conclude - *animitto cetosamādhi* is described as a very high, formless *jhānic*-type attainment which is filled with wisdom and insight¹², able to nudge the mind into seeing things as they really

⁷ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2005: 969.

⁸ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2005: 969: ‘There is present only this amount of disturbance, namely, that connected with the six bases that are dependent on this body and conditioned by life.’

⁹ For a discussion of *upādi*, see Harvey, 1995: 182.

¹⁰ See note 1137 in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2005: 1333.

¹¹ See note 1143 in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2005: 1334: ‘See MN 52.4. MA [*Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā*, the traditional Pali commentary on the *Majjhima Nikāya*] calls this “counter-insight (*paṭivipassanā*), *i.e.*, the application of the principles of insight to the act of consciousness that exercises the function of insight. On the basis of this he attains arahantship.’

¹² See note 1142 in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2005: 1334: ‘*Animitta cetosamādhi*. MA: This is the concentration of the mind in insight; it is called “signless” because it is devoid of the signs of permanence, etc.’

are and consequently being liberated, due to the mind entering a state which is void and empty.

In another passage (M.I.298)¹³, the Buddha mentions the deliverance of mind through emptiness and the signless deliverance of mind (amongst four deliverances)¹⁴, reiterating that ‘the signless deliverance of mind (*animittā cetovimutti*) is the attainment of fruition’ (as the commentary says, quite plausibly¹⁵) which can be attained by ‘non-attention to all signs and attention to the signless element.’¹⁶ ‘Here, with non-attention to all signs, a *bhikkhu* enters upon and abides in the signless concentration of mind [*animitto cetosamādhi*]. This is called the signless deliverance of mind.’¹⁷ Again, there is a link between *animitto cetosamādhi* and the attainment of fruition named the signless deliverance of mind¹⁸, although it is less clear in this passage whether there is a difference between *animitto cetosamādhi* and *animittā cetovimutti* (i.e. the former being a springboard for the latter - as it seems more reasonable considering similar passages in the Canon), or whether they are identical (remembering, nonetheless, that a *cetovimutti* can be of different types and levels). However, it is clear that the signless deliverance of mind is the attainment of fruition as it is empty of the signs of lust, hatred and delusion¹⁹, taintless, free of defilements, completely pacified and liberated²⁰. Lust, hate and delusion - as makers of signs (*nimitta-karaṇa*) - ‘cause the mind to ascribe a false significance to things as being permanent, pleasurable, self, or beautiful’²¹; through insight-filled *animitto cetosamādhi*, it is instead possible to pierce through the deceiving nature of signs and attain *animittā cetovimutti*.

¹³ *Mahāvedalla Sutta*, The Greater Series of Questions and Answers, in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2005: 387-95.

¹⁴ M.I.298, in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2005: 394: ‘Friend, the immeasurable deliverance of mind, the deliverance of mind through nothingness, the deliverance of mind through voidness, and the signless deliverance of mind: there is a way in which these states are different in meaning and different in name, and there is a way in which they are one in meaning and different only in name.’

¹⁵ See note 449 in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2005: 1239: ‘MA: The “signless deliverance of mind (*animittā cetovimutti*) is the attainment of fruition; the “signs” are objects such as forms, etc.; the “signless element” is *Nibbāna*, in which all signs of conditioned things are absent.’

¹⁶ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2005: 393: ‘Friend, there are two conditions for the attainment of the signless deliverance of mind: non-attention to all signs and attention to the signless element. These are the two conditions for the attainment of the signless deliverance of mind.’

¹⁷ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2005: 395.

¹⁸ See note 451, in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2005: 1239-40: ‘As above, the signless deliverance of mind is identified by MA with the attainment of fruition. Of the four deliverances of mind mentioned in § 30, this one alone is supramundane. The first three - the *brahmavihāras*, the third immaterial attainment, and insight into the voidness of formations - all pertain to the mundane level.’

¹⁹ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2005: 395: ‘Lust is a maker of signs, hate is a maker of signs, delusion is a maker of signs. In a *Bhikkhu* whose taints are destroyed, these are abandoned, cut off at the root, made like a palm stump, done away with so that they are no longer subject to future arising. Of all these kinds of signless deliverance of mind, the unshakeable deliverance of mind is pronounced the best. Now the unshakeable deliverance of mind is void of lust, void of hate, void of delusion.’

²⁰ The passage first differentiates various kinds of deliverances, then says how the unshakeable deliverance (Arahatship) is the highest, and unites aspects of all the types- e.g. it is the best kind of signless deliverances (see also note 21 below) - as it produces no lust-produced sign, etc.

²¹ See note 456, in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2005: 1240.

In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, we find further evidence of all three *vimokkha-mukhas*, for instance in: SN IV 294-5 (*Sutta* 41.6) and SN IV 296-7 (*Sutta* 41.7), *Cittasamyutta* - Connected Discourses with Citta.

In *Sutta* 41.6, the householder Citta²² is addressing the Venerable Kāmaḥhū as regards to the attainment of cessation of perception and feeling (*saññāvedayitanirodha*, also called *nirodhasamāpatti*), a high²³ meditative state in which all bodily, verbal and mental formations stop (but in which vitality and physical heat are not extinguished nor the faculties are broken up, for they are serene and peaceful, thus distinguishing it from the state of death). When asked about how many contacts a *bhikkhu* experiences when having emerged from the attainment of cessation of perception and feeling, the Venerable Kāmaḥhū replies: ‘Householder, when a *bhikkhu* has emerged from the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling, three kinds of contacts touch him: emptiness-contact [*suññataphassa*], signless-contact [*animittaphassa*], undirected-contact[*appaṇihitaphassa*].’²⁴ The Pāli commentary (*Sāratthappakāsinī*, *Samyutta Nikāya-aṭṭhakathā*) unambiguously associates these three contacts with the attainment of fruition (*phalasangāpatti*), illustrating that all three

‘can be explained by the way of their own quality (*saguṇa*) or by way of their object (*ārammaṇa*). By the way of quality: the attainment of fruition (*phalasangāpatti*) is called emptiness, and the accompanying contact is called emptiness-contact; the same method in the other two cases. By the way of object: *Nibbāna* is called emptiness because it is empty of lust, etc.; signless, because the signs of lust, etc., are absent; and undirected, because it is not directed towards lust, hatred, or delusion. The contact of the arisen fruition attainment, which takes emptiness-*Nibbāna* as object, is called emptiness-contact; the same method in the other two cases. Fruition attainment is a special meditative attainment in which the mind directly experiences the bliss of *Nibbāna*. It is said to be of four levels, corresponding to the four levels of awakening (the fruition of attainment of stream-entry, etc.).’^{25 26}

In the following *Sutta* (SN IV 296-7, SN 41.7), the householder Citta approaches the Venerable Godatta, who discusses four kinds of liberation: the measureless liberation of mind, the liberation of mind by nothingness, the liberation of mind by emptiness and the signless liberation of mind.

²² ‘At AN I 26,5 Citta is declared the chief male disciple among speakers of the Dhamma (*etadaggaṃ dhamma-kathikānaṃ*)’, see Bodhi, 2000: 1440, note 285.

²³ This meditative state is said to be accessible only to *arahants* and non-returners who have mastered the eight *jhānas* (the four *jhānas* and four formless states).

²⁴ SN IV 295 (*Sutta* 41.6), Bodhi, 2000: 1324.

²⁵ Bodhi, 2000: 1443-4, note 305.

²⁶ Although only an *Arahat* or Non-returner can attain the cessation of perception and feeling- see *Visuddhimagga XXIII.18*. Peter Harvey comments that: ‘actually, there is some ambiguity for me- the *Suttas* imply when one comes out of cessation, one will become an *Arahat* (if not already one) or a Non-returner (see *The Selfless Mind*, 1995: 187-8), which implies one could enter cessation while not yet a Non-returner.

And what, venerable sir, is the liberation of mind by emptiness²⁷? Here a *bhikkhu*, gone to the forest or to the foot of a tree or to an empty hut, reflects thus: “Empty is this of self or of what belongs to self.” This is called the liberation of mind by emptiness.’ And what, venerable sir, is the signless liberation of mind? Here, with nonattention to all signs, a *bhikkhu* enters and dwells in the signless concentration of mind. This is called the signless liberation of mind.²⁸

If the liberation of mind by emptiness is more familiarly illustrated with reference to the liberating concentration based on insight into the not-self nature of all phenomena, thus being ‘unshakable liberation of mind [which is] empty of lust, empty of hatred, empty of delusion’ (SN IV 41.7, p. 1326), it appears less evident to determine the exact status of the signless liberation of mind. The *Sutta* points to the fact that lust, hatred and delusion are makers of signs²⁹, possibly referring to their tainting nature, which must be removed, destroyed and abandoned to reach liberation. Bhikkhu Bodhi (in his notes) agrees that ‘the signless liberation of mind is hard to pinpoint in terms of familiar doctrinal categories. *Spk* takes it here as supramundane with *Nibbāna* as object.’³⁰ However, it seems unequivocal here that both liberation of mind by emptiness and signless liberation of mind represent the final attainment of fruition of arahantship, as they are referred to using the statement: ‘the unshakeable liberation of mind is chief among them’ (*akuppā cetovimutti*).³¹ Moreover, in M.I.298 it is said that unshakeable liberation/deliverance of mind is the highest kind of *animitta* deliverance.

Furthermore, in SN IV 359-60 (*Sutta* 43: *Asaṅkhatasamīyutta*: Connected Discourses on the Unconditioned), the Buddha speaks of the Unconditioned (*Nibbāna*) as the event of the destruction of lust, hatred and delusion and he speaks of the path to the Unconditioned via serenity and insight combined, mentioning directly the three gateways to liberation: ‘And what, *bhikkhus*, is the path leading to the unconditioned? The emptiness concentration, the signless concentration, the undirected concentration.’ Here the context is particularly significant, as the Buddha mentions the three concentrations alongside the more classic and established list of the four presencings of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), the four right endeavours (*samma-ppadhāna*), the four bases of spiritual power (*iddhi-pāda*), the five spiritual faculties (*indriya*), the five powers (*bala*), the seven factors of awakening

²⁷ ‘*Spk* does not gloss this, but it seems that the expression “liberation of mind by emptiness (*suññatā cetovimutti*) is used to signify concentration based on insight into the selfless nature of phenomena and also the supramundane paths and fruits’, SN IV 297 (*Sutta* 41.7), Bodhi, 2000: 1444-5, note 311.

²⁸ ‘There are thirteen kinds of signless liberation of mind (*animittā cetovimutti*): insight – because it removes the “signs” of permanence, happiness and self; the four formless attainments – because the sign of form is absent in them; and the four paths and fruits – because the defilements, the “makers of signs,” are absent in them’, SN IV 298 (*Sutta* 41.7), Bodhi, 2000: 1445, note 312.

²⁹ ‘*Spk* explains that lust, etc., are called sign-makers (*nimitta-karaṇa*) because they mark a person as lustful, hating, or deluded. Perhaps, though, the statement means that lust causes the “sign of beauty” (*subhanimitta*) to appear, hatred the “sign of the repulsive” (*paṭighanimitta*), and delusion the signs of permanence, pleasure and self’, Bodhi, 2000: 1445, note 316.

³⁰ Bodhi, 2000: 1445, note 313

³¹ Bodhi, 2000: 1445, note 314: ‘*Akuppā cetovimutti*. *Spk*: The liberation of mind consisting in the fruition of arahantship.’

(*bojjhaṅga*) and the noble eightfold path (*ariyo aṭṭhangiko maggo*), that is the thirty-seven ‘*dhammas* that contribute to awakening (*bodhi-pakkhiyā dhammā*).³²

Although there is no explanation of *suññatā samādhi*, *animitta samādhi* and *appaṇihita samādhi* in the *Samyutta Nikāya* Pāli commentary on this passage, the *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* (*Dīgha Nikāya-aṭṭhakathā*), SV III 1003-4, ‘comments on them thus: One who, at the stage of advanced insight, contemplated things as not-self, acquires the emptiness concentration on arriving at the path and fruit (because he has seen things as empty of self); one who contemplates things as impermanent acquires the signless concentration (because he has seen things through the “sign of permanence”); one who contemplates things as suffering acquires the undirected concentration (because he has no leaning to things seen as painful).’³³

Moreover, another passage of the *Samyutta Nikāya* (SN IV 269, 9, Sutta 40: *Moggallānasamyutta*) reiterates the very lofty nature of the signless concentration of mind (*animitta cetosamādhi*), which is entered upon after having gone through the four *jhānas* and the four formless states: ‘Here, by nonattention to all signs, a *bhikkhu* enters and dwells in the signless concentration of mind. This is called the signless concentration of mind.’³⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi quotes the Pāli commentary again (*Spk*) to remind us that *animitta cetosamādhi* refers to insight concentration (*vipassanāsamādhi*), but admits that this state is not precisely and univocally defined in the four *Nikāyas*. However, ‘its placement after the eighth formless attainment suggests it is a *samādhi* qualitatively different from those attained in *samatha* meditation.’³⁵

To summarise the investigation across the *Samyutta Nikāya*, a few connected threads seem to emerge in regards to the three gateways to liberation. On the one hand, they seem to be very lofty *vipassanā-samādhi*, meditative concentrations based on strong insight into emptiness/not-self, impermanence and suffering; on the other hand, they appear to be supramundane attainment of fruition, where *Nibbāna* is glimpsed at in its quality of not-self, signless and aimless/undirected and as an object which is empty of self, empty of signs and empty of suffering.

The theme of emptiness is also briefly mentioned in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, for instance in AN I. 72 (p. 68 in translation): “Herein, monks, in whatsoever company the monk listens not to the discourse uttered by the *Tathāgata*, discourses deep and deep in meaning, transcendental, dealing with the Void, when they are recited...’³⁶ The same

³² Gethin, 2001: xiii.

³³ Bodhi, 2000: 1454, note 368.

³⁴ Bodhi, 2000: 1308.

³⁵ Bodhi, 2000: 1440, note 280.

³⁶ AN II.v.5 *Idha bhikkhave yassaṃ parisāyaṃ bhikkū ye te suttantā Tathāgatabhāsītā gambhīrā gambhūratthā lokuttarā suññatāpaṭisaññūtā ...* In Pali, AN, Part I, 1961, London PTS, p.72.

passage is also found in SN II 267 (from PTS, p. 179 in translation): ‘Those *Suttantas* uttered by the *Tathāgata*, deep, deep in meaning, not of the world, dealing with the void...’³⁷

In the *Nissāya-vagga* of the same *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (A.V. 318-26), there ‘are a number of passages which are clearly on the “signless” apprehension of *nibbāna*³⁸, in which advanced meditative states filled with insight (*animitta-samādhi*) are said to have *Nibbāna* has their object. At A.V. 321-22 the Buddha replies to Ānanda that there is a meditative state in which a *bhikkhu* turns his mind

away from all “signs” – the five physical sense-organs and their objects, the four physical elements (perhaps here as objects of *jhāna*), the four formless mystical states, any world, any object of the six senses – and turning his mind to *Nibbāna*, which is beyond all such “signs”... a movement of progressive emptying, in which signs of both gross and subtle phenomena are gradually transcended.’³⁹

The Buddha is thus pointing to the possibility of not attending to any signs, which can be somewhat ‘sticky’ and can cause entanglement with the world, but - through a progressive emptying - being able to know what is beyond conditioned signs - *Nibbāna*.

In a similar passage (A.V. 318-19)⁴⁰, the Buddha reiterates the possibility of seeing the signless *Nibbāna*, this time though not by turning the mind away from attending to signs, but by ‘seeing through’ them, thus seeing the timeless and signless *Nibbāna* through and beyond the signs. For instance, when the mind is applied to cognizing solidity, there – in solidity – no solidity is found, no ontological ground is perceived: solidity is perceived as empty of solidity, groundless, lacking signs of permanence and substantiality.⁴¹

In a parallel passage (A.V. 324-26), a similar idea is reiterated by the Buddha when he explains how a *bhikkhu* may be meditating (*jhāyati*) without depending on any phenomena, thus hinting again at the signless meditation state. The monk meditates in such a way that ‘in solidity, the cognition of solidity is *vibhūta*⁴², which in this case seems to mean ‘made clear’ without any signs of permanence or substance, attending to the signless *Nibbāna*, which is devoid of any signs that can be grasped at, and can be seen by looking ‘through’ sense-objects, ‘no longer registering *what* has been the object of contemplation.’⁴³ In this signless state of contemplation, *Nibbāna* can be glanced at, ‘where the mind attends

³⁷ In Pali: XX. 7.3 *Ye te suttantā tathāgatabhāsītā gambhīrā gambhīratthā lokuttarā suññatāpaṭisaṃyuttā...*, in PTS, *Saṃyutta-Nikāya Part II Nidāna-Vagga*, 1960, p. 267.

³⁸ Harvey, 1995: 194.

³⁹ Harvey, 1995: 194.

⁴⁰ ‘May it be, venerable sir, that a monk’s acquiring of concentration is of such sort that in solidity he is not cognizant of solidity (*paṭhaviyaṃ paṭhavī-saññī*)... [this formula is then repeated for each of the remaining items at A.V. 321-22]... and yet he is cognizant (*saññī*)?’ in Harvey, 1995: 195.

⁴¹ ‘Solidity is perceived, as it were, as empty of “solidity”: *saññā* – “cognition” or “interpretation”, that which classifies or labels experience – does not latch onto a “sign” as a basis for seeing solidity as solidity. Rather, the mind perceives the signless *Nibbāna*’, in Harvey, 1995: 195.

⁴² Harvey, 1995: 195.

⁴³ Harvey, 195: 196.

to the unconstructed phenomena in such a way that their insignificant, ephemeral nature allows the deathless, unconstructed realm beyond them to be seen.’⁴⁴

All these passages from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (especially from the *Nissāya-vagga*) can be associated with and taken as a further clarification of the famous citation on *Nibbāna* in *Udāna* 80 (*Vagga* 8, *Sutta* 1), i.e. the above passages describe states of *samādhi* in which there is perception of *Nibbāna*, as described below:

There exists (*atthi*), monks, that sphere [or 'domain', *āyatanam*] where there is: neither solidity (*paṭhavim*), cohesion, heat, nor motion; nor the spheres of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, or neither-cognition-nor-non-cognition; neither this world, nor a world beyond, nor both, nor sun-and-moon; there, monks, I say there is no coming (*āgatiṃ*), nor going (*gatiṃ*), nor maintenance (*ṭhitiṃ*), nor falling away (*cutiṃ*), nor arising (*upapattiṃ*); that, surely, is without support (*appatiṭṭham*), non-functioning (*appavattam*), objectless (*anārammaṇam*) - just this is the end of *dukkha*.

Nibbāna thus exists, yet it is utterly beyond any sphere (material, elemental or even formless), any level of rebirth, being hard to comprehend and ‘slippery’ to any definition. Hence, *Nibbāna* seems beyond even the highest *animitta-samādhi*, which is still impermanent, and ‘the experience of arahantship transcends other *animitta* states, as it has no object, not even the *animitta Nibbāna*.’⁴⁵

The three gateways to liberation in the *Khuddaka Nikāya*: the *Dhammapada*

The three gateways to liberation are clearly alluded to in the *Dhammapada* (Dhp. 91-3), albeit indirectly and tangentially. Following Nārada Thera’s translation, the three verses state:

91.

Uyyuñjanti satīmanto na nikete ramanti te

haṃsā va pallalaṃ hitvā okam okam jahanti te

⁴⁴ Harvey, 195: 197.

⁴⁵ Harvey, 1986: 44. He continues by stating: ‘Rather, it is *Nibbāna*, in the form of an objectless (*anārammaṇa*), unsupported (*appatiṭṭhita*), non-manifestive (*anidassana*), infinite (*ananta*), unconstructed (*asaṅkata*), and stopped (*niruddha*) consciousness. In the timeless experience of arahantship, *viññāṇa*, schooled so as not to be taken in by *nimittas* and worldly objects, does not even take *Nibbāna* as object, but, objectless, transcends conditions and it is the unconditioned.’ In a personal correspondence, Harvey continues as follows: ‘my point is that the *animitta samādhi* still takes *Nibbāna* as an object, and is not itself the experience of attaining Arahantship, where *Nibbāna*, as objectless consciousness, is directly experienced. However, *Nibbāna* can still be called *animitta*, signless. Of course remember that orthodox Theravāda does not see *Nibbāna* as any kind of consciousness, as such’. I do agree with his interpretation, which will be linked to more Mahāyāna ideas in the next few chapters (Harvey further pointed out that his interpretation is not based on any Mahāyāna ideas).

91. The mindful exert themselves. To no abode are they attached. Like swans that quit their pools, home after home they abandon (and go)⁴⁶.

92.

Yesaṃ sannicayo natthi, ye pariññātabhojanā;

Suññato animitto ca, vimokkha yesaṃ gocaro;

Ākāse va sakuntānaṃ, gati tesam durannayā.

92. They for whom there is no accumulation⁴⁷, who reflect well over their food, who have Deliverance⁴⁸, which is Void and Signless, as their object, - their course like that of birds in the air cannot be traced.

John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana's translation and comment on this verse are illuminating:

And (whose pasture is freedom) that is empty, that has not sign.' 'Here in the phrase "freedom that is empty, that has no signs" the third freedom, namely "freedom that has no aspiring [*appaṇihita*] is also indeed included. These three are names for *Nibbāna* itself. *Nibbāna* is "empty" because in it there is neither attachment, nor ill will, nor delusion; because it is free of these, it is "freedom that is empty." It is devoid of signs because it has none of the three signs such as attachment, and the like [ill will and delusion]. Because it is free of these, it is "freedom that has no signs." It is devoid of aspirations based on attachment, and so forth. Because it is free of these it is "freedom that has no aspiring."

Following their pointer, it could be argued that in the *Dhammapada*, albeit not in a systematic and rigorously philosophical manner, there is a rather overt indication of *Nibbāna* as signless, empty and wishless/undirected: a timeless state in which there are no signs, no-things, no expectations and desires, and therefore no attachment to anything, freedom to live un-impeded and unobstructed. This interpretation is supported by the last verse:

93.

⁴⁶ Nārada Thera, 1972: 85 'Arahants, having destroyed the taints of greed/attachment, hatred and delusion/ignorance, are free to wander from place to place, unattached to any abode, without preferences, without expectations, without aims and goals' and note 1, p. 85: 'Arahants wander whithersoever they like without any attachment to any particular place as they are free from the conception of "I" and "mine".'

⁴⁷ Nārada Thera, 1972: 86-7, note 1: 'There are two kinds of accumulation - namely, *kammic* activities and the four necessities of life. The former tend to prolong life is *Saṃsāra* and the latter, though essential, may prove an obstacle to spiritual progress.'

⁴⁸ Nārada Thera, 1972: 86-7 note 2: '*Nibbāna* is Deliverance from suffering (*vimokkha*). It is called Void because it is void of lust, hatred and ignorance, not because it is nothingness or annihilation. *Nibbāna* is a positive supramundane state which cannot be expressed in mundane words. It is Signless because it is free from the signs of lust, etc., *Arahants* experience *Nibbānic* bliss while alive. It is not correct to say that *Arahants* exist after death, nor do not exist after death, for *Nibbāna* is neither eternalism nor nihilism. In *Nibbāna* nothing is eternalised nor is anything, except passions, annihilated. *Arahants* experience *Nibbānic* bliss by attaining to the fruit of *Arahantship* in this life itself.'

Yassāsavā parikkhīṇā, āhāre ca anissito

Suññato animitto ca, vimokkho yassa gocaro;

Ākāse va sakuntānaṃ, padaṃ tassa durannayaṃ.

(Nārada Thera, p. 97)

He whose corruptions are destroyed, he who is not attached to food, he who has Deliverance, which is Void and Signless, as his object, - his path, like that of birds in the air, cannot be traced.

The three gateways to liberation in the *Khuddaka Nikāya*: the case of the *Paṭisambhidhāmagga*

The three gateways to liberation are discussed in more detail and precision in the *Paṭisambhidhāmagga*, *The Path of Discrimination* (as Ñāṇamoli translates it), which is part of the fifth *Nikāya* of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, yet it seems clearly a relatively late, *Abhidhamma*-style work expressing a definitely *Theravādin* view. The text is extremely interesting because it presents a more systematic treatment of the three gateways, which will be copiously referred to by Buddhaghosa in his *Visuddhimagga*.

In Treatise V – On liberation (*Ps. II. 36*), the text defines the three liberations as: liberation by⁴⁹ emptiness (*suññato vimokkho*, literally ‘the emptiness liberation’); liberation by signlessness (*animitto vimokkho*); liberation by wishlessness (*appaṇihito vimokkho*).⁵⁰ Further on (*Ps. II. 48*), the text explains how emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness are to be considered gateways to liberations, doors to the deathless and the unconditioned – *Nibbāna*.

Now these three gateways to liberation lead to the outlet from the world, [that is to say:] (i) to the seeing of all formations as limited and circumscribed [*pariccheda-parivaṭṭumato*] and to the entering of cognizance [*citta*] into the signless [*animitta*] principle, (ii) to the bestirring of mind with respect to all formations and to the entering of cognizance into the desireless [*appaṇihita*] principle, (iii) to the seeing of

⁴⁹ Though there is no ‘by’ in the Pali.

⁵⁰ Ñāṇamoli, 1982: 237: ‘What is liberation by voidness? Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty place, considers thus: “This is void of self or of what belongs to self.” He contrives no misinterpretation [*abhinivesa*] thereon, thus it is liberation by voidness. This is liberation by voidness. What is liberation by signlessness? Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty place, considers thus: “This is void of self or of what belongs to self.” He contrives no sign thereon, thus it is liberation by signlessness. This is liberation by signlessness. What is liberation by desirelessness? Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty place, considers thus: “This is void of self or of what belongs to self.” He contrives no desire thereon, thus it is liberation by desirelessness. This is liberation by desirelessness.’

all ideas⁵¹ as alien and to the entering of cognizance into the voidness [*suññatā*] principle. These three gateways to liberation lead to the outlet from the world.⁵²

The *Paṭisambhidhāmagga* continues its analytical exposition by associating the three gateways to the three characteristics of *dhammas* (*anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*)⁵³, as it comments that the cognizance of the signless element is brought about by paying attention to all formations (*saṅkhāras*) as impermanent, thus realising the ungraspable nature of any conditioned phenomenon; cognizance into the wishless element is engendered by attending to the unsatisfactoriness of all formations, thus realising their ‘being a pain’; cognizance into the emptiness element is prompted by giving attention to all formations as not-Self, thus realising their insubstantiality.

Secondly, the text (*Ps.II.48-9*) aligns the three gateways to liberation with three exalted spiritual qualities: ‘When he gives attention as impermanent, his cognizance has great resolution [*adhimokkha*]. When he gives attention as painful, his cognizance has great tranquillity [*passaddhi*]. When he gives attention as not self, his cognizance has great wisdom [*paññā*].’⁵⁴

Thirdly, the three gateways and their related qualities are associated to three spiritual faculties: ‘When one who has great resolution gives attention as impermanent, he acquires the faith [*saddhā*] faculty. When one who has great tranquillity gives attention as painful, he acquires the concentration [*samādhi*] faculty. When one who has great wisdom gives attention as not self, he acquires the understanding [*paññā*] faculty.’

The text concludes its exposition of the three gateways to liberation by discussing what kind of noble person one will become as he passes through a specific gateway. The one with great resolution and faith, having realised all phenomena as impermanent, is ‘One Liberated by Faith;’ the one with great concentration, having realised the unsatisfactoriness of all formations, in ‘a Body Witness;’ the third one, whose outstanding faculty is wisdom and understanding, having realised the not-Self nature of all *dhammas*, is ‘One Attained to Vision’(*Ps.II.60*).⁵⁵

The *Paṭisambhidhāmagga* is therefore the first text to describe with some philosophical precision and consistency the nature of the three gateways to liberation, their relationship with which insight leads to them (insight into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-Self) and their association with spiritual qualities and faculties. As these three gateways have *Nibbāna* as their supporting object (*Ps.II.69*), we can safely elaborate how each gateway knows *Nibbāna* under a different aspect, in a specific manner. The gateway of signlessness knows *Nibbāna* as the signless (*animitta*): that which has no

⁵¹ Nāṇamoli’s rather odd translation of the term ‘*dhamma*’.

⁵² Nāṇamoli, 1982: 250.

⁵³ The first two of these are characteristics of all *saṅkhāras* - conditioned *dhammas*; the third applies to all *dhammas*.

⁵⁴ Nāṇamoli, 1982: 250.

⁵⁵ All of these are types of noble persons, at least stream-enterers; any can go on to Arahatsip.

signs of anything graspable, no signs of being conditioned, constructed and limited in any way, that which is beyond time and change, beyond arising and passing away. The gateway of wishlessness knows *Nibbāna* as wishless and undirected (*appaṇihita*), beyond our compulsive desire to establish goal-directedness as regards to conditioned phenomena, which are all unsatisfactory and leading to pain and disappointment, thus suggesting a profound and complete letting go of expectations, aims, goals, objectives and desires of controlling ephemeral phenomena. The gateway of emptiness knows *Nibbāna* as voidness, groundlessness, impossibility to grasp at any Self, misinterpreting *dhammas* as substantial, ‘Self’, ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘mine’, thus freeing the mind to contemplate that which is unsupported, unobstructed, unconditioned.

The three gateways to liberation in the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (and its post-canonical commentary – the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*)

Further evidence of the three gateways to liberation is found in the *Dhamma-saṅgaṇi* (Dhs. 344-53), the first book of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*. The text presents the three gateways to liberation in a more systematic way, discussing emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness both as doors into liberation and as aspects of *Nibbāna*.

These references are explained at length in the post-canonical *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, the classic *Summary of the Topics of Abhidhamma* by Anuruddha (together with its commentary by Sumaṅgala), which provides us with a detailed commentary of emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness as modes or aspects of *Nibbāna*. ‘Emptiness ... because it is empty of greed, hatred and delusion... it is signless because it is removed from any sign of greed, etc.; it is wishless because it is removed from the wishes that are greed, etc.’⁵⁶ This correlation between these three aspects of *Nibbāna* and the absence of the three poisons (*lobha/rāga, dosa* and *moha*) is reiterated in almost all passages referring to the *vimokkha-mukhas*.

On the other hand, the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* proposes alternative and complimentary explanations: ‘it is emptiness because it is empty of all formations, signless because of the absence of signs of all formations, wishless because of the absence of the wish that is craving.’⁵⁷ This interpretation is further strengthened by associating the three gateways to liberation with profound insight into impermanence, suffering and not-self (*anicca, dukkha, anattā*), which will become a cornerstone of the Pāli and Theravāda analysis of the significance and status of the three gateways⁵⁸. *Suññatā*

⁵⁶ Wijeratne and Gethin, 2002: 254.

⁵⁷ Wijeratne and Gethin, 2002: 255.

⁵⁸ See, for instance, Della Santina (website reference): ‘it is in this sense that contemplation of the three characteristics leads to the three doors of liberation: the door of signlessness, the door of wishlessness, and the door of emptiness. Contemplating the characteristic of impermanence leads to the door of signlessness; contemplating suffering leads to the door of wishlessness, or freedom from desire; and contemplating not-self

is the gateway to liberation called “contemplation of emptiness” since it contemplates formations in the form of emptiness of self. It is a door to the transcendent path and fruits... The contemplation of formations as impermanent, which lets go of the sign of distortion, is the gateway to liberation called “the contemplation of the signless... The contemplation of formations as suffering, which lets go of the wish that is craving, is the gateway to liberation called “the contemplation of the wishless.”⁵⁹

Therefore, according to the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, these three gateways are paths as well as liberations, depending whether the insight leading to emergence gains insight into emptiness, impermanence or suffering.⁶⁰

Anuruddha takes his analysis even further, interpreting the name of the three liberations in relations to: a) by the way of arrival (path); b) by virtue of their object⁶¹; c) by virtue of their own properties. This interpretation contrasts that of Buddhaghosa in the *Atthasālinī*, as it will be demonstrated later on in this chapter.

To conclude our analysis of the evidence on the three gateways of liberation in the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* and its Pāli commentaries, it can be said that a more systematic and philosophical interpretation is emerging, connecting the *vimokkha-mukhas* with three aspects of *Nibbāna* via the concept of the three seals of reality: impermanence, suffering and not-self.

The three gateways to liberation in post-canonical Theravāda sources: the *Nettippakaraṇaṃ*

The *Nettippakaraṇaṃ*, a para-canonical commentary attributed to Kaccāna Thera, has an interesting interpretation of the *vimokkha-mukhas*, which it connects with the three pillars of Buddhism - *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* - explicitly linking them to the Noble Eightfold Path when it states:

When he keeps in being quiet and insight, he keeps in being the three Gateways to Liberation. When he keeps in being the three Gateways to Liberation, he keeps in being the three categories [of virtue, concentration, and understanding]. When he

leads to the door of emptiness. These three doors of liberation are the culmination of meditation on the three universal characteristics.’

⁵⁹ Della Santina (website reference), p. 359.

⁶⁰ Della Santina (website reference), p. 360: ‘So the path acquires three names by the way of arrival of insight, and likewise the fruit occurring in the consciousness process of the path, by the way of arrival of the path.’

⁶¹ Della Santina (website reference), p. 361: ‘by virtue of their occurrence in respect of *Nibbāna*, which has the names emptiness, signless and wishless.’

keeps in being the three categories, he keeps in being the Noble Eight-factored Path.⁶²

Moreover, the *Nettipakaraṇaṃ* continues its analysis by associating each gateway with a specific temperament and the relevant training to attain release. The signless gateway is recommended for those with a greedy and attachment-prone temperament, who would mostly benefit from *samādhi* training, so as to attain *animitta vimutti*, the release by not attending to signs of greed and attachment. The wishless gateway is recommended for those with a hatred-filled temperament, who would chiefly benefit from *sīla* training, thus relinquishing hatred, so as to attain *appaṇihita vimutti*, the release by not wishing and desiring that which is unprofitable. Finally, the emptiness gateway is suggested to those with a deluded temperament, who should train in *paññā*, in higher understanding and wisdom, so as to attain *suññatā vimutti*, liberation through emptiness.

However, this interpretation somewhat differs from the analysis found in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (*Ps. II. 58*, which is also quoted in the *Visuddhimagga*, *Vis. 658*), where emptiness is still coupled with wisdom (*veda*), but wishlessness is instead associated with tranquillity (*passaddhi*) and signlessness with faith (*adhimokkha = saddhā*), by which belief virtue is undertaken in the first place.

The three gateways to liberation in post-canonical Theravāda sources: the *Vimuttimagga* by Upatissa

A similar analysis of the three gateways to liberation is presented in the *Vimuttimagga* (*The Path of Freedom*, a text now only available in its Chinese translation form Pali) where Upatissa discusses how each gateway leads to a different aspect of emancipation: a) the discernment of all formations as impermanent, constantly rising and falling, springs the mind forth into the signless element, attaining peace (*Nibbāna*); b) the insight into the unsatisfactoriness of all formations – *dukkha* – leads the mind into the desireless and wishless element (translated as ‘unhankered’ by Soma Thera & Kheminda Thera, that which is not subject to craving and desire); the understanding of the not-Self nature of all *dhammas* allows the mind to penetrate into the void element.⁶³

Interestingly, the *Vimuttimagga* deepens its examination of the three emancipations (Ch. 12, On Discerning Truth)⁶⁴ by stating that ‘these three emancipations fulfil different Paths through penetration [*anicca*-penetration, *dukkha*-penetration and *anattā*-penetration]; and they fulfil one Path through attainment’⁶⁵, thus hinting at the fact that the three gateways, albeit different insofar as from which insight they are opened,

⁶² *Nett.* 528, p. 125.

⁶³ Soma Thera & Kheminda Thera, 1977: 288.

⁶⁴ Soma Thera & Kheminda Thera, 1977: 312-14.

⁶⁵ Soma Thera & Kheminda Thera, 1977: 313.

nonetheless they all spring the mind forth into contemplating the unconditioned – *Nibbāna*. Moreover, the text explicitly declares that by cultivating each insight and by developing each penetration, not only a specific faculty is perfected (faith through *anicca*-penetration, concentration through *dukkha*-penetration and wisdom through *anattā*-penetration), but all other four remaining spiritual faculties are attained and perfected simultaneously, leading the mind into release from the five aggregates, into complete liberation⁶⁶, clearly stating that this is ‘supramundane enjoyment’⁶⁷, realisation of *Nibbāna*.

The three gateways to liberation in post-canonical Theravāda sources: the *Visuddhimagga* by Buddhaghosa

A more comprehensive commentary of the three gateways to liberation is given by Buddhaghosa in the *Visuddhimagga*, where the author analyses, explains and argues his position in relation to (and against, on one occasion) the *Paṭisambhidhāmagga* and the *Abhidhamma*. Buddhaghosa recalls⁶⁸ the *Paṭisambhidhāmagga*’s passage (*Ps.II.48*) on the three gateways to liberation as emancipating, insight-filled, deep meditative states into seeing all formations as *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*, but he seems to prefer (at the beginning) to follow the *Abhidhamma*’s analysis against the *Paṭisambhidhāmagga*. In the latter, all three liberations ‘should be understood as the noble path that has occurred by making *Nibbāna* its object through the signless [the wishless and the empty] aspect.’⁶⁹ However, in the former (the *Abhidhamma*), Buddhaghosa states that only two liberations are mentioned: the wishless and the empty, commenting that

⁶⁶ Soma Thera & Kheminda Thera, 1977: 313: ‘Q. How do these fulfil different Paths through penetration? A. Through impermanence-penetration, the signless emancipation is fulfilled. Through ill-penetration, the unhankered emancipation is fulfilled. Through not-self penetration, the void emancipation is fulfilled.

Q. How is the signless emancipation fulfilled through impermanence-penetration? A. Attention to impermanence destroys the formations, and emancipated the mind in many ways. Thus faith and the other four faculties are got. And the knowledge of the thus-ness of the sign makes manifest the impermanence of all compounded things, arouses fear of the sign of the formations and, through proceeding in the signless, surpasses the sign through the emancipation that is without sign; and the release from the aggregates takes place. Thus the signless emancipation is fulfilled through impermanence-penetration.

Q. How is the unhankered emancipation fulfilled through ill-penetration? A. Attention to ill develops fear towards the formations and emancipates the mind in many ways. Thus concentration and the other four faculties are got. And the knowledge of thus-ness of birth makes manifest the ill of all compounded things, arouses fear towards birth, gains the knowledge of birth and, proceeding in the birthless, surpasses birth through the emancipation that is without hankering; and the release from the aggregates takes place. Thus the unhankered emancipation is fulfilled through ill-penetration.

Q. How is the void emancipation fulfilled through not-self-penetration? A. Attention to Not-self makes manifest the voidness of the formations and stirs up aversion for them. Thus wisdom and the other four faculties are got. And the knowledge of the thus-ness of the faculties and of birth makes manifest the not-self of all compounded things. Liberating itself from the sign of birth, the mind, proceeding along the signless, the birthless, goes beyond to breaking-up and *Nibbāna*, through the emancipation that is void; and the release from the aggregates takes place. Thus through not-self-penetration, the voidness emancipation is fulfilled. Thus do these three emancipations fulfil different Paths through penetration.

⁶⁷ Soma Thera & Kheminda Thera, 1977: 322.

⁶⁸ *Vism.* XXI 67, in Ñāṇamoli, 1991: 680.

⁶⁹ *Vism.* XXI 71, in Ñāṇamoli, 1991: 681.

‘although stated in this way [in the *Paṭisambhidhāmagga*], insight knowledge is not literally signless because there is no abandoning of the sign of formations [as formed, here, as distinct from their sign as impermanent and so on]. It [the insight knowledge] is however literally void and desireless. And it is at the moment of the noble path that the liberation is distinguished, and that is done according to insight knowledge’s way of arrival at the path. That, it should be understood, is why only two liberations are stated [in the *Abhidhamma*], namely, the desireless and the void.’⁷⁰

This argument will be reiterated by Buddhaghosa in the *Atthasālinī* (a post-canonical Theravāda text traditionally attributed to him, although recent scholarship seems to indicate it was not actually by him). However, he seems here the only author to propose this explanation (and the only instance too in his writings), when all other sources agree that all three liberations fulfil the supramundane, noble path, being the knowing of *Nibbāna*, albeit under a different aspect (the signless, the wishless and the empty).

On the other hand (and seemingly in contradiction with himself), in another passage of the *Visuddhimagga* (XXI 89) Buddhaghosa seems to side with the *Paṭisambhidhāmagga* (and its illustration of all three liberations as path names), when he discusses his understanding of the ‘insights leading to emergence’ (insights that have reached culmination – *Nibbāna* – namely the equanimity about formations, conformity and change-of-lineage), stating that if emergence comes whilst contemplating impermanence

‘then all three persons⁷¹ acquire the faculty of faith since they have great resolution; they are liberated by the signless liberation... if emergence is from the painful, then all three persons acquire the faculty of concentration since they have great tranquillity; they are liberated by the desireless liberation... and then if emergence takes place [while contemplating] as not-self, all three persons acquire the faculty of understanding since they have great vision; they are liberated by the void liberation.’⁷²

Here Buddhaghosa seems to suggest that all three insights (into impermanence, suffering and not-Self), together with their related three spiritual qualities (resolution, tranquillity and understanding) and three spiritual faculties (faith, concentration, wisdom), qualify to lead the mind into final liberation, emerging onto fruition (signless, wishless or empty), in line with the *Paṭisambhidhāmagga*.

In a following section (XXI 119-127), Buddhaghosa strengthens this argument when he concludes his exposition of liberation by declaring that the (supramundane, noble) path ‘gets its name for five reasons, that is to say, (1) owing to its own nature, or (2) owing to

⁷⁰ *Vism.* XXI 73, in Ñāṇamoli, 1991: 681.

⁷¹ Buddhaghosa is referring here to the person who has started with the contemplation of impermanence, the person who has started with the contemplation of unsatisfactoriness and the person who has started with the contemplation of not-Self.

⁷² *Vism.* XXI 89, in Ñāṇamoli, 1991: 685.

what it opposes, or (3) owing to its own special quality, or (4) owing to its object, or (5) owing to the way of arrival.⁷³ Again, discussing these five cases in details, Buddhaghosa shows how the path can be called signless, wishless or empty because in each case liberation takes place as either signless, aimless or empty. Interestingly, with regards to reasons (5) (owing to the way of arrival), Buddhaghosa recalls how ‘this name [signless path] is inadmissible by the *Abhidhamma* method, [yet] it is admissible by the *Suttanta* method; for, they say, by that method change-of-lineage⁷⁴ takes the name “signless” by making the signless *Nibbāna* its object, and while itself remaining at the arrival point, it gives its name to the path. Hence the path is called signless. And its fruition can be called signless too according to the path’s way of arrival.’⁷⁵ Therefore, Buddhaghosa seems again to prefer the possibility of taking all three liberations as names for the path, in this case by appealing to the authority of the *Suttas*, possibly by referring to the fact that insight into impermanence leads to relinquishing all signs in regards to *dhammas*, thus enabling the mind to see the signless *Nibbāna* as its object, bringing about a change of lineage.

The three gateways to liberation in post-canonical Theravāda sources: the *Atthasālinī*, attributed to Buddhaghosa

In the *Atthasālinī*, Buddhaghosa’s classic commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, Buddhaghosa discusses the three gateways of liberation at length, offering yet another interpretation of their role on the path to freedom.

In commenting on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, Buddhaghosa considers only emptiness and wishlessness as being able to be a transcendental and supramundane path (*lokuttaro maggo*), analysing them with regards to arrival (*āgamanato* – from [the way] of arrival), own qualities (*saguṇato*) and object (*ārammaṇato*) of each name of the path. With regards to arrival, emptiness gives the name to the path because the insight (*vipassanā*) into not-self of all formations (*saṅkhāras*) emerges onto the path; because the path (in the sense of the one-moment *lokuttaro maggo*) is empty of greed, hatred and delusion, it is said empty by the means of its own merit; finally, because *Nibbāna* is empty of the three taints, it is said to be empty by the means of the object – *Nibbāna*. Similarly, wishlessness (or ‘the Undesired’ in PTS translation) is a name of the Path with regards to its arrival (the insight into *dukkha*), to its own merits (abandoning desires for greed, hatred and delusion) and in reference to the object – *Nibbāna* – (which is the absence of those desires).

On the contrary, Buddhaghosa argues – against the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*⁷⁶ and partly against his own previous interpretation in the *Visuddhimagga*⁷⁷ – that signless is not a name

⁷³ *Vism.* XXI 120, in Ñāṇamoli, 1991: 691.

⁷⁴ *Gotra-bhū*: the transition between being an ordinary person – a *puṭhujjana* – and a Noble person – an *ariya* (Stream-enterer, Once-returner, Non-returner and *Arahat*).

⁷⁵ *Vism.* XXI 126, in Ñāṇamoli, 1991: 692.

⁷⁶ *Pts*, II. 35: ‘*Bhikkhus*, there are three Deliverances: that of Emptiness, of the Signless, of the Undesired.’

⁷⁷ *Vism.* XXI 89 and XXI 119-127.

for the Path, ‘for insight of the “Signless” is not able by itself to stand in the place of arrival and to give the name to its own path.’⁷⁸ Buddhaghosa explains that, although insight into the signless severs the delusory signs of permanence, stability, bliss and self (and therefore it is recommended by the Buddha), nevertheless ‘it itself frequents states which are signs; thus it occurs within the sign. Therefore it itself is not able to stand at the place of arrival and give name to its own path.’⁷⁹ Buddhaghosa strengthens his thesis by appealing to the authority of the *Abhidhamma*, connecting the deliverance through the Signless with the insight into impermanence and the faculty of faith, which is strongest when attending to *anicca*. As the faith faculty is not a path-factor (unlike the faculties of concentration and wisdom, correlated to wishlessness and emptiness), the signless lacks all criteria to give name to a transcendental path. To recap Buddhaghosa’s position, there is an Emptiness transcendent path and an Wishless transcendent path, but not a Signless transcendent path in the strict sense. However, we have previously seen how Buddhaghosa seems to move frequently between this interpretation (following the *Abhidhamma*’s analysis) and the alternative position of taking all three liberations as names for the path (following the authority of the *Suttas* and of the *Paṭisambhidhāmagga*).

In conclusion to our preliminary investigation into Theravāda sources, it can be said that - albeit not always in a completely consistent and systematic way - there is a clear, complex and sophisticated analysis of the three gateways to liberation as doors into the Unconditioned and openings into Freedom (*Nibbāna*)⁸⁰ both in the Pāli Canon and in various post-canonical sources. This chapter has begun to unearth a fruitful tension and ambiguity with regards to the terms ‘emptiness’, ‘signlessness’ and ‘wishlessness’, insofar as they are simultaneously, though not entirely consistently, seen as: a) lofty *vipassanāsamādhī*, that is conditioned doors into *Nibbāna* (thus pertaining to the conditioned path), and - at the same time - b) types of liberations, elements of *Nibbāna* (thus pertaining to the goal), in which the Unconditioned is seen, glanced at as signless, wishless/undirected and empty (perhaps only partially though, as an object, rather than having a full experience of *Nibbāna*, which seems a step further)⁸¹. This topic will be developed further in the next few chapters.

⁷⁸ Asl.223, p. 301.

⁷⁹ Asl.223, p. 302.

⁸⁰ Freedom also seen as a new type of health (*ārogya*) from the illness of suffering, from conditioned and conditioning *saṃsāra*, In Johansson, 1969: 110-11: ‘The state of this “immovable, un-fluctuating mind” (*asaṃhīraṃ asankappaṃ cittaṃ*, Ta 649) is often described in terms of emptiness, and we find *Nibbāna* described as *suññatā*, “emptiness” (M III 108, Ti 46), *animitta*, “signless” (Ti 46), and *anidassana*, “free from attributes” (S IV 370).’

⁸¹ Harvey, 1995: 193: ‘a state of high insight which has *nibbāna* as its object is the “signless concentration” (*animitta- samādhī*), an advanced meditative state which, as “constructed” (M.III.108), is not itself the same as the Arahāt’s full experience of *nibbāna* (A.IV.78). It is part of the Holy Eightfold Path (S.IV.360) which is itself simply the best of all constructed states (A.II.34).’

2. The Three Gateways to Liberation in Sarvāstivāda and in Indian Mahāyāna sources

The three gateways to liberation in Sarvāstivāda sources

The three gateways to liberation (emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness) are mentioned in the *Abhidharma-kośa*⁸² - a classic survey of the Sarvāstivādin⁸³ thought elaborated in the fourth century A.D. by Vasubandhu - which can be seen as a work on which the Mahāyāna built, whilst - at the same time - critiquing some of its ideas. Conze points out that 'the *Abhidharma-kośa* associates our triad [emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness] with the specifically Sarvāstivādin list of sixteen "aspects"⁸⁴: Emptiness corresponds to "empty" and "not-self" [which are two of the four aspects of the first Truth], the Signless to the four aspects of the third Truth and the Wishless to the remaining ten aspects.'⁸⁵ In the *Abhidharma-kośa*, Vasubandhu summarise his position by stating: 'the signless is the aspect of peace. Emptiness engages in selflessness and emptiness. The wishless [has similarity] with the aspects of the truths other than those.'⁸⁶

Emptiness is a name for a door to deliverance because it reflects the nature of *Nirvāṇa* as being empty of self (following the *Abhidharma* thought) and empty of the three poisons of greed, hatred and delusion (in accordance with early canonical and Theravāda views, too).

Signlessness leads to liberation because it allows the mind to relinquish all attachment to signs (*nimittas*), freeing it from the stupefaction and entrancement with mental, emotional and volitional superimpositions characteristic of all signs, which tend to distort reality as it offers itself: impermanent and not-Self. Finally, wishlessness relates to

⁸² AK viii 184 (*Abhidharmakośa*, by Vasubandhu, = L. de la Vallée-Poussin, *L'AK de Vasubandhu*, trad. et annoté, 6 vols, 1923-31), quoted in Conze, 1967: 59 (and 277, note 1).

⁸³ 'The Sarvāstivādins, or "Pan-realists", became the dominant non-Mahāyāna school in north India, especially in the north-west under the patronage of Kaniṣka I, who ruled in the late first or early second century AD... Their canonical *Abhidharma* survives in Chinese translation. They became known for their view that not only present *dharmas* exist, but also past and future ones... The Sarvāstivādins also reified *dharmas*, seeing them as the indivisible constituents of reality. Each was seen as having an "own-nature" (Skt *svabhāva*) [but not an independent existence, for conditioned *dharmas*], a unique inherent nature, and they were seen as bound together in a "person" by a *dharma* known as *prāpti*, or "possession". Dissenters from the Sarvāstivāda view split off to form the Sautrāntika school. This looked to the *Suttas* as alone authoritative, and argued that many of the *dharmas* of the Sarvāstivādins were not separate ultimate realities', in Harvey, 1990: 85-6.

⁸⁴ The sixteen aspects of the Four Noble Truths are a Sarvāstivādin concept. The first Truth - *duḥkhasatya* - is understood as having four aspects: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, emptiness and impersonality; the four aspects of the second Truth - *samudāyasatya* - are: cause, origination, production and condition; the third Truth - *nirodhasatya* - is understood with regards to four aspects: stopping, pacification, sublime nature and definite liberation; the fourth Truth - *mārgasatya* - has four aspects: path, correct method/suitability, progress and deliverance. For further analysis, see Conze, 1972: 142-4 and Lopez, 1987: 89-90.

⁸⁵ Conze, 1967: 68.

⁸⁶ AK viii 24, quoted in Lopez, 1987: 90.

the attitude of not desiring or grasping even in regards to *Nirvāṇa* (in addition to the classic pernicious craving for sensual pleasures, for becoming and for annihilation), where liberation means being content and calm, ‘not placing anything in front’ (*a-pra-ṇi-hita*), not chasing after signs, desires, wishes and attachments.

In another Sarvāstivāda text, the *Mahā-vibhāṣā*⁸⁷, the three gateways to liberation are, respectively: the antidote to the false view of individuality (probably a reference to *sakkāya-diṭṭhi/satkāya-dṛṣṭī*) and an essential Self (emptiness); the rejection of the permanence and substantiality of all signs and objects related to the senses (signlessness); ‘the absence of all intentions (*āśaya*) or plans (*praṇidhāna*) in respect to any *dharma* of the triple world [wishlessness].’⁸⁸

It is interesting that the *Visuddhimagga* places the analysis of the three gateways to liberation within the sixth purification: the purification by knowledge and vision of the way (*paṭipadā-ñāṇadassana-visuddhi-niddesa*), whereas it seems less clear where the three gateways fit into the Sarvāstivādin scheme of five paths, as elaborated in the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* by Vasubandhu (fourth or fifth century AD)⁸⁹: the path of equipment (*sambhāra-mārga*), the path of application (*prayoga-mārga*), the path of seeing (*darśana-mārga*), the path of development (*bhāvanā-mārga*) and the path of completion (*niṣṭhā-mārga*)⁹⁰. However, if we follow Conze’s suggestion to associate the three gateways in the *Abhidharmakośa* with the sixteen aspects, then they should be part of the path of seeing, in which there is ‘a direct vision of the four truths in sixteen aspects’⁹¹. This would make sense because - in both Buddhaghosa’s analysis and the five paths scheme - seeing with deep insight the four noble truths leads to a change of lineage (*gotrabhū*): from the level of an ordinary person (Pāli: *puṭhujjana*, Sanskrit: *pṛthagjana*), to the family of the noble ones (*ariya/ārya*).⁹² This interpretation seems also supported by Gethin (2001: 336-7) when he discusses how the four *nirvedha-bhāgīyas* (the four stages of penetrative wisdom which constitute the *prayoga-mārga*, which precedes the ‘path of seeing’) ‘are not developed in the four formless

⁸⁷ The *Mahā-vibhāṣā* is the result of a Sarvāstivāda council held in around AD 100, under Kaniṣka I and it is an immense survey of their doctrine. It is quoted by Conze, 1967: 68 (and in note 38 on page 278 which refers to 104, possibly intending *Vibhāṣā*, T 1545, ch, 104, p. 538 a).

⁸⁸ Conze, 1967: 68.

⁸⁹ The *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* is an auto commentary by Vasubandhu on the Sarvāstivādin ideas expressed in the *Abhidharma-kośa*, this time though from a Sautrāntika point of view. As Harvey explains (Harvey, 2008a: section 2), ‘the author may or may not be the same as Mahāyānist Yogācārin philosopher “Vasubandhu”, though one can see a continuity in the line of thinking from the “one” Vasubandhu to the “other”. While the Mahāyāna traditions of Northern and Eastern Buddhism of course critique Sarvāstivādin ideas, especially that of *dharma*s having an “own-nature”, they in many ways build on the groundwork of Sarvāstivādin *Abhidharma* ideas, such as the ideas of the “five paths”. Chapter VI of the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* describes, in a somewhat piecemeal way, this scheme of five paths.’

⁹⁰ For a more in-depth examination of the five paths structure, see Gethin, 1998: 194-98.

⁹¹ Gethin, 1998: 197.

⁹² Stream-enterer (*sotāpanna/srotāpanna*) - by abandoning the first three fetters (the personality/Self-identity-view, doubt and clinging to precepts and vows); once-returned (*sakadāgāmin/sakṛdāgāmin*) - by abandoning the first three fetters and the permanent weakening of the next two (sensual desire and aversion); non-returned (*anāgāmin*) - by the complete abandoning of the five lower fetters; *Arahat/Arhat* - by abandoning all ten fetters (the first five ones, plus attachment to pure form, attachment to the formless, conceit, restlessness and spiritual ignorance).

attainments' (p. 337), and therefore not in the three gateways to liberation either, as the latter are even higher stages than the formless attainments.

The *darśana-mārga* consists of fifteen moments of consciousness that are said to be “without *āsravas*” (*anāsrava*). There follows a sixteenth moment which completes the vision of the four truths in sixteen aspects. This sixteenth moment constitutes the beginning of the *bhāvanā-mārga*. The fifteen moments are equivalent to path-attainment and the sixteenth moment to fruit attainment (Gethin, 2001: 337).

As supramundane (*lokottara*) *samādhis* filled with deep insight, emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness are truly doors to liberation insofar as ‘they are quite near to the true reality of *Nirvāṇa*, at its very threshold. In consequence they look towards both conditioned things and the unconditioned *Nirvāṇa*’,⁹³ thus playing on the richly double-edged metaphorical and symbolic meaning of the threshold image. Abiding in emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness allows the mind to see ‘through’ the conditioned to perceive *Nirvāṇa*, in a way that the world becomes transparent, enabling the vision of the Unconditioned.⁹⁴

The three gateways to liberation in the *Prajñā Pāramitā* literature

The three gateways to liberation are frequently mentioned in the *Prajñā Pāramitā* literature⁹⁵, where they are considered to be – once the Path has been reached – the approach to *Nirvāṇa*. Emptiness (*śūnyatā*), signlessness (*ānimitta*) and wishlessness (*apraṇihita*) are interpreted in the light of the Perfection of Wisdom: that is, both as doors and approaches into deliverance⁹⁶ and – simultaneously and non-dually – as synonyms⁹⁷ for the ultimately unthinkable, immeasurable, inexhaustible and unsupported reality of *Nirvāṇa*⁹⁸: ‘the realm of *Dharma*, and Suchness [*tathatā*]... empty, signless, wishless, not brought together, not produced, not stopped, not defiled, not purified.’⁹⁹

⁹³Conze, 1967: 69-70. Interestingly, Conze quotes here MN i 296: ‘There are two conditions for the attainment of the signless deliverance of thought – being non-attentive to all signs, being attentive to the signless element’, showing awareness that the doors to liberation (in this case *animitta-vimokkha*), even in the Canon, entail looking ‘through’ the conditioned to unveil the Unconditioned. For an even stronger reference for the idea of ‘looking through’ see Harvey, 1995: 195.

⁹⁴ See also A.V.318-26, referred to in the first chapter of this dissertation.

⁹⁵ Perfection of wisdom and/or ‘wisdom gone beyond’, that is: beyond the limitations of language, of discursive thinking, of rational logic, allowing a total letting go of views (*dr̥ṣṭi/diṭṭhi*), conceptual constructions (*vikalpa*) and proliferation (*prapañca/papañca*). It is therefore not a systematic philosophical doctrine or a treatise, but a soteriological exhortation and inspiration. For an in-depth analysis of the *Prajñā Pāramitā* literature, see Williams, 2000: 131-39, Williams, 1989: 37-54 and Gethin, 1998: 234-7.

⁹⁶‘Furthermore, Subhuti, a Bodhisattva should approach the perfection of wisdom as follows... [a long list of ways ensues]... from the emptiness, Signlessness and Wishlessness of all dharmas’, Conze, 1973: 274.

⁹⁷ Conze, 1973: 209.

⁹⁸ This is reminiscent of the use of these terms in the Theravāda, e.g. S.IV.360- the path is these three.

⁹⁹ Conze, 1973: 177.

In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, practising emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness is regarded as a complete path to liberation, as they act as doors to freedom. They are lofty concentration (*samādhi*) states¹⁰⁰ that allow the contemplation of the Unconditioned under its different aspects. In this text, the Buddha explicitly states that a *Bodhisattva*, having generated the aspiration to set all beings free (*bodhicittopāda*), should ‘aspire for the concentration on emptiness, the signless, the Wishless, i.e. for the three doors to deliverance’¹⁰¹, whilst still practising the perfection of skilful means so that ‘as a free agent he then enters into the concentration on Emptiness, on the Signless, on the Wishless’¹⁰² without realising full *Nirvāṇa*, but using his skilful means and his perfected loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity¹⁰³ in order to continue working in the world for the benefit of all beings. By dwelling in one of the doors to freedom, a *Bodhisattva* achieves complete conquest over emptiness, over the signless and the wishless, midway between falling ‘into the Uneffected [final *Nirvāṇa*], or become intimate with what belongs to the triple world [*traiḍhātuka*, the world of sense desire, the world of form and the formless world]’¹⁰⁴.

Following the re-interpretation of the *Prajñā Pāramitā*, all *Bodhisattvas*, as well as perfecting generosity, morality, patience, vigour and meditative concentration¹⁰⁵, must also uphold perfect wisdom and skilful means¹⁰⁶ to be able to access the level of the Buddha (as opposed to the ‘lower’ levels of a *śrāvaka*¹⁰⁷ or a *pratyekabuddha*¹⁰⁸). Nevertheless, insofar as the perfection of wisdom is mastered, ‘this is a perfection of Emptiness, of the Signless, of the Wishless, because all three doors to deliverance cannot be apprehended’¹⁰⁹ (thus they are perfectly pure because utterly free from any delusory intellectual grasping). The three doors to deliverance are therefore intimately connected with the development of the perfection of wisdom which a *Bodhisattva* is cultivating, allowing him/her to dwell in the concentration of Emptiness, of the Signless and of the Wishless without however completely and conclusively realising them, so as to delay ultimate liberation (*parinirvāṇa*) and assist all beings in the realm of *Saṃsāra*.

¹⁰⁰ Conze, 1973: 222: ‘Subhuti: how should a *Bodhisattva*, who courses in perfect wisdom, achieve the complete conquest of emptiness, or how should he enter into the concentration of emptiness?’ The text also mentions the concentration on the Signless, but it is clear that includes the concentration on the Wishless, as it discusses them as the doors into deliverance.

¹⁰¹ Conze, 1973: 225.

¹⁰² Conze, 1973: 222.

¹⁰³ The four limitless (*apramāṇa*) *brahma-vihāras*: *maitri*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekṣā*.

¹⁰⁴ Conze, 1973: 226.

¹⁰⁵ The first five of the six main Mahāyāna *pāramitās* (perfections): *dāna*, *śīla*, *kṣanti*, *virya*, *samādhi*, the sixth being *prajñā*.

¹⁰⁶ *Upāya-kauśalya*. The *Bodhisattva*’s skill in doing whatever is necessary for the salvation of all beings.

¹⁰⁷ A disciple, literally ‘one who listens’ and technically applied only to the disciples of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni who had heard his teachings directly from him. However, it is also used (rather disparagingly at times) in Mahāyāna texts for those who are non-Mahāyāna followers.

¹⁰⁸ A *pratyekabuddha* is a self-awakened solitary Buddha, yet unwilling or unable to teach others.

¹⁰⁹ Conze, 1973: 152.

The three gateways to liberation in the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*

In another early and important Mahāyāna text - the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* - emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness are presented in slightly different ways according to the context, yet not in a consistent and systematic manner, since their interpretation ranges from considering them as: qualities of *Nirvāṇa*, doors to liberation, types of *samādhi* and meditation practices (as in much previous literature, too, i.e. the three terms are applied to a range of related things).

They are firstly illustrated as doors connected with *Nirvāṇa* when Vimalakīrti, in discussing the qualities of the Law (*Dharma*) – which is clearly equated here with the Unconditioned realm, *Nirvāṇa* – says that the Law ‘is linked to emptiness (*śūnyatā*), signlessness (*ānimitta*) and wishlessness (*apraṇihita*) (for) it avoids all affirmation (*samāropa*) and negation (*apavāda*).’¹¹⁰ This passage seems to echo Pali Canonical scriptures (the *Paṭisambhidhāmagga*, for instance – Ps II. 48) in which emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness are seen as aspects of *Nirvāṇa* which is known as devoid of signs, beyond the possibility of grasping desire and empty of Self. It is interesting that the footnote by Lamotte¹¹¹ describes emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness as concerning

the *samādhis* practised in both Vehicles and considered as the three doors to deliverance (*vimokṣamukha*). *Śūnyatā* looks at things from the aspects of emptiness (*śūnya*) and not-self (*anātman*) and counteracts the belief in a self (*satkāyadṛṣṭi*); *ānimitta* which relates to *Nirvāṇa* as an objective free of all characteristic sign (*nimitta*); *apraṇihita* is the *samādhi* where there is no intention (*āśaya*), no wish (*praṇidhana*) regarding any dharma of the triple world

hence implying that they are *samādhis* that are doors to deliverance (*vimokṣamukha*), and aspects of *Nirvāṇa*.

Moreover, emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness are portrayed as the three gateways to liberation in a passage¹¹² where Vimalakīrti, addressing the daughters of the gods (who had ‘produced the thought of supreme and perfect enlightenment’ [*anuttarā samyaksambodhiḥ*]), declares that they will place their pleasure (*rati*) and their confidence (*adhimukti*) in the great garden of the Law (*dharmārāma*), and not in the five objects of desire (*kāmaguṇa*) by ‘penetrating in depth the three doors to deliverance (*vimokṣamukhapravacaya*)’- amongst other practices. In this instance, Vimalakīrti is contrasting the Garden of the Law, which symbolises perfect renunciation, with the heavenly parks, where the daughters of the gods enjoy instead the pleasures connected with the five objects of desire: sights, sounds, scents, tastes and tangibles. However, it seems here that the three gateways to liberation, despite the name, are not fully doors into

¹¹⁰ Boin, 1976: 48 (ch. III, § 6).

¹¹¹ Boin, 1976: 48 (ch. III, § 6), note 16.

¹¹² Boin, 1976: 103-4 (ch. III, § 64).

the Unconditioned, but more like entrances into lofty meditative formless states, possibly filled with *dhyānic/jhānic* pleasures born of seclusion and renunciation.

A following passage, where Vimalakīrti discusses how the offering of the giving of the Law (*dharmadānaya*) is truly commendable above all other offerings, speaks of three meditations as worthy offerings: ‘the meditation on emptiness (*śūnyabhāvanā*) resulting from the ripening of all beings (*sarvasattvapariṣādana*), the meditation on signlessness (*ānimittabhāvanā*) resulting from the purification of conditioned things (*saṃskṛtapariśodhana*), the meditation on wishlessness (*apraṇihitabhāvanā*) resulting from the births assumed according to the aspirations (*yathāśayotpatti*)’¹¹³. Here emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness appear to be more types of *bhāvanā*, meditation practices and cultivation of wholesome states, rather than doors to liberation, as emptiness relates to saving beings who are empty of essence, signlessness has to do with the purification of conditioned things (perhaps by seeing through them and glancing at the signless *Nirvāṇa*) and wishlessness refers to having a great aspiration.

Nevertheless, later on in the text Vimalakīrti explains how a *Bodhisattva* realises ‘wisdom acquired through skilful means (*upāyopāttaprajñā*) and which constitutes deliverance (*mukti*)... [when he] ‘subdues his mind (*svacittaṃ niyamati*) by the practice of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), signlessness (*ānimitta*) and wishlessness (*apraṇihita*)’.¹¹⁴ In this case, on the other hand, Vimalakīrti explicitly contrasts bondage (*bandhana*) and deliverance (*mukti*), using the three practices of emptiness, signlessness and aimlessness as direct gateways to liberation, rather than as formless meditative states.

Furthermore, these three are also seen as domains of a *Bodhisattva*, fields in which the *Bodhisattva* abides operating with wisdom and compassion for the benefit of all beings, ‘a domain where *Nirvāṇa* is known (*nirvāṇaprekṣaṇāgocara*) but not the domain of definite and full *Nirvāṇa* (*atyantaparīnirvāṇagocara*)’¹¹⁵, namely, ‘a domain where emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is reflected upon, but where all kinds of virtues are also sought (*sarvaguṇākāraparyeṣaṇā*)... where signlessness (*ānimitta*) is reflected upon, but where the liberation of beings (*sattvavimocana*) is kept in view... where wishlessness (*apraṇihita*) is reflected upon, but where the course through existences (*bhavaśaṃkrānti*) is voluntarily (*saṃcintya*) manifested’¹¹⁶. This typically Mahāyāna concept of seeing the Unconditioned but voluntarily deciding not to realise it permanently to remain in the conditioned world and help all sentient beings is reiterated further on by mentioning again the three gateways to liberation when it is said that ‘a *Bodhisattva* practices emptiness, but does not realise emptiness (*śūnyatā*). He does the same with signlessness (*ānimitta*), wishlessness (*apraṇihita*) and inaction (*anabhisamskāra*)’¹¹⁷.

¹¹³ Boin, 1976: 108 (ch. III, § 71).

¹¹⁴ Boin, 1976: 127 (ch. IV, § 17).

¹¹⁵ Boin, 1976: 128 (ch. IV, § 20).

¹¹⁶ Boin, 1976: 129-30 (ch. IV, § 20).

¹¹⁷ Boin, 1976: 232 (ch. X, § 18).

Finally, the text proclaims how the three gateways to liberation, despite being seemingly different, they are nonetheless non-dual¹¹⁹: they are one single door to deliverance, which leads into non-duality¹²⁰. ‘Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is one thing, signlessness (*ānimitta*) is another, and wishlessness (*apraṇihita*) is yet another: all this implies duality. But is emptiness (*śūnyatā*), there is no sign (*nimitta*); in signlessness, there is no wish (*praṇidhana*); in wishlessness, neither thought (*citta*) nor mind (*manas*) nor consciousness (*vijñāna*) function. Seeing that all three doors to deliverance (*vimokṣamukha*) are contained in a single door to deliverance, this is penetrating into non-duality [*advaya*].¹²¹ For in emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness there is no discriminating thought, sign or aim/desire, which means that there is non-dual wisdom and liberation. The ultimate non-duality of the three doors of liberation expressed in the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* can be associated with the analysis of their interpenetration and complex relationship suggested by the Pali *Paṭisambhidhāmagga* (Ps II 67-9), where each liberation is simultaneously linked to the other two through the contemplation of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self nature of all phenomena.

¹¹⁸ Peter Harvey comments: ‘interesting- I had thought that the advanced Bodhisattva fully experiences *Nirvāṇa* in life, but does not go beyond rebirths at death. This suggests more that he/she knows *Nirvāṇa* as an object of insight, much as a stream-enterer, once-returned or non-returned does, but holds off from full *Nirvāṇa* (as at Arhatship) until Buddhahood can be simultaneously attained (and in the mean time, more beings can be helped). Of course, in terms of the developed details of the *Bodhisattva* path in other Mahāyāna texts, the equivalent of stream-entry is the path of seeing, at the start of the 1st *bhūmi*- so maybe the 6th stage+, advanced Bodhisattva is most like the non-returned- still in *samsāra*, but without the lower fetters such as sense-desire and ill-will...? A kind of super-non-returned- cf the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* sees Buddhahood at attained in the highest of the pure abodes of the non-returned- see Harvey, 1990: 124 (supervisor’s comments).

¹¹⁹ Or one can say they are three aspects of a single state- cf *Majjhima Nikāya* I 297-98, too.

¹²⁰ The concept of non-duality has a rich and complex history in Mahāyāna traditions, stemming from the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature and philosophically systematised by Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka school. In brief, the tenets to which it refers are: all *dharma*s are without self-nature (*niḥsvabhāva*) or empty of self-nature (*svabhāvasūnya*); all *dharma*s are unarisen (*anutpanna*) and un-extinguished (*aniruddha*); all *dharma*s are originally calm and naturally in a *Nirvāṇa*-ised state (*prakṛtiparinirvṛta*); all *dharma*s are without marks (*alakṣaṇa*) and signs, and therefore ultimately inexpressible (*anirvacanīya*, *anabhilāpya*) and unthinkable (*acintya*); all *dharma*s are ultimately the same (*sama*) and non-dual (*advaya*). The non-duality of all *dharma*s is therefore the understanding of phenomena as not having an inherent own-nature through which we can distinguish them, devoid of characteristic, essential marks and signs. For further comments on the concept of non-duality, especially in the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*, see Lamotte’s Introduction in Boin, 1976: LXI-LXXIII.

¹²¹ Boin: 198 (ch. VIII, § 21).

The three gateways to liberation in the Heart Sūtra

In the *Heart Sūtra* (*Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra*)¹²² - considered by many as the epitome and quintessential expression of the perfection of wisdom thought - there are many implicit references to emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness as perfection of wisdom doors to liberation. The entire *Sūtra* is dedicated to exhorting us to penetrate with wisdom into the emptiness of all *dharmas*, which (following Vimalamitra's commentary)¹²³ are devoid of 'self-existence whether form be a mode-of-being (*bhāva*) or a designation (*prajñapti*)'¹²⁴, without reifying emptiness though as an external entity either, for emptiness is the antidote to all conceptual proliferation, 'the relinquishing of all views'¹²⁵. Being marked with emptiness¹²⁶, all phenomena are therefore signless too, their sign being a non-sign, their sign being emptiness of signs, their characteristic mark being the absence of differentiating marks. As a result of the emptiness and signlessness of all phenomena¹²⁷, 'there is no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path. There is no cognition, no attainment and no non-attainment'.¹²⁸ Practice is therefore wishless, the path is pathless: nothing to desire, nothing to seek and - ultimately - nothing to achieve. The *Sūtra* continues - indirectly summarising the three doors to liberation - by declaring: 'Therefore, O Sariputra, it is because of his non-attainmentness that a Bodhisattva, through having relied on the perfection of wisdom, dwells without thought-coverings. In the absence of thought-coverings he has not been made to tremble, he has overcome what can upset, and in the end he attains to Nirvana.'¹²⁹

This last verse appears to be an implicit review of the role of the three doors to liberation, which is to spring the mind forth into *Nirvāṇa* by: a) letting go of any wish and desire to attain anything, dwelling in the wisdom of no attainment or no non-attainment (wishlessness); b) directly seeing (relying on the perfection of wisdom, which stands for

¹²² Recent scholarship considers the *Heart Sūtra* as an apocryphal Chinese text that masterfully summarises the idea of the Perfection of Wisdom thought: 'Recently Jan Nattier [‘The Heart Sūtra: A Chinese Apocryphal Text?’, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 1992, Vol. 15, pp. 153-223] has argued with considerable plausibility that perhaps the most popular Mahāyāna *Prajñāpāramitā* text of all, the short *Heart (Hṛdaya) Sūtra*, was actually as a *sūtra* an apocryphal Chinese text abstracted and compiled from a Chinese translation of a much larger *Prajñāpāramitā* text. It may then have subsequently and successfully been introduced into India itself, probably by the Chinese pilgrim Hsüan-tsang and translated into Sanskrit’, Williams, 2000: 131-2.

¹²³ *Ārya-Prajñāpāramitā-ṭīkā*, T. T. Vol. 94: 280, quoted in Wayman, 1984: 316.

¹²⁴ Wayman, 1984: 316.

¹²⁵ Garfield, 1995: 36 (Ch. XIII of MMK). 'The victorious ones have said - That emptiness is the relinquishing of all views - For whomever emptiness is a view - That one will accomplish nothing' [also translated as 'is incurable'].

¹²⁶ 'Here, o Sariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness; they are not produced or stopped, not defiled or immaculate, not deficient or complete', Conze, 1958: 85. In Sanskrit: *Iha Śāriputra sarva-dharmāḥ śūnyatā-lakṣaṇā, anuṭpannā aniruddhā, amalā avimalā, anūnā aparipūrṇāḥ*.

¹²⁷ In the Mahāyāna, emptiness, the signless and wishless, previously associated with *Nirvāṇa* and states close to its realisation, are now seen as qualities of everything.

¹²⁸ Conze, 1958: 89. In Sanskrit, *na duḥkha-samudaya-nirodha-mārga. Na jñānam, na prāptir na-aprāptir*.

¹²⁹ Conze, 1958: 93. In Sanskrit: *Tasmāc Śāriputra aprāptitvād bodhisattvasya prajñāpāramitām āśritya viharaty acittāvaraṇaḥ cittāvaraṇa-nāstitvād atrasto viparyāsa-atikrānto nishṭhā-nirvāṇa-prāptaḥ*.

*śūnyatā*¹³⁰) the emptiness of all *dharmas*, their being void of independent existence and self-nature; c) overcoming any fear caused by mis-perceiving and mis-interpreting reality, having removed the delusory and misleading clouding of signs, those thought-coverings¹³¹ that are mainly perceptual and cognitive obstacles to realising the nature of things¹³², thus abiding in signlessness. Through emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness, all *bodhisattvas* will enter into *Nirvāṇa*, ‘the utmost, right and perfect enlightenment [*anuttāraṃ samyaksambodhim abhisambuddhāḥ*] because they have relied on the perfection of wisdom.’¹³³

Interestingly, our interpretation – according to Wayman’s research¹³⁴ – is somewhat supported by Asaṅga in the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī* of the *Samāhitabhūmi*¹³⁵ and in *Meeting of Father and son*¹³⁶, where he discusses emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness as three doors of liberation in relation to the *Heart Sūtra*. Wayman comments that the line referring to all *dharmas* as ‘not originated and not destroyed means the voidness gateway... not defiled and not pure means the non-sign-source [signless] gateway... without subtraction and without addition [translated by Conze as ‘not deficient or complete’¹³⁷] means the wishless gateway.’¹³⁸

¹³⁰ Conze, 1958: 94, comments on this very passage by stating that ‘the Perfection of Wisdom can, of course, be equated with Emptiness’.

¹³¹ Conze, 1958: 95, explains that thought-coverings (*citta-āvaraṇaḥ*) are – in the Buddhist tradition – three kinds of obstacles to spiritual development: practical (*karma-āvaraṇa*: unwholesome past deeds), moral (*kleśa-āvaraṇa*, impediments arising from the defilements, such as greed, hatred, delusion and so on) and cognitive (*jñeya-āvaraṇa*, ‘literally “the obstruction from what is cognizable”, which are the impediments arising from the belief in the real existence of separate objects.’). Conze points out that the term *citta-āvaraṇa* is very rare in the Scriptures, ‘and I assume it to be identical with the third kind of obstacles, the cognitive ones’, thus corroborating our interpretation that the *Sūtra* is chiefly preoccupied to discuss cognitive misperception of signs.

¹³² Conze, 1958: 97, translates the Sanskrit term ‘*viparyāsa*’ with ‘that can upset’ in the *Sūtra*, but also explains that it could be rendered with ‘perverted views.’ Interestingly, he justifies it by saying that ‘this does not affect the meaning, because we can never be upset by any fact, but only by our wrong interpretation of it... Traditionally there are four “perverted views”, which cover all attempts to seek, or to find, (1) permanence, (2) ease, (3) selfhood, and (4) delight, in that which is essentially (1) impermanent, (2) inseparable from suffering, (3) not linked to any self, and (4) repulsive or unlovely.’ Again, Conze’s reflections here seem to endorse our thesis of the *Sūtra* implicitly discussing signlessness as a door to liberation by removing (mis)perceptual and cognitive obstacles related to wrong apprehension of signs. This view is also confirmed by Wayman’s translation and analysis of *viparyāsa* as ‘waywardness’. ‘Waywardness means taking the impermanent as permanent, pain as pleasure, nonself as self, and the impure as pure. There are three stages of waywardness, of wit, of ideas (*saṃjñā*), then of views (*dr̥ṣṭi*) attached to the ideas, and finally of consciousness (*citta*) with secondary defilements going with the view attachment. Since the Bodhisattva does not have thought-obscuration (*cittā-āvaraṇa*) he cannot have the last stage of waywardness, that of consciousness (*citta*); and the sūtra intends this to mean the Bodhisattva has transcended waywardness’, in Wayman, 1984: 322-3.

¹³³ Conze, 1958: 98.

¹³⁴ Wayman, 1984: 318-9.

¹³⁵ T. T. Vol. 111: 11d, quoted in Wayman, 1984: 319.

¹³⁶ T.T. Vol. 23: 201b, c, quoted in Wayman, 1984: 319.

¹³⁷ Conze, 1958:85.

¹³⁸ Wayman, 1984: 319.

The three gateways to liberation in the *Diamond Sūtra*

Other implicit references to emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness as doors into *Nirvāṇa* are made in the *Diamond Sūtra* (*Vajracchedikā Sūtra*) - another highly influential text belonging to the Perfection of Wisdom tradition¹³⁹. At the beginning of the *Sūtra*¹⁴⁰, the Buddha outlines to Subhuti the *Bodhisattva* path (the path leading to complete and perfect emancipation of all beings), which combines arousing the aspiration¹⁴¹ to save all conceivable sentient beings by leading them to *Nirvāṇa* and the wisdom that - ultimately - there are no beings to be saved¹⁴², because all beings (and all phenomena too) are empty of inherent essence, devoid of self-nature, empty of permanent existence. Penetrating with perfect wisdom the nature of emptiness is therefore a door to liberating all beings, a door into *Nirvāṇa*.

Moreover, the Buddha continues - in the same verse - by explaining that a *Bodhisattva* is such if he holds no notion of marks and signs (*lakṣaṇa* - a mark of characteristic - so very close to *nimitta* in meaning), especially of signs of self, human beings, sentient beings or soul¹⁴³. The path to liberation is a signless path, by avoiding to become embroiled in delusory perceptions, cognitions and thoughts of *dharmas* as being marked by characteristic signs (of which they are also empty, as stated earlier). Master Hsing Yun, in his commentary to the *Diamond Sūtra*, points out that *lakṣaṇa* is the most commonly used term in the *Sūtra*, 'the single most important word in the *Diamond Sūtra*,¹⁴⁴ emphasising that a vast portion of the text is dedicated to illuminating the pernicious and delusory habit of attributing a *lakṣaṇa* to all *dharmas*, which falsely makes them to look permanent and endowed with independent nature, thus perpetuating ignorance and clinging¹⁴⁵.

As for wishlessness, section four of the *Diamond Sūtra* reiterates the importance for a *Bodhisattva* of practising generosity (*dāna pāramitā*)¹⁴⁶ 'in such a way that he is not supported

¹³⁹ The *Vajracchedikā Sūtra* is a famous and highly regarded summary of the *Prajñāpāramitā* thought. There is some disagreement amongst scholars with regards to its dating. 'The issue must be left open, but at the moment there is reasonable possibility that the *Vajracchedikā* is some form or another dates from a very early phase of *Prajñāpāramitā* literary activity', Williams, 1989:42

¹⁴⁰ Vc. sec. 3. 'And yet, although innumerable beings have thus being led to Nirvana, no being at all has been led to Nirvana', Conze, 1958: 25.

¹⁴¹ This alludes to generating the 'arising of the thought' - *cittotpāda* - of Enlightenment, which marks the beginning of a *Bodhisattva*'s career', Conze, 1958: 25.

¹⁴² 'In his [the *Bodhisattva*'s] wisdom (*prajñā*), he knows that there are no "beings", just fluxes of empty "dharmas", but his "skilful means" enables him to reconcile this wisdom with his compassion (*karuṇā*). This urges him to work for the salvation of all beings, for such empty fluxes do experience "themselves" as "suffering beings" (Vc. sec. 3)', Harvey, 1990: 121.

¹⁴³ 'And why is this? Subhuti, if a *bodhisattva* has lakshana of self, lakshana of human beings, lakshana of sentient beings, or lakshana of a soul, then he is not a *bodhisattva*', Yun, 2001: 47.

¹⁴⁴ Yun, 2001: 49.

¹⁴⁵ Peter Harvey rightly comments: 'even though the pre-Mahāyāna *Abhidharmas* clearly saw *dharmas* as having *lakṣaṇas*, but as (apart from *Nirvāṇa*), being impermanent and dependent!'

¹⁴⁶ However, 'many commentators on the *Diamond Sūtra* have pointed out that for the sake of brevity, the Buddha used generosity to represent all the paramitas', Yun, 2001: 55.

by the notion of any sign [*nimitta*]¹⁴⁷ (another implicit reference to signlessness as a door to liberation), for this unsupported practice reveals ‘the attitude which, in the practice of virtue, ignores all “things” and “signs”, [and] can be described as completely disinterested¹⁴⁸, wishless, undirected, without any desire to achieve merits and rewards from his wholesome deeds. This section is therefore concerned with admonishing the practitioners ‘to be and act wholly without mental attachments of any kind¹⁴⁹, ‘without expecting anything is return¹⁵⁰, hence without aiming at anything, as there is nothing to attain, not even complete enlightenment.¹⁵¹

The three gateways to liberation in other Mahāyāna sources

Emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness are cited in a number of other Mahāyāna *Sūtras*. For instance, in the *Kāśyapaparivarta* it is said that ‘phenomena are not made empty by emptiness; phenomena themselves are empty. Phenomena are not made signless by signlessness; phenomena themselves are signless. Phenomena are not made wishless by wishlessness; phenomena themselves are wishless¹⁵². The individual knowledge of those, Kāśyapa, is the middle path, the correct individual knowledge of phenomena.’¹⁵³

The *Āryarāṣṭrapālapariṣcchā* says that ‘transmigrators wander because they do not understand emptiness, peace and non-production. The Compassionate One guides them with method and with hundreds of reasonings¹⁵⁴. Lopez explains that a Tibetan commentator associates this stanza with the concept of the three doors to liberation, insofar as emptiness refers to the classic Mahāyāna idea of the lack of substantiality of all phenomena; peace is *Nirvāṇa* as signless, ‘which is the emptiness of a truly existent cause’¹⁵⁵ (interestingly, an explanation close to Vasubandhu’s association in the *Abhidharma-kośa* between signlessness and the four aspects of the second Noble Truth, as seen previously in this chapter); wishlessness ‘means that effects lack truly existent production’¹⁵⁶ (which can be seen as the Mahāyāna idea of the pathless path because phenomena are inherently empty). The Buddha, using his unsurpassed teaching skills by employing a variety of methods and ways, causes beings to enter the three doors of liberation.

¹⁴⁷ Conze, 1958: 26.

¹⁴⁸ Conze, 1958: 27.

¹⁴⁹ Yun, 2001: 54.

¹⁵⁰ Yun, 2001: 54.

¹⁵¹ See Vc. sec. 7.

¹⁵² I would agree with Peter Harvey’s comment here: ‘what might it be for a phenomenon to be ‘wishless’? For many, it might be that they have no inbuilt direction or purpose; for things such as wishing, aspiration, resolve... it is perhaps because they are empty of these as an inherent nature’.

¹⁵³ Quoted in Lopez, 1987: 90 and explained in note 66 on p. 207: ‘cited by Gung-thang dKon-mchog-bstan-pa’i-sgron-me in his *rNam thar sgo gsum gyi rnam par bzagh pa legs bshad rgya mtsho rba rlabs* (Sarnath: Pleasure of Elegant Sayings Press, 1964), p. 2.

¹⁵⁴ Quoted in Lopez, 1987: 90.

¹⁵⁵ Lopez, 1987: 90.

¹⁵⁶ Lopez, 1987: 90.

There are two more interpretations of the three *samādhis* as doors to liberation in the eighteenth chapter of the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*¹⁵⁷. In the first, it is said that ‘the objects of the three *samādhis* are the two selflessnesses, the basis which is viewed as a self, and the eternal pacification of that’¹⁵⁸; Lopez comments by relating the *samādhi* of emptiness with the realization of the not-Self nature of persons and phenomena (i.e. persons and the *dharmas* composing them are empty of Self, and the *dharmas* are empty of self-nature/essence), the *samādhi* of wishlessness (interestingly the order in which they are discussed is different here: emptiness, wishlessness and signlessness) with viewing the five *skandhas* as not worth clinging to as they are faulty, and the *samādhi* of signlessness with the vision of *Nirvāṇa* as utter pacification of the *skandhas*. The second passage aligns the three *samādhis* as doors to liberation with the specifically Mahāyāna concept of the four *dharma* seals¹⁵⁹, taking the latter as the cause of the former by stating: ‘It is explained to *Bodhisattvas* that the fourfold summary of the doctrine is a cause of the three *samādhis*.’¹⁶⁰ According to Vasubandhu’s commentary on this stanza, impermanence and unsatisfactoriness of all phenomena are the cause of the *apraṇihita samādhi*, probably because insight into these two *dharma* seals prompts the mind to let go of anything as not worth clinging to, being constantly changing and incapable of producing permanent happiness; seeing all phenomena as empty of Self is clearly and logically the cause of the *sūnyatā samādhi*; the fourth seal, *Nirvāṇa*, is that which is peaceful, is the cause of the *ānimitta samādhi*, possibly due to the lack of signs pertaining to the Unconditioned.

A further interpretation, similar to the previous one related to the sixteen aspects of the four truths discussed by Vasubandhu in the *Abhidharmakośa*, is presented by the Indian philosopher Haribhadra in the *Sphuṭārtha*, where the three *samādhis* are doors to liberation because they act – respectively – as antidotes to: the view of self (*sūnyatā samādhi*, realising with wisdom the emptiness and selflessness, the first two aspects of the first noble truth); the misconception of signs that creates the view of self (*ānimitta samādhi*, which has as its object the eight aspects of the third and fourth truth); the wish for attainment in the realm of *Śaṃsāra* (*apraṇihita samādhi*, which realizes impermanence and unsatisfactoriness – the two remaining aspects of the first noble truth- and the four aspects of true origin – the second noble truth).

Asaṅga provides a couple of different interpretations of the three doors to liberation in two texts: the *Mahāyānasamgraha*, in which he associates¹⁶¹ emptiness, wishlessness and signlessness to the Yogācāra concept of the three natures (*trisvabhāva*): constructed or conceptualised aspect (*parikalpitasvabhāva*), dependent aspect

¹⁵⁷ ‘The Ornament of the Mahāyāna Sūtras’, an extensive overview of Mahāyāna teachings attributed by the Chinese or Tibetan tradition to ‘Maitreya’, in the sense that the celestial *Bodhisattva* Maitreya inspired Asaṅga – in our case – to write it.

¹⁵⁸ P 5521, Vol. 108, 16.2.8 (*Tibetan Tripitaka*, Tokyo-Kyoto: Tibetan Tripitaka Research Foundation, 1956), as quoted in Lopez, 1987: 91 (referred to in note 69 on page 207).

¹⁵⁹ *Anitya* (impermanence), *duḥkha* (unsatisfactoriness), *anātman* (not-self) and *Nirvāṇa*.

¹⁶⁰ P 5521, Vol. 108, 16.3.1-2, as quoted in Lopez, 1987: 91 (referred to in note 71 on page 207).

¹⁶¹ See Lopez, 1987: 92.

(*paratantrasvabhāva*) and perfected aspect (*pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*)¹⁶²; the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, in which all three doors are related to the inexpressible nature of reality (*nirabhilapyasvabhāva*): the *samādhi* of emptiness sees the inexpressibility of things, the *samādhi* of aimlessness sees how mistakenly attributing value and attachment to things creates suffering, and the *samādhi* of signlessness removing all conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*) with regards to the inexpressible nature of reality.

Lastly, Atīśa (an Indian monk and scholar of the eleventh century, invited to Tibet on a missionary tour) discusses the three doors to liberation in his commentary to the *Heart Sūtra*¹⁶³ by: identifying the emptiness gateway with the negation of any inherently substantial nature in all phenomena; linking the signless gateway with the negation of the inherent existence of causes - as *nimitta* can mean either 'sign' or 'cause' (making phenomena 'unproduced' and 'unceasing'); associating the wishlessness gateway with the negation of inherent existence of effects (making phenomena 'undiminished' and 'undefiled'). Again, the three doors of liberation are chiefly antidotes to reification and attachment.

Finally, there is a brief mention of the three doors to liberation in the *Lotus Sūtra*, where the monks, lamenting not having attained *Nirvāṇa* despite their efforts in practice, say: 'Hence, O Lord, we are unable, in spite of the Lord's preaching, to realise the fact that all is vanity (or void), purposeless (or causeless, or unconditioned), and unfixed (*Sūnyatānimittāpraṇihitaṃ sarvaṃ*)'.¹⁶⁴ In this brief line, the three gateways to liberation are mentioned together as a lofty teaching by the Buddha leading to *Nirvāṇa*.¹⁶⁵

From our overview of the previous Mahāyāna sources, it seems evident that the three doors to liberation, albeit mentioned frequently by various authors of different schools, are not univocally and unambiguously analysed, as 'there is little consensus concerning their order, much less their meaning.'¹⁶⁶ However, it appears nonetheless clear that they are important teachings related to the completion of the path by seeing into the nature of the four noble truths and the four *dharma* seals, which allows the mind to break through into *Nirvāṇa*.

¹⁶² See Williams, 1989: 82-85.

¹⁶³ P 5222, Vol. 94, 299.1.1-4.

¹⁶⁴ Kern (translated by), 1974: 98-99.

¹⁶⁵ Wawrytko, 2000: 83-6, discusses the three gates to liberation in relation to different parts of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Chapters 1-14 refer to the 'branch gate: signless/animitta', that which leads beyond 'the dualisms and limitations imposed by perception and conception... passing through this gate, we leave signs behind and enter into wisdom (*prajñā*)'; chapters 15-27 are dedicated to 'the root gate: emptiness/*sūnyatā*... entering this gate brings a recognition that no independent existence is possible, only relational, interdependent existence'; chapter 28 is 'closure (gate of no gate): aimlessness/*appañihita* ... beyond the limitations of language and logic (exorcized by the awakening to Signlessness) and the snares of ego (annihilated by the awakening to Emptiness), full liberation comes with the realization that there is nothing to "get" and nowhere to "go." PRACTICE now becomes possible in the fullest sense'.

¹⁶⁶ Lopez, 1987: 92.

3. The Three Gateways to Liberation reinterpreted in East Asian Buddhism: Japanese Sōtō Zen

The three gateways to liberation in Japanese Sōtō Zen: Dōgen Zenji

‘The notions of the three gateways to liberation¹⁶⁷... are radically transformed and thoroughly embedded in East Asian Buddhism. So Zen is no exception. In Dōgen’s Zen, they are uniquely recast so as to offer a great potential for religio-philosophical reflections.’¹⁶⁸ Dōgen Zenji – considered the founder¹⁶⁹ of the Japanese Sōtō Zen school in the thirteen century – can be seen as reformulating (albeit implicitly) the concepts of the three doors to liberation in a more hermeneutical and theological fashion through a unique reinterpretation of liberation as the unity of emancipation, realization and practice¹⁷⁰ - the oneness of practice and enlightenment/authentication (*shushō ittō* or *shushō ichi-nyo*)¹⁷¹, based on Dōgen’s renewed understanding of the doctrine of Buddha-nature.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ 三解脱門 (*san-gedatsu-mon*): 空 (*kū* - emptiness), 無相 (*musō* - signlessness) and 無作 (*musa* - wishlessness/purposelessness). See Soothill and Hodous, <http://www.acmuller.net/soothill/soothill-hodous.html>, pp. 57, 59, 74 and 76.

¹⁶⁸ Hee-Jin Kim, 25.02.09, in a personal email correspondence on the topic.

¹⁶⁹ Although Dōgen insisted in his writings that he ‘emphatically repudiated any sectarian allegiance’ (De Bary, 1972: 361, note 1) with any so-called Zen school, as he considered himself a representative of the original *Buddha-dharma*, as taught by Śākyamuni Buddha. ‘Dōgen’s intention was not to establish any particular sect or school of Buddhism or Zen but to disseminate what he called the “rightly transmitted *Buddha-dharma* (*shōden no buppō*), which transcended all sectarian divisions and divisiveness... it [the rightly transmitted *Buddha-dharma*] was the symbolic expression of the spirit of Śākyamuni the Buddha’, Kim, 2004: 52.

¹⁷⁰ ‘Enlightenment as actualization of buddha nature through practice is Dōgen’s fundamental teaching... But understanding is not the final goal; continuous everyday practice is the ultimate goal... This is the practice of nonattachment, freedom from any aim, including “enlightenment”... Dōgen calls this practice of nonattachment “emancipation” – Japanese *tōdatsu* – which means a fish slipping out of the net. This aspect of teaching is usually associated with “letting go,” “dropping away,” or “abandoning...” “Realization,” “actualization,” or “actualizing” – Japanese *genjō*, which means coming forth and completing – is another aspect of the same teaching. Though the feeling of dropping away is quite different from that of coming forth, the two movements are inseparable. Once a person is entirely free from attachment he experiences all things without any preconceptions. This experience is itself realization. Dōgen says: “The great way of all buddhas, thoroughly practiced, is emancipation and realization”, in Tanahashi, 1985: 18-9.

¹⁷¹ ‘To think that practice and enlightenment are not identical is a non-Buddhist view. In the Buddha-Dharma, practice and realization are one [*shushō kore ittō nari*]’, Cook’s translation of Dōgen’s *Bendōwa*, in Cook, 1983: 17.

¹⁷² ‘The teaching of the oneness of practice and realization was for Dōgen a logical and religious consequence of his radicalization of the doctrine of Buddha-nature’, Cook, 1983: 22.

In order to elucidate the significance of three doors to liberation in Dōgen's thought, it seems appropriate to focus¹⁷³ on his ground-breaking interpretation of *zazen shikantaza* (just sitting 'seated meditation')¹⁷⁴, 'zazen-only, as the mythic-cultic archetype, [which for Dōgen] symbolized the totality of the self and the world and represented that in which Buddha-nature became embodied'¹⁷⁵, epitomising 'the whole body of his [Dōgen's] religio-philosophical and cultic-moral visions and enactments.'¹⁷⁶ *Zazen shikantaza* is 'the essence and prototype of Buddhist *cultus* as well as well as *mythos*, and the crystallization of practice and enlightenment.'¹⁷⁷

In the *Fukanzazengi*¹⁷⁸ - Dōgen's first work and a sort of manifesto/meditation manual (which is, however, not merely a manual of techniques of meditation, but 'more conspicuously, a theological statement of the Zen approach to Buddhism'¹⁷⁹) -, *zazen shikantaza* is presented as the quintessential Zen practice: 'Zazen is not the practice of *dhyāna* [*shūzen*]¹⁸⁰: it is just the Dharma gate of ease and joy¹⁸¹. It is the practice and verification of ultimate bodhi [*gūjin bodai shi shushō*].'¹⁸² And how is *zazen shikantaza* practised? After a brief description of the physical posture in which to sit and the suitable external and internal conditions, Dōgen reaches the climax by stating the mental attitude that characterises *zazen shikantaza*: 'sitting fixedly, think [*shiryō*] of not thinking [*fushiryō*]. How do you think of not thinking? Nonthinking [*hishiryō*]. This is the essential art of zazen.'¹⁸³

¹⁷³ This dissertation acknowledges the impossibility to do justice to Dōgen's 'rare combination of religious insight and philosophical ability' (Abe, 1971: 29) coupled with extraordinary poetic sensibility; therefore, it seems fitting to limit my analysis to only one aspect of his reflections, which I think is strongly representative of his implicit thought on the three doors to liberation: *zazen shikantaza*.

¹⁷⁴ 'Zazen is not seen as a "method" to "attain" enlightenment, but is itself enlightenment, a way of simply exhibiting one's innate Buddha-nature... A person must sit in *zazen* with constant awareness, and with faith that he is already a Buddha. The process is one of self-forgetting in which the Buddha-nature gradually unfolds its infinite potential throughout one's life. As an aid to this, physical, mental, moral and intellectual discipline provide a fitting framework for a life of selfless action', Harvey, 1990: 166.

¹⁷⁵ Kim, 2004: 37.

¹⁷⁶ Kim, 2004: 58.

¹⁷⁷ Kim, 2004: 39.

¹⁷⁸ The same instructions are also found in the *Zazengi* (Principles of Zazen), Book 11 of the *Shōbōgenzō*, see <http://hcbss.stanford.edu/research/projects/sztp/translations/shobogenzo/translations/zazengi/pdf/Zazengi%20translation.pdf>.

¹⁷⁹ Bielefeldt, 1988: 109.

¹⁸⁰ Dōgen is here criticising the use of meditation only as a quietist practice to attain trance.

¹⁸¹ This is interesting and quite 'ironic- as *jhāna/dhyāna* is often described as a way of ease and joy in the Pali *Suttas*!' (Harvey, supervisor). It could also be a reference to early Theravāda tradition, in Dōgen's effort to re-connect with original materials, albeit reinterpreted in his peculiar fashion - with a 'zen spin' on it.

¹⁸² Bielefeldt's translation, in Maezumi and Glassman, 2002: 14. Alternative translations of this passage are: 'Zazen is not learning to do concentration. It is the dharma gate of great ease and joy. It is undefiled practice-enlightenment', Tanahashi, 1985: 30; and 'The zazen I speak of is not learning meditation. It is simply the Dharma-gate of repose and bliss, the cultivation-authentication of totally culminated enlightenment', Kasulis, 1985: 71.

¹⁸³ Bielefeldt's translation, in Maezumi and Glassman, 2002: 14. Alternative translations are: 'Sit solidly in *samādhi* and think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Nonthinking. This is the art of zazen', Tanahashi, 1985: 30; and 'settle into a steady, immobile sitting position. Think of not thinking. How do you think of not thinking? Without thinking. This in itself is the essential art of zazen', Kasulis, 1985: 71.

Following Kasulis's phenomenological analysis¹⁸⁴, thinking (*shiryō*) can be equated to any positional noetic attitude, which in Buddhism terminology could be seen in terms of the *arūpa skandhas*: perception (*saṃjñā/saññā*), feeling (*vedanā*), constructing activities (*saṃskāra/saṅkhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāna/viññāṇa*); not thinking (*fushiryō*) would be a positional noetic attitude of negation of all mental acts, 'the will to stop the buzz of mental activity.'¹⁸⁵ More problematic is to fathom what Dōgen means by nonthinking (*hishiryō*), which might perhaps be initially understood as 'the unhabituating and continuous total awareness – the undimmed and non-verbal at-one-ness with experience'¹⁸⁶, or as 'pre-reflective experience known by accompanying open mindfulness.'¹⁸⁷

It is Hee-Jin Kim, in his seminal *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist*¹⁸⁸, who seems better poised to shed light on the possible meaning and significance of nonthinking, with its implicit, yet remarkable links with the three doors to liberation. Citing Dōgen's *Zazenshin*¹⁸⁹, Hee-Jin Kim interprets nonthinking as not only the transcending of thinking and not-thinking, but more importantly as the dynamic process of realising both in the act of resolute sitting in *zazen*. That is, nonthinking is not only beyond thinking and not-thinking, but it is also and nonetheless a form, 'a very special form of thinking beyond thinking and not-thinking, that is, thinking of not-thinking.'¹⁹⁰ Therefore, 'nonthinking was used [by Dōgen] not transcendentally so much as realizationally; it was objectless, subjectless, formless, goalless and purposeless.'¹⁹¹ This interpretation (nonthinking as objectless¹⁹², subjectless, formless, goalless and purposeless)¹⁹³ highlights a noteworthy connection

¹⁸⁴ Kasulis, 1985: 70-77.

¹⁸⁵ Harvey, 2008b: section 2.

¹⁸⁶ Becker, 1984: 278.

¹⁸⁷ Harvey, 2008b: section 2. I would agree with Harvey here vs. Kasulis in connecting nonthinking to mindfulness (*sati*), which enables to see clearly things as they are or as they 'presence' themselves, rather than as simply a pre-thinking state without mindfulness.

¹⁸⁸ Kim, 2004: 58-67.

¹⁸⁹ *Lancet of Zazen*, translated by Bielefeldt, <http://hcbss.stanford.edu/research/projects/sztp/translations/shobogenzo/translations/zazenshin/zazenshin.translation.html>. 'Once, when the Great Master Hongdao of Yueshan was sitting [in meditation], a monk asked him, "What are you thinking of, [sitting there] so fixedly?" The master answered, "I'm thinking of not thinking."

The monk asked, "How do you think of not thinking?" The Master answered, "Nonthinking."

¹⁹⁰ Kim, 2004: 62. This is not intended in the normal sense of 'think of not thinking', i.e. the hopelessly self-defeating attempt to make the mind go blank, but possibly more as the idea of 'relinquishing of both, perhaps in the sense of a mental state imbued with the spirit of not falling into either of them' (Harvey, supervisor).

¹⁹¹ Kim, 2004: 62-3.

¹⁹² Or becoming totally objectless after having allowed a series of objects to arise and pass away, without focusing on them.

¹⁹³ Kim (2004) further elucidates his interpretation of *hishiryō* (nonthinking) when he explains how 'ultimately, there was nothing but the *act* [italics mine] of resolute sitting in meditation' (p. 62); nonthinking is not a way to mystically transcend thinking and not-thinking (and with them, reason and intellect). 'but to realize both, in the absolutely simple and singular act of resolute sitting itself' (p. 62). When he speaks of nonthinking as 'a very special form of thinking and not-thinking, that is, thinking of not-thinking' (p. 62), I understand 'the form' as referring to the resolute *act* of sitting *zazen*-only, which is at once a creative activity (*gyōji*) and an expression (*dōtoku*) of the awakened state, 'the unfolding enactment of original enlightenment' (p. 68). The emphasis of his interpretation of nonthinking seems to me to be on the *action and ritual* of resolute sitting without any object of meditation on which to concentrate or to investigate with insight. In this way, it seems close to simply being choicelessly aware of what arises in its immediacy, without reacting for or

between three elements: *zazen shikantaza*; nonthinking as its quintessential art; and the gateways to liberation - emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness.

‘Thinking and not-thinking are said to be realized through [insight into] emptiness [and being in a state that is empty of thought]¹⁹⁴, and nonthinking is said to be right thought (*shōshiyui* or *shōshiryō*)¹⁹⁵. Thus emptiness, nonthinking, and right thought were interchangeably used by Dōgen.’¹⁹⁶ Nonthinking is not the experience of annihilation of thought in either a mystical union or in a pantheistic apprehension of the self and the world. Nonthinking is the dynamic and insight-filled (*prajñā*) realization of emptiness, the process of directly being present to reality as it manifests itself in its insubstantiality, groundlessness and constant change and flow. ‘Without-thinking [nonthinking, *hishiryō*] is emptiness... In that *kū* [emptiness] transcends the distinction between subject and object and being and nothingness, to say that without-thinking [nonthinking] is “crystal clear” [as Dōgen does in “Zazenshin”] is justified.’¹⁹⁷ Sitting in *zazen shikantaza*, ‘dropping off mind and body’ (*shinjindatsuraku*)¹⁹⁸, the experience of emptiness (*kū*) arises: the realising of Buddha-nature (*busshō*) as impermanence (*mujiō*)¹⁹⁹ – the knowing of the ‘thusly-changing-reality-flow,’²⁰⁰ the open witnessing of reality-as-it-is, the never-ending and continuous process of the mind being ‘ever vigilant, deconceptualizing and deontologizing them [the delusory dualities] as circumstances demand, and thereby attaining a state of spiritual freedom and purity.’²⁰¹ Therefore, *zazen shikantaza* enables the opening of the emptiness door to liberation: the paradox (*kōan*) of the ceaseless becoming directly and experientially aware of the presencing (*genjō*)²⁰² of reality in its emptiness and impermanence.

against it and without any deliberate insightful probing into its nature, although the emphasis seems to be more on the action rather than the mental intention of mindful awareness.

¹⁹⁴ *Shōbōgenzō*, “Kokū”, in Kim, 2004, note 53, p. 270.

¹⁹⁵ *Shōbōgenzō*, “Sanjūshichihon-bodaibumpō”, in Kim, 2004, note 53, p. 270.

¹⁹⁶ Kim, 2004: 63.

¹⁹⁷ Terada Tōru and Mizuno Yaoko, *Dōgen*, Vol. I, p. 128 (in Japanese), cited in Kasulis, 1985: 72 (see also note 10, p. 158).

¹⁹⁸ ‘To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly’, *Genjō Kōan*, in Tanahashi, 1985: 70.

¹⁹⁹ Dōgen reinterprets Buddha-nature as impermanence against a perilously substantialising view held by a strand of Chinese Buddhism, especially based on the *Awakening of Faith* text (see Williams, 1989: 109-112). Dōgen re-reads the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* from ‘all beings have [italics mine] Buddha nature’ to ‘all beings are [italics mine] (all being is) Buddha nature’ (Williams, 1989: 114). Moreover, he equates Buddha-nature with impermanence: ‘for Dōgen the world of phenomena really and quite literally is the Buddha-nature’ (Williams, 1989: 114). Impermanence, though, is not to be interpreted metaphysically, as it is not a substance, a being or the ground of reality. ‘To avoid man’s natural tendency to objectify and to substantialize everything... Dōgen often emphasises the idea of *mubusshō*, no Buddha-nature’ (Abe, 1971: 46), thus highlighting once more its insubstantiality and groundlessness. (Of course his equating of the impermanent world with the ‘Buddha-nature’ is an echo of the Madhyamaka idea of the non-difference of *Samāsāra* and *Nirvāṇa*).

²⁰⁰ Harvey, 2008b: section 3.

²⁰¹ Kim, 2004: 64.

²⁰² In the verbal sense. See Kasulis, 1985: 83-4.

If nonthinking as ‘objectless [and] subjectless’²⁰³ reveals the connection with the emptiness (空 - *kū*) door to liberation, its nature of being ‘formless’²⁰⁴ alludes to the other door to liberation: signlessness (無相 - *musō*). In the *Fukanzezeṅgi*, Dōgen reiterates the injunction to stop any intellectual pursuits, to halt any thinking of good or evil (i.e. of any liked and disliked and of any deliberately good or evil actions (*puṇya* and *apuṇya*)), to cease any thoughts, ideas and perceptions, so as to allow the mind to naturally abide in its original purity and formless nature – its ‘original face’.²⁰⁵ Similarly, in the *Zazengi* fascicle of the *Shōbōgenzō*, it is said that *zazen* ‘is not’²⁰⁶ mind, intellect or consciousness [*shin i shiki*, whose Sanskrit equivalent would be *citta*, *manas* and *vijñāna*]; it is not thoughts, ideas or perceptions [*nen sō kan*]²⁰⁷.

The first definition (*zazen* is not mind, intellect or consciousness) refers to the equivalent notion of thought (*nen*) regularly used in Zen texts, whilst the second expression (it is not thoughts, ideas or perceptions) – as Bielefeldt points out in the notes to his translation – ‘is rather less common and somewhat ambiguous: it likely refers here to discriminative cognition (*vikalpa*), but it can also represent various Buddhist contemplative exercises’²⁰⁸. This last comment is particularly interesting, as it may hint at the classic Buddhist *śamatha/samatha* practice of working with *nimittas*, where the mind is stilled and calmed through concentrating onto a suitable meditation object²⁰⁹, working through a series of signs: an initial or preparatory sign (*parikamma-nimitta*), an acquired sign (*uggaha-nimitta*), then its counterpart sign (*paṭibhāga-nimitta*), which is concomitant with the attainment of access concentration (*upacāra-samādhi*), the step prior to entering full absorption (*appanā samādhi*) or *jhāna/dhyāna*.²¹⁰ Dōgen seems to wish to emphasise again how *zazen* is not a concentration exercise based on forms or objects of any sort (‘*Zazen* is not the practice of *dhyāna*: it is just the Dharma gate of ease and joy’²¹¹), but it is the formless yet dynamic resting of the mind in its no-thought state, which is the original non-abiding nature of the mind: ‘serenely free-flowing, innocent and direct, not encumbered with thought-forms’,²¹² not chasing after or attaching to (or even calmly focusing on) any delusory marks.

The theme of formless abiding in ‘no-thought’ is clearly an echo of ‘classical Ch’an doctrine: true meditation practice is simply nonattachment to sense objects and nonproduction of deluded thoughts, and this in itself is the enlightened state.’²¹³ Dōgen re-

²⁰³ Kim, 2004: 63.

²⁰⁴ Kim, 2004: 63 (Not ‘formless’ in the sense of *arūpa*).

²⁰⁵ Maezumi and Glassman, 2002: 13.

²⁰⁶ ‘He is presumably talking about some state that sustained *zazen* brings about (or, in non-goal language, what true *zazen* is about!’ (Harvey, supervisor).

²⁰⁷ Bielefeldt, *Principles of Zazen*, translation.

²⁰⁸ Bielefeldt, *Principles of Zazen*, note 3.

²⁰⁹ For the classic Theravāda list of the forty meditation objects, see Gethin, 1998: 178 (table 4).

²¹⁰ For a more detailed analysis, see Gethin, 1998: 176-86.

²¹¹ Maezumi and Glassman, 2002: 14.

²¹² Harvey, 1990: 272.

²¹³ Bielefeldt, 1988: 146.

interprets the Sixth Patriarch's²¹⁴ concept of 'no-thought' (*wu-nien, mu-nen*) as nonthinking (*hishiryō*), which is 'the ultimate thinking'²¹⁵: the constant and dynamic practice and realization of Awakening. Hence the reason why - during *zazen* sitting - one is discouraged from dwelling on mental images that may arise (*makyō*)²¹⁶, as *zazen shikantaza* is instead characterised by 'no-thought' (Ch: *Wu-nien*, Jp: *munen*), 'no-form' (Ch: *wu-hsiang*, Jp: *musō*) and 'non-abiding' (Ch: *wu-chu*, Jp: *mujū*), in line with its Ch'an predecessors.²¹⁷

Signlessness is therefore a gateway to liberation: practising and realising the formlessness of Awakening. As Dōgen says in the *Genjō Kōan*:

To study the the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. *No trace* of realization remains, and this *no trace* continues endlessly [italics mine].²¹⁸

Lastly, nonthinking as 'goalless, and purposeless'²¹⁹ suggests its connection with the third door to liberation: wishlessness/purposelessness (無所得 - *mushotoku*). In both the *Fukanzeengi* and the *Zazengi*, Dōgen clearly states that *zazen shikantaza* is not desiring or figuring out how to become Buddha, i.e. it is not a technique utilised instrumentally to achieve any special state of mind, not even enlightenment. 'Do not intend to make a Buddha'²²⁰ it is said in both texts, as *zazen* 'is not merely a utilitarian device for producing a perfected state of enlightenment (*sabutsu*) but the expression of a more fundamental perfection inherent in all things (*gyōbutsu*)... the actualization of the ultimate truth (*genjō kōan*).'²²¹ Not figuring to make a Buddha patently alludes to the famous *kōan* known as 'Nanyue polishes a tile'²²², in which Master Nanyue questions Daji (Ma-tsu) on what he is doing by sitting in meditation. To Daji's reply of 'figuring to make a Buddha', Nanyue picks up a tile and begins polishing it in order to make a mirror, engendering Daji's disconcerted puzzlement, whilst admonishing him that sitting in meditation cannot produce a Buddha, as Buddha nature is inherent and unconstructed, beyond cause and effect. Dōgen reiterates here (and in the *Shōbōgenzō* fascicle called *Zazen shin*, too)²²³ how Zen religious practice must be 'beyond the machinations of the deluded mind of the practitioner: it must be, as he says, "the practice of an embodied Buddha that does not make a Buddha"²²⁴, the religious

²¹⁴ Enō in Japanese, Hui-neng in Chinese.

²¹⁵ Bielefeldt, 1988: 149.

²¹⁶ See Harvey, 2007c, section 6.

²¹⁷ Kasulis, 1985: 43. These three are Enō's technical terms.

²¹⁸ Tanahashi, 1985: 70. An alternative translation of the last line recites: 'No sign of enlightenment can be found and this signlessness presents itself continuously', Yasuda and Anzan, <http://www.wwzc.org/translations/genjokoan.htm>.

²¹⁹ Kim, 2004: 63.

²²⁰ Maezumi and Glassman, 2002: 14.

²²¹ Bielefeldt, 1988: 140.

²²² For the complete case and discussion, see Bielefeldt, 1988: 141-3.

²²³ See Bielefeldt's translation: *Lancet of Zazen* from the Stanford *Sōtō Zen Project* cited in the bibliography.

²²⁴ Bielefeldt, 1988: 145.

attitude of actualising one's inherent Buddha nature through practice and verification in an ongoing pure and undefiled commitment.

The attitude of practising *mushotoku*, without any wish, purpose and idea of gain or profit, is also recommended by Dōgen in several passages of his *Gakudō Yōjin-Shū* (*Guidelines for Studying the Way*), where he reminds his Zen students to be like the ancient sages, having 'no distorted thought of fame and profit, not even attached to dharma [here meaning enlightenment]²²⁵, practising neither for one's own sake, nor 'for name and gain', or 'to attain blissful reward', not even 'with the thought that it is to benefit others', but 'practise buddha-dharma solely for the sake of buddha-dharma. This is the way.'²²⁶ Authentic practice is therefore constant expression and verification of one's own inherent Buddha nature which calls for realisation and actualisation, not achievement.

Finally, wishlessness/purposelessness as a gateway to liberation is hinted at by the interpretation of nonthinking as 'the essence of the samādhi of self-fulfilling activity [*jijuyū zanmai*]²²⁷, which is the bliss of Awakening itself experienced as 'total freedom of self-realization without any dualism of antitheses'²²⁸, and which is 'often referred to as joyous play (*yuke* or *yuge*)'²²⁹, emphasising the total purposelessness and ludic nature as undirected and goalless activity - so, practice is to be in an awakened *mode*, but not to attain some future event of awakening. Hence why 'zazen-only is called 'the samādhi of samādhis' (*ōzanmai*): because for Dōgen *zazen* is the ultimate expression (as a process) 'of an eternal quest for the meaning of existence, which was, paradoxically enough, meaningless - it was living the meaning of ultimate meaninglessness.'²³⁰

²²⁵ Tanahashi, 1985: 32.

²²⁶ Tanahashi, 1985: 34-5.

²²⁷ Kim, 2004: 63.

²²⁸ Kim, 2004: 55.

²²⁹ Kim, 2004: 63.

²³⁰ Kim, 2004: 63.

The three gateways to liberation in contemporary Japanese Sōtō Zen

Within the tradition of thought and practice inaugurated by Dōgen Zenji, a few pre-eminent contemporary Japanese Sōtō Zen Masters have continued to accentuate implicitly the importance of emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness as doors to liberation.

Kōdō Sawaki Rōshi²³¹ is a highly regarded Zen Master in the Sōtō Zen tradition as he is considered to have revitalised Zen practice from a period of relative degeneration²³², thanks to his emphasis on practising without expectations, without aim, without any thoughts of gain or profit: *mushotoku*. Hence, he seems to implicitly highlight the connection between wishlessness and emancipation, between the attitude of *mushotoku* and Awakening (being in an awakened mode). His direct and uncompromising style is reflected in his admonitions to practise undirected, wishless, pure, genuine and unadulterated *zazen*²³³:

In true *Dharma* there's nothing to gain. In false *Dharma* there's something to gain. The way of Buddha means that there is nothing to seek, nothing to find [*mushogumushotoku*]. If there's something to find, no matter how much we practise, it's got nothing to do with the *Buddha-dharma*. If there's nothing to find [*mushotoku*], that's the *Buddha-dharma*.²³⁴

His teachings radicalised the attitude of wishlessness to the point of stating that *zazen* is 'good for nothing... *zazen* isn't good for anything at all... *zazen* has no results. You won't get anything out of *zazen*.'²³⁵ This is clearly a rather paradoxical affirmation, which is however closely connected with and supported by his teachings of emptiness and signlessness, seemingly based on the Mahāyāna *Prajñā Pāramitā* tradition: 'in a word, Buddhism is non-self [*muga*]. Non-self means that "I" am not a separate subject,' which explains his following words: 'you say you want to become a better person by doing *zazen*. *Zazen* isn't about learning how to be a person. *Zazen* is to stop being a person.'²³⁶

²³¹ 'Kōdō Sawaki (Japanese: 沢木興道, *Sawaki Kōdō*) (1880-1965) is considered by some to be the most important Japanese Zen master of the 20th century. His parents died early and he grew up being adopted by a gambler and an ex-prostitute. When he was 16, he ran away from home to become a monk at *Eiheiji*, one of the two main temples of *Soto Zen*. At first unsuccessful, he was finally ordained as a monk and began his Zen studies. Later, he started to give lectures and instructions in the practice of *zazen*, and during the 1930s he was called as a professor at *Komazawa University*. At the same time, he also took responsibility for *Antaiji*, a *zazen* temple in northern *Kyoto*. Because of his continuous travels throughout Japan to practice *zazen* with people everywhere, he began to be called "homeless Kōdō." Sawaki Kōdō Rōshi died on December 21st, 1965, in *Antaiji*' from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kodo_Sawaki .

²³² 'Sawaki Rōshi was the Zen master who brought the degenerated Zen of the 20th century back to its roots: The practice of *Zazen* without the expectation of gain', from *Antaiji*'s website: <http://www.antaiji.dogen-zen.de/eng/sawaki-uchiyama.shtml>.

²³³ *Zazen shikantaza*, in the Sōtō Zen tradition after Dōgen, is considered the quintessential practice and gate to liberation.

²³⁴ Sawaki Kōdō Rōshi, from <http://www.antaiji.dogen-zen.de/eng/kodo-sawaki-to-you.shtml>, section 11.

²³⁵ Sawaki Kōdō Rōshi, from <http://www.antaiji.dogen-zen.de/eng/kodo-sawaki-to-you.shtml>, section 10.

²³⁶ Sawaki Kōdō Rōshi, from <http://www.antaiji.dogen-zen.de/eng/kodo-sawaki-to-you.shtml>, section 11 and 12.

Wishlessness is thus linked to the understanding of emptiness: if there is no 'I' - no separate, independent and substantial subject - then Zen practice is not aimed at making a better person out of an individual, because the individual - the person - is only conventionally true, and not ultimately real²³⁷. As a result, the door of emptiness clarifies the insight into wishlessness, into practising with the mind un-directed towards wishing for any delusory achievement, any projected desire to improve one's personality or even to achieve Awakening. 'We don't practise in order to get *satori*. It's *satori* that pulls our practice. We practise, being dragged all over by *satori* ... We don't achieve *satori* through practice: practice *is satori*. Each and every step is the goal.'²³⁸

Signlessness is also implicitly discussed in the teachings of Sawaki Rōshi when he says that 'the *Buddha-dharma* is immeasurable and unlimited. How could it ever have been made to fit your categories? No matter what you are grasping for, it's limited... The *Buddha-dharma* teaches limitlessness.'²³⁹ From Sawaki Rōshi's standpoint, the *Buddha-dharma* is synonymous with ultimate reality, which is impossible to conceptually exhaust with signs and language constructs, as the latter are always provisional and limited. Ultimate reality is therefore signless, beyond conditioned marks and characteristics. Only signlessness can open the door to the limitless nature of reality, as it partakes of its boundlessness.

To summarise Sawaki Rōshi's implicit teachings on the three doors to liberation: 'The *Buddha-Dharma* is always ungraspable [*fukatoku*] [signlessness]. There is nothing there to be gained [*mushotoku*] [wishlessness]... in the practice of the Buddha Way there is neither illusion nor *satori* [emptiness].'²⁴⁰

Sawaki Rōshi's message was passed on by one of his prominent disciples - Taisen Deshimaru Rōshi²⁴¹, a charismatic Zen Master who vigorously introduced Sōtō Zen Buddhism in Europe since his arrival in France in the late 1960s. In his famous *kusen* (oral teachings given by the Master during *zazen* sittings, usually during a *sesshin* - a period of intensive practice), Deshimaru Rōshi continually emphasises the crucial importance of *mushotoku*, the pure attitude of practising without any aim for profit or gain: 'during *zazen* I always say *mushotoku*. *Mushotoku*-mind. There is nothing to obtain; during *zazen* there is no goal... for to do *zazen* is itself *Satori*.'²⁴² The authentic practice of sitting in *zazen shikantaza* is permeated with the liberating attitude of not seeking or rejecting anything, without the slightest desire for gain, without any expectation to achieve anything. 'Satori means nothing more than to become *mushotoku* and understand *mushotoku* intimately and deeply.'²⁴³ Liberation (which is *Satori* in Zen discourse) is emancipation from the incessant

²³⁷ I agree with Harvey's (supervisor) comment: 'Though while the moral/spiritual improvement of the individual is not the aim, I think it problematic if this were not a side-effect!' Zen is not antinomian or anti-moral.

²³⁸ Sawaki Kōdō Rōshi, from <http://www.antaiji.dogen-zen.de/eng/kodo-sawaki-to-you.shtml>, section 14.

²³⁹ Sawaki Kōdō Rōshi, from <http://www.antaiji.dogen-zen.de/eng/kodo-sawaki-to-you.shtml>, section 33.

²⁴⁰ Sawaki Kōdō Rōshi, 2002: 68-9.

²⁴¹ For a biographical account, see Deshimaru, 1979: xxiv-xxix.

²⁴² Deshimaru, 1979: 152.

²⁴³ Deshimaru, 1983: 49.

and delusory (insofar as they are self-centred) desires which tie the mind into bondage: ‘people are always pursuing some objective. But *mushotoku* has no objective. Mind has no fetters. Freedom is not the same thing as egoism... if [the mind] becomes *mushotoku*... if the mind does not stick to anything, does not grasp anything’²⁴⁴, then liberation is realized²⁴⁵. Wishlessness is seen as a door to liberation, to freeing the mind from craving, attachment and illusory desires for achievement (for being and becoming).

Emptiness is also discussed in Deshimaru Rōshi’s teachings, using the concepts of *muga* (*anātman* - not-Self)²⁴⁶ and *ku* (*śūnyatā* - emptiness) in connection with the understanding of impermanence (*anitya* - *mujō*). Not only is there no personal and substantial Self, but all phenomena are ultimately empty of independent existence: ‘there is no noumenon²⁴⁷. There is no substance... *muga* is non-noumenon... all existence is *ku*.’²⁴⁸ Emptiness, not-Self and Dependent Origination are interlinked, following classic Mahāyāna (especially Madhyamaka) thought: ‘all existences are *ku*, impermanent, changing, lacking any permanent substance... the ego [the self] has no substance of its own, is not an entity, and has no autonomy; it is simply the momentary actualization of a set of interdependent causes.’²⁴⁹ Deshimaru Rōshi pushes his analysis forward by drawing on the *Heart Sūtra*²⁵⁰ to link emptiness and wishlessness. Commenting on the famous lines *shiki fu i ku ku fu i shiki, shiki soku ze ku ku souk ze shiki* (form is not different from emptiness, emptiness not different from form; form is then emptiness, emptiness is then form), he states that ‘there is no duality’, no ultimately essential differentiation between *Samśāra* and *Nirvāṇa*, or, as he puts it, ‘*bonno soku bodai* - illusions are not different from *satori*.’²⁵¹ If this is the case, it becomes clearer why Zen practice is *mushotoku*, as ‘it is not necessary to try to eliminate ignorance, because it has no more real existence than we ourselves’²⁵² because it is empty of independent existence, it is ultimately illusory too (though ignorance is clearly known for what it is).

There does not seem to be an explicit mention of signlessness in Deshimaru Rōshi’s teachings, yet it appears to be hinted at when he says: ‘do not try to make conscious thoughts apply to the realm of wisdom, and do not try to achieve wisdom; because true

²⁴⁴ Deshimaru, 1983: 50.

²⁴⁵ *Mushotoku* attitude is transformatory because it doubly turns the method upside-down: by using the goal as the method and by seeing the goal itself as goal-less. ‘Note that there is still an “if...then” mode here, which suggests a method to a goal- but the point is that the method is itself one of being (at least some of the time) in a goal-less state! This is itself transformatory. Relating this to the idea of an inherent Buddha-nature, it is transformatory in the sense that it means that non-Buddha-nature modes of being drop away’ (Harvey, supervisor).

²⁴⁶ *Muga* is the Japanese translation of *anātman*: ‘not-Self’ as a characteristic of everything, always.

²⁴⁷ In Kantian philosophy, the noumenon is the ‘thing-in-itself’, that which is independent of the senses (see <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/420847/noumenon>). Deshimaru seems to be using noumenon here to refer to a realm which is substantial and permanent.

²⁴⁸ Deshimaru, 1979: 29-30.

²⁴⁹ Deshimaru, 1983: 51.

²⁵⁰ The Japanese version is called *Hannya Shingyō*. See for example: <http://www.ciolek.com/WWWVLPages/ZenPages/Daily-Zen-Sutras.html#HEART>.

²⁵¹ Deshimaru, 1983: 129.

²⁵² Deshimaru, 1983: 129.

wisdom is *mushotoku*... It transcends all limitations created by the mind... ultimately, the highest wisdom is objectless... it is *mushotoku*.²⁵³ We find here a link between the understanding that true wisdom is beyond the limitation of signs and marks and then intuition that such boundlessness calls for a complete letting go of any delusory attachment to signs and objects of thought, which are empty of inherent existence, being merely conditioned constructs.

Another illustrious Sōtō Zen Master, Shunryū Suzuki Rōshi²⁵⁴ powerfully highlighted emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness as doors to liberation, albeit implicitly in his teachings. In his seminal, yet informal text *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, he develops his understanding of authentic Zen practice based on the central role of *zazen shikantaza*: sitting in the correct posture without any goal or objective, manifesting the spirit of Awakening²⁵⁵. *Mushotoku* is then wishless, undirected *samādhi*, the actualization of *satori*, the dynamic presencing of the awakened state, based on earnest faith in one's own Buddha-nature. By practising without any gaining ideas, without following desires to become and to achieve, 'then eventually you will resume your own nature. That is to say, your own nature will resume itself.'²⁵⁶ For Suzuki Rōshi, *mushotoku* practice is rooted in unwavering confidence in one's original Buddha-nature, which calls for expression and manifestation, rather than achievement. Right effort is therefore pure and wishless effort, without any external goals to attain²⁵⁷, not even desiring to obtain *satori*.

The philosophical background of his emphasis on *mushotoku* is his understanding of emptiness. 'We have to go through the gate of emptiness'²⁵⁸, he admonishes, which means the realization of the total lack of substantiality of every phenomenon, brushing away any delusory ideas of a permanent and independent self, as well as of an autonomous essence in all things. From insight into emptiness comes the insight into the signless nature of reality, which is empty of any signs of permanence and inherent existence.

²⁵³ Deshimaru, 1983: 50.

²⁵⁴ For a biographical account of Shunryū Suzuki Rōshi, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shunryu_Suzuki.

²⁵⁵ 'The state of mind that exists when you sit in the right posture [*zazen shikantaza*] is itself, enlightenment... In this posture there is no need to talk about the right state of mind. You already have it. This is the conclusion of Buddhism', Suzuki, 1970: 28.

²⁵⁶ Suzuki, 1970: 49.

²⁵⁷ 'Try not to achieve anything special. You already have everything in your own pure quality', Suzuki, 1970: 61.

²⁵⁸ Suzuki, 1970: 110.

Conclusion

This dissertation has journeyed through diverse, yet broadly and interestingly overlapping interpretations of the three gateways to liberation across Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda, Indian Mahāyāna and Sōtō Zen traditions, attempting to emphasise significant points of hermeneutical convergence, whilst respecting their historical and semantic differences and peculiarities.

According to the context and to the specific Buddhist tradition, the three gateways to liberation have been analysed as: lofty if not utterly transcendent (*lokuttara/lokottara*) *vipassanā-samādhis* - that is supramundane meditative states filled with insight concerning the not-Self nature of reality, whilst certain *samādhis* and *Nirvāṇa* are also signless and undirected; doors to liberation - insofar as they act as an ideal springboard for the mind into the Unconditioned; types of liberation - as they enable the mind to taste emancipation in its threefold characteristics; and aspects of *Nirvāṇa/Nibbāna* - since they partake of the qualities of the Deathless.

The idea of three gateways to liberation has emerged as a powerful interpretative tool to illuminate the relationship between two problematically incongruous realms - the conditioned and the Unconditioned - as they appear to be perfectly poised in-between them, operating as a swinging threshold connecting path and goal, partaking of the qualities of *Nirvāṇa/Nibbāna*, without yet exhausting its wholly transcendent nature. Although belonging to the conditioned sphere of the path - since they are approached via high meditative states (which are constructed and produced), the doors to liberation nonetheless open the mind to the boundless vista of ‘that which is beyond’ - the ultimate goal: *Nirvāṇa/Nibbāna*.

Furthermore, there seems to be a closer relationship and a progressive overlapping between the conditioned and the unconditioned realm in the Buddhist traditions analysed in this dissertation, beginning with some hints²⁵⁹ in the Theravāda school (emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness as aspects of *Nibbāna*), through Mahāyāna non-dual understanding of *Śaṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa* reflected in the gateways sharing its qualities, and finishing with utter assimilation in Sōtō Zen, where practice (the path) is simply expression and realization of Awakening (the goal). Although there is patently a semantic shift across traditions with regards to the meaning and the status of the three gateways to liberation²⁶⁰,

²⁵⁹ I agree with Harvey (1995: 196-7) that in the Theravāda tradition there are - however - only hints at the non-duality between conditioned and Unconditioned with regards to both being emptiness. ‘The apprehension of *nibbāna* as a signless emptiness by “seeing through” empty phenomena is of course reminiscent of the Mahāyāna Madhyamaka school’s view: of *nibbāna* and the conditioned world being non-different, both being equally “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*). Hints in this direction are in fact contained in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*... The Pāli Canon contains no further hint in this direction, though’, so it seems unnecessary to speak of Proto-Mādhyamika views (see Gomez, 1976).

²⁶⁰ For instance, much of Theravāda *samatha* meditation practice focuses on developing particular meditative signs (*nimitta*), so as to deepen concentration and access *jhāna*. The four formless states (higher *jhānas*) are only partially signless, and true signlessness is only experienced when profound insight is present, catching a

a fruitful ambivalence is nevertheless present across the interpretative spectrum, indicating fertile soil for further research.

In this regard, the three gateways to liberation could be seen as an apt metaphor to reveal the liminality²⁶¹ of existence, its symbolic status as dynamically in-between the realms of the mundane and the supramundane, especially in reference to certain meditative states and practices which share aspects of both conditioned and unconditioned, acting as a swinging door between the two realms. There seems to be an underlying theme across Buddhist traditions as far as the ambiguous relationship between practice and attainment is concerned: the oscillation between emphasising effort, goal-setting and step-by-step achievement, and advocating a total relinquishing of goal-directedness, abiding in formlessness and emptiness. This tension seems interwoven in the fabric of Buddhist sensibility, in line with its quintessential metaphor of the Middle Way between conceptual and existential extremes.

The three gateways to liberation could be further fruitfully analysed to reveal their potential to act as hermeneutical hoe to unearth the ludic²⁶², aesthetic²⁶³ and symbolic dimensions of Buddhism, attempting to reveal the 'sacred' element of the Buddhist religion (liberation, Nirvāṇa) as a necessarily 'use-less' and gratuitous dimension to be experienced and lived ludically, aesthetically and symbolically through ritual practice.

glimpse of *Nibbāna*. Moreover, experience of the undirected (*appaṇihita*) is also a very high attainment, whilst in the greater part of the practice the mind should be, on the other hand, *well* directed (A.I.8-10). More generally, at any level of practice across different traditions, the practitioner needs to move between phases of deliberate cultivation, and letting go of (= non-attachment to) the products of this.

²⁶¹ Liminality (from the Latin word *līmen*, meaning "a threshold") is a psychological, neurological, or metaphysical subjective, conscious state of being on the "threshold" of or between two different existential planes, as defined in [neurological psychology](#) (a "liminal state") and in the anthropological theories of [ritual](#) by such writers as [Arnold van Gennep](#), [Victor Turner](#)[2], and others', from Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminality>.

²⁶² See, for instance, Huizinga's (1955) analysis of play for its own sake, as a fundamental anthropological characteristic of culture.

²⁶³ In its etymological meaning of 'to sense/feel', connected to 'purified spiritual senses' in Buddhism.

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