

THE SIXTEEN VIPASSANĀ-ÑĀNAS
FROM IMPERMANENCE TO LIBERATION

Guy Eugène DUBOIS

Dhamma
books

“ Spiritual wisdom is a gift to be shared with insight and compassion, not exploited for personal gain. When wisdom is commercialized, it loses its purity and becomes a commodity, diminishing its transformative power. ”

(Guy E. Dubois)

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This book is a contemplative English edition of the original Dutch work *De Zestien Vipassanā-Nāṇas – Van Vergankelijkheid naar Bevrijding*. The Dutch text serves as the point of departure for this English edition, which has been carefully rendered for an international readership while remaining faithful to the author's understanding. The original Dutch edition remains the definitive source text for this English edition.

D/2026/Guy Eugène Dubois, Publisher
Zomerlaan 8/101 - 2580 Beerzel, Belgium
gdubois.dhammadbooks@gmail.com
<https://yatha-bhuta.com>

Layout, prepress, design & cover: GD
Set in Helvetica Neue
Printed on FSC-certified white offset paper
Printed by Brave New Books, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
ISBN: 9789465540207 | NUR-Code: 718

• *Yo kho dhammaṃ passati, so maṃ passati. —
Whoever sees the Dhamma sees me.* •

Vakkali Sutta, Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.87

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A NOTE TO THE READER

This book does not translate words.
It translates understanding.

Although this English edition is based on an earlier Dutch work, it is far more than a translation. Every chapter has been carefully revised, expanded, and refined in the light of continued study, reflection, and editorial development. The result is an independent English edition that reflects the author's most mature understanding of the early Dhamma and the contemplative path it reveals.

The Pāli Canon and related Buddhist traditions preserve a rich terminology that often carries meanings for which no single English equivalent exists. Throughout this book, many key Pāli and Sanskrit terms have therefore been retained, accompanied by concise explanations where appropriate.

Pāli and Sanskrit terms are presented in roman type rather than italics, reflecting the editorial principle that these terms form an integral part of the text rather than foreign expressions. Only complete footnotes are set in italics.

The words of the Buddha are presented in italics and enclosed within ‘...’ quotation marks, allowing them to remain quietly distinct from the surrounding text.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations, terminology, and interpretations are based on the earliest Dhamma preserved in the Pāli Canon.

FOREWORD

There are books that are meant to be read, understood, and remembered.

This is not one of them.

What lies before you is not a textbook, a manual, or a collection of knowledge. It is an invitation. An invitation to become still, to look, to listen to what quietly unfolds beyond words.

The sixteen stages of insight are not a technique, nor are they a ladder to be climbed. They form the landscape through which a yogi gradually learns to let go. They are not a route to be followed, but footprints in the sand—fleeting traces left by those who came, looked, and moved on.

In the early Dhamma texts, the Buddha is often referred to as the Tathāgata ¹—the One who has thus come and thus gone, without clinging to what passes away; who comes and goes like the wind, leaving nothing behind to which the world can cling.

The Tathāgata walks an uncharted path—holding on to nothing, leaving nothing that lingers in time or space. ²

Not as someone who possesses or claims anything, but as a presence moving through the world like a bird through the open sky, leaving no path behind.

As the Dhammapada expresses it metaphorically (Verse 93): ³

• *Suññato animitto ca, vimokkho yassa gocaro; ākā-seva sakuntānaṃ, padaṃ tassa durannayaṃ. — The path of one who dwells in the liberation that is empty and signless is difficult to trace—like the flight of birds through the sky. •*

So it is with the sixteen stages of insight: fleeting traces of seeing and letting go, disappearing like footprints in wet sand as the wind begins to rise.

Within that very impermanence, the essence of practice reveals itself: it is not sitting that matters, but seeing. ⁴ Not form, but essence.

Sitting may indeed be helpful, offering the mind a stable space in which to settle. Yet the moment form is mistaken for the essence, the heart of the practice is lost. ⁵ A skilful means (upāya; upāyaḥ) must never be confused with the reality toward which it points.

The Dhamma is neither ritual nor technique. It is not a structure. It is an invitation to meet reality directly—free from self-centred intention and expectation.

The danger, however, is that practice itself becomes a new identity: the quiet, seated seeker—someone with a path to follow, a goal to attain and the promise of future fulfilment. Yet the moment the inner journey becomes another way of confirming the self, the practitioner is once again caught in the very snare from which liberation is sought.

The Buddha did not point to postures, rituals, or structures, but to insight. He pointed to impermanence, to the relinquishment of clinging, and to not-self, so that suffering might come to an end.

Seeing—that is what matters.

Seeing how everything arises and passes away. Seeing thoughts move, seeing perceptions and feelings arise and pass away, without grasping or pushing anything aside. Seeing without resistance, without interference, without wanting experience to be other than it is. Direct seeing, unfiltered by thought or conceptualization.

True meditation has no fixed form. ⁶ Once the mind becomes clear, every technique falls away. The object of attention gives way to mindfulness (*sati*; *smṛti*) and wisdom (*paññā*; *prajñā*). Meditation is then no longer a matter of posture or method, no longer an exercise in form or structure, but simply an open and uncontrived awareness of this moment, and therefore of every moment.

Even the most profound states of stillness or spaciousness, however subtle or refined, remain subject to arising and passing away.

Even openness itself—even the absence of objects—is simply another appearance within the stream of consciousness.

Such experiences can easily be mistaken for liberation, yet they are not liberation. Liberation does not arise from abiding in any particular state, but from clearly seeing whatever arises and passes away—without craving, without grasping, without attachment.

Whether walking, washing the dishes, sitting, or lying down: wherever there is clear knowing (*pajānāti*; pra-

jānāti), ⁷ there is practice. Only where there is seeing does liberation come into view. ⁸

It is therefore not sitting that liberates (vimutti; vimukti), ⁹ but the insight (vipassanā; vipaśyanā) that dawns when we let go of what we think we must do, achieve, or become. ¹⁰

Where outward forms fall away, truth may reveal itself—not as something new, but as what has always been here. Dhammatā. ¹¹

Truth requires no structures, no lineages, no rituals, no words to validate it. ¹²

It asks not for form, but for openness—a receptivity that excludes nothing.

Acceptance.

Clarity.

Stillness.

Liberation.

It asks for acceptance—the willingness to see things as they are, rather than as we imagine, wish, or want them to be.

It asks for clarity—a mind that sees without grasping, without judging, condemning, or excluding.

It asks for stillness—not the absence of sound, but the absence of resistance.

It asks for liberation—not as a goal to be attained, but as the natural consequence of letting go.

What is directly seen in silence is reflected in the Buddha's teaching.

Nibbāna (nirvāṇa) is not presented in the Pāli Canon as a new form of existence or as an entity, but as the Unconditioned (asaṅkhata; asaṃskṛta)—open, free from all forms and concepts.

Openness (anālaya; id.)¹³ and wisdom (paññā; pra-jñā) are cultivated through meditation and mature in the direct realization of anicca, dukkha, and anattā. Stillness and liberation are not ends in themselves, but the natural flowering of that insight.

For this reason, the Buddha also describes Nibbāna as santi (śānti): peace.

Whoever enters these pages is not invited to achieve anything, but to relinquish whatever stands in the way of achievement. Not to become something (bhava; id.),¹⁴ but to disappear into the simplicity of what is.

Read this book as you would contemplate a flower, watch the morning mist, or follow a falling star. Do not read in order to grasp, but to allow what wishes to reveal itself to unfold of its own accord.

For what is sought does not lie outside ourselves.

What binds us is not a chain, but an illusion. Even the teachings themselves are only pointers. They are not truth, but invitations to see.

The Dhamma begins there.

Not with belief. Not with conclusions. But with the simple willingness to look.

This English edition is not simply a translation of an earlier Dutch work. It has been thoroughly revised, expanded, and refined throughout, incorporating further study, reflection, and editorial development. It is therefore best regarded as a new and independent edition, reflecting the author's most mature understanding of the early Dhamma and the contemplative path it reveals.

This book does not seek to convince. It simply invites you to look.

It is not an instruction manual, but a dismantling; not an encouragement to search, but an invitation to let go.

And then—only silence.

In the Buddha's words: ¹⁵

• *Yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ. — Whatever is subject to arising is subject to cessation.* •

Guy Eugène Dubois
Beerzel, August 2026

INTRODUCTION

There is a silence that reaches deeper than the mere absence of sound. It is the silence of insight—the wordless understanding that arises when the mind grows still and reality reveals itself in its naked simplicity. Yet this silence is not easily attained. It is not the fruit of technique, nor the result of effort.

As Jiddu Krishnamurti observed: ¹⁶

“ The silence that thought constructs is still and lifeless. But the silence that comes into being when thought has understood its own beginning, knows its own nature, and sees that all thought is never free but always old—this silence is meditation, in which the meditator is completely absent, where the mind has emptied itself of the past. ”

What we ordinarily call silence—the cessation of activity, the quieting of thought—is often little more than a subtle act of control. Understand that the mind which tries to become silent is still engaged in activity; the search for peace still presupposes the movement of craving.

True silence arises only when the mind understands itself ¹⁷—its attachment to the past, its tendency to grasp and identify—and when that very seeing is sufficient for all conditioned activity to dissolve. Then no effort remains, but only an open space without a centre, without an “I”. No practitioner remains, no striving—only uncontrived presence.

Within that openness arises a silence that cannot be captured in words.

This silence is not an absence, but a presence that permeates everything. What cannot be expressed in words flows like an unheard song—a song beyond concepts and forms, requiring no explanation because it simply is.

Words are but a shadow of this reality. They cannot touch the essence of what is known when the yogi's mind falls silent and opens to the Ineffable—to the Unconditioned.

In the simplicity of silence, the universal mystery becomes tangible—not as thought, but as a direct realization (paṭivedha; prativēdha) ¹⁸ of what has always been present. No dogma. No esoteric display. No imagination. Only simple presence—accessible to anyone willing to listen without expectation, without striving, without hope of reward.

True inner silence opens onto a deeper way of seeing and knowing ¹⁹—a luminous awareness, a natural wisdom ²⁰ that requires no words and no forms to which it might cling. It is the Unconditioned (as-aṅkhata; asaṃskṛta), ²¹ more lucid and more primordial than thought itself (pabhassara-citta; prabhāśvara-citta). ²²

Within silence, that which cannot be spoken reveals itself—recognizable only to those who are willing to listen with an open heart.

Silence is the threshold of the innermost sanctuary, the hidden cave of the heart. It is the song of the

heart—a language without words, universal and requiring no translation. Like love, unborn and timeless, silence speaks to all who are willing to listen. ²³ A melody without sound, recognizable alike to those who are musical and to those who are not; to those who are religious and to those who are free from religion.

Go into the forest. Listen to the whispering of the leaves, to the breathing of the wind. Sit beside the sea and let the roar of the waves fill your ears. Look up into the immeasurable stillness of the night sky.

Open the inner ear of the mind. Listen to the sound of silence itself. There, within that inaudible melody, the gentle joy of contemplation is born. There blossoms a happiness that is never sought, but appears in the absence of craving.

Within that silent clarity, insight is born—not as a thought, not as a conclusion, but as an immediate knowing of how all things arise and pass away—without an owner, without a centre.

It is within this silence, within this spacious openness (*suññatā-vihāra*), ²⁴ that the *vipassanā-ñāṇas* (*vipaśyanā-jñāna*) take root and gradually mature. ²⁵

Just as a flower does not force itself to bloom, ²⁶ so the stages of insight do not unfold through effort or desire, but through the gradual letting go of the obscurations that conceal them.

In silence, insight matures naturally. The ancient masters observed this process with great care and described it with remarkable precision.

In the earliest texts we do not yet find a systematic presentation of the stages of insight. What we do find are the living traces of an inner process of maturation—a contemplative landscape that would later be distilled, from Upatissa's *Vimuttimagga* ²⁷ through the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* ²⁸ to the *Visuddhimagga*, ²⁹ into the sixteen stages of insight as they are known today.

What, then, are these *vipassanā-ñāṇas*? How did they emerge, and in what way can they serve as a gentle guide along the path of inner liberation? ³⁰

The pages that follow seek to explore these questions—not as instruction, not as dogma, but as an invitation to pause together and contemplate this process of maturation and letting go. Not in order to attain something, but to make space for what has awaited discovery all along. ³¹

The *vipassanā-ñāṇas* (*vipaśyanā-jñāna*)—the insights that mature through deep meditation—are not conceptual constructions or theoretical schemes.

Rather, they are traces: gentle markers along the inner path, born of careful and reverential observation (*yoniso manasikāra*; *yuktiso manaskāra*) ³² of the process of liberation itself.

Their roots reach back to the earliest traditions of the *Buddhadhamma*.

The Pāli Canon contains no formal enumeration of sixteen stages of insight. Yet throughout its discourses a recurring pattern can be discerned: insight gradually matures as ordinary looking gives way to direct seeing—a clear and immediate recognition of

impermanence (anicca; anitya), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha; duḥkha), and not-self (anattā; anātman).

Again and again, the Buddha points to the arising and passing away of phenomena (udayabbaya; utpādayaya)³³—body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness—and to the relinquishment of all attachment to them (upādāna).³⁴

He did not teach an abstract philosophy.³⁵ He invited the practitioner to look directly and fearlessly at reality itself:

• *Yarṇ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ. — Whatever is subject to arising is subject to cessation.* •³⁶

This is the pure and unblemished knowing of the Dhamma. Nothing is permanent. Nothing can truly be possessed. Nothing can provide lasting satisfaction.

This simple yet profound observation lies at the very heart of all insight meditation (vipassanā; vipaśyanā).

When the mind grows still and observes without interference, reality reveals its impermanent nature of its own accord—not as an idea, but as direct experience.

Vipassanā is therefore not a matter of intellectual understanding, but of immediate, lived realization.

— Not everything needs to be spoken,
not everything needs to be explained.
Sometimes what is most essential

is precisely what remains
unspoken. —

Vipassanā refers to direct realization (*paccanubhūta*; *pratyanuṣṭhita*)³⁷—not as a single flash of insight, but as a continually deepening and ever more refined understanding, lived and verified anew in direct experience.³⁸ This immediate realization is like the very breath of the path to liberation: quiet, alive, and ever present.

Only later, when the first generations of Buddhist monks began to reflect upon and organise their contemplative experience, did a more systematic map of this inner path emerge.

In works such as the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*³⁹—included in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* of the Pāli Canon—we find one of the earliest systematic descriptions of the progressive unfolding of insight.

Later still, within the commentarial tradition of Theravāda Buddhism, this understanding developed into the sequence of the sixteen *vipassanā-ñāṇas* (*vipaśyanā-jñāna*) as they are known today.

The great synthesis of this tradition is the *Visuddhimagga*⁴⁰—The Path of Purification—compiled by Buddhaghosa during the fifth century CE.

There, the sixteen stages are described in meticulous detail—not to elevate them into goals in themselves, but to offer the practitioner points of recognition: quiet landmarks that gently accompany the contemplative traveller along the way.

Buddhaghosa himself understood that insight cannot be manufactured.

His work is not a manual for producing Awakening, but a careful description of the way insight may unfold when the mind has become ripe for it.

The sixteen stages describe a process of natural maturation. They are not brought about through will-power or manipulation, but ripen as the natural consequence of wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*; *yukti-iso manaskāra*), meditation (*bhāvanā*; *id.*), and the gradual maturation of insight (*anupubba-paṭipadā*; *anupūva-pratipad*).⁴¹

Just as a sunflower opens, not because someone pulls at its petals, but because the sun has risen high enough in the sky, so too insight unfolds when the necessary conditions have matured.

Yet, like every natural process of growth, this map also has its limits. It points the way; it is not the destination.

Even this map is provisional. The Buddha compared the Dhamma to a raft: something to cross the river with, not something to carry on one's shoulders after reaching the Further Shore.⁴²

So it is with the sixteen *vipassanā-ñāṇas* (*vipaśyanā-jñāna*). They are to be understood as a support, as a skilful means (*upāya*; *upāyah*), never as something to cling to; as a mirror, not an idol.

What these stages describe is not a method imposed upon reality. Insight (*vipassanā*; *vipaśyanā*) is the

direct seeing of yathābhūta—reality as it truly is, free from distortion and conceptual overlay.

They are an invitation to encounter that reality directly. To see what is, without interference, without expectation, without fear. To remain still and watch everything arise and pass away—and, in that seeing, to relinquish what was never truly ours, yet what, in our innocent credulity, we imagined we possessed: a permanent core, a self, a soul, ⁴³ a solid ground.

The vipassanā-ñāṇas (vipaśyanā-jñāna) are not a ladder leading to some higher attainment. Nor are they an accomplishment or a badge of spiritual achievement.

They describe an inner process of maturation—a natural unfolding of the mind as it becomes quiet, clear, and unburdened. In other words, they are natural stages of insight (ñāṇa; jñāna) that arise through right practice.

Just as fruit ripens in the orchard, unaware of its own growth, so insight matures in a mind that sees through and relinquishes its own conditioning. The maturation of insight is not a process that can be forced or deliberately manipulated.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas, mindfulness (sati; smṛti) gives rise to insight when there is no striving for results. ⁴⁴ Likewise, classical works such as the Visuddhimagga emphasise letting go rather than acquisition.

In this sense, the path of insight is not directed towards attainment, but towards relinquishment. Not

towards constructing new structures, but towards allowing existing ones to fall away.

The path is characterised by the gradual dismantling of attachment and illusion—of arising and cessation (samudaya and nirodha) ⁴⁵ clearly understood—rather than by the construction of a new self or a conceptual system.

Each vipassanā-ñāṇa invites a deeper relaxation, a greater openness, and a further release from everything that binds the practitioner to the conditioned and the impermanent.

The process is marked by increasing clarity (paññā; prajñā), the fading of craving (taṇhā; tṛṣṇā), and an ever more deeply established equanimity (upekkhā; upekṣā).

This book is not a manual for producing these stages. It offers no recipes and no guarantees. ⁴⁶ What follows is simply a description—not of a path that lies somewhere outside ourselves, but of one that unfolds within the practitioner's own mind.

Each stage of insight represents a possibility—a reflection of the way wisdom may blossom when the necessary conditions have matured: clarity, mindfulness, and surrender. It is a maturation born not of striving, but of the quiet unfolding of causes and conditions.

The invitation is therefore both simple and radical: to become still, to look, not to grasp, not to strive. To allow whatever is ready to mature to mature, without interference. Just as the sun does not force the lotus