Sutta summary

The Brāhmaṇa Uṇṇābha Sutta (S 48.42) is a dialogue between the brahmin Uṇṇābha and the Buddha, centering on the statement that each of the five physical sense-faculties (pañc'indriya) have their own "range and field" (visaya,gocara) [§2-3]. Their common range and field, however, is the mind (mano,-paṭisaraṇa) [§4], meaning that these five physical senses arise dependent on the mind (mano). Not only does the mind experience the five physical senses, but this is where synaesthesia is possible, where the senses influence and affect one another [2].

On being further questioned by Uṇṇābha, the Buddha explains that the mind’s resort (paṭisaraṇa)² is mindfulness (sati) [§5], which in turn resorts to liberation (vimutti) [§6], which in turn resorts to nirvana. Clearly here, paṭisaraṇa has the sense of “goal, ideal.”

Uṇṇābha fully understands the Buddha’s teaching and in due course attains non-return [§§9-12]. The Commentary explains that he attains dhyana and becomes a “dhyana non-returner” (jhāna,anagamita).³ This is one of the rare examples where a lay person becomes a non-returner.⁴

2 Synaesthesia

2.1 THE SCIENTIFIC VIEW. Synaesthesia is a neurologically based phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway.⁵ People who report such experiences are known as synaesthetes. In one common form of synaesthesia, known as grapheme or color-graphemic synaesthesia, letters or numbers are perceived as inherently colored,⁶ while in ordinal linguistic personification,⁷ numbers, days of the week and months of the year evoke personalities.⁸

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¹ As in Mahā Vedalla S (M 43), where Sāriputta tells this to Mahā Koṭṭhita (M 43.21/1:295) = SD 30.2.
² Patisaraṇa lit means “resorting to, having recourse to,” that is, being functionally dependent upon. However, it has other senses, eg, taking something: (1) as the ideal (dhamma,paṭisaraṇa, Kv 3.1.2/228), (2) as the standard (gotta,paṭisārī, D 3.1/1:99). Comys tend to use it in a more concrete sense as “shelter, refuge,” as in “it is duggati because it is the destiny, the refuge, of suffering,” dukkhasha gati paṭisaraṇan ti duggati (DA 2:544; MA 2:37; AA 1:57; UA 418; ItA 1:72; cf SA 3:245; VvA 231). See S:W 5:193 n1.
³ See §12 n below on jhāna,anāgāmita.
⁴ For other examples of lay non-returners, see Laymen Saints = SD 8.6 (9-10).
In spatial-sequence, or number form synaesthesia, numbers, months of the year, or days of the week evoke precise locations in space (for example, 1980 may be “farther away” than 1990), or may have a (three-dimensional) view of a year as a map (clockwise or counterclockwise). Yet another recently identified type, visual motion sound synaesthesia, involves hearing sounds in response to visual motion and flicker.

Over 60 types of synaesthesia have been reported by people, but only a fraction has been evaluated by scientific research. Even within one type, synaesthetic perceptions vary in intensity and people vary in awareness of their synaesthetic perceptions.

While cross-sensory metaphors (eg “loud shirt,” “bitter wind” or “prickly laugh”) are sometimes described as “synaesthetic,” true neurological synaesthesia is involuntary. It is estimated that synaesthesia could possibly be as prevalent as 1 in 23 persons across its range of variants. Synaesthesia runs strongly in families, but the precise mode of inheritance has yet to be ascertained. Synaesthesia is also sometimes reported by individuals under the influence of psychedelic drugs, after a stroke, during a temporal lobe epilepsy seizure, or as a result of blindness or deafness.

Synaesthesia that arises from such non-genetic events is referred to as “adventitious synaesthesia” to distinguish it from the more common congenital forms of synaesthesia. Adventitious synaesthesia involving drugs or stroke (but not blindness or deafness) apparently only involves sensory linkings such as sound vision or touch hearing. There are few, if any, reported cases involving culture-based, learned sets such as graphemes, lexemes, days of the week, or months of the year.

Although synaesthesia was the topic of intensive scientific investigation in the late 1800s and early 1900s, it was largely abandoned by scientific research in the mid-20th century, and has only recently been rediscovered by modern researchers. Psychological research has demonstrated that synaesthetic experiences can have measurable behavioral consequences, while functional neuroimaging studies have identified differences in patterns of brain activation. Many people with synaesthesia use their experiences to aid in their creative process, and many non-synaesthetes have attempted to create works of art that may capture what it is like to experience synaesthesia. Psychologists and neuroscientists study synaesthesia not only for its inherent interest, but also for the insights it may give into cognitive and perceptual processes that occur in synaesthetes and non-synaesthetes alike.

2.2 The Buddhist View. From the Brāhmaṇa Uṇṇābha Sutta, it is clear that synaesthesia does not occur at the physical sense level, but on the mental level. Each physical sense-organ is a specialized set of tissues and structures that function to “sense” or detect form (space), sound (wind), smell (water), taste (fire) and touches (earth), that is, the four primary elements and space. The eye makes sense of space (ākāsa) and detects light and colours. The ear detects wind (vāyo) or motion, that is, vibration or sound, but which also includes other bodily “winds,” such as peristalsis (passage of ingested food, digestion, etc.).

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20 This section is based on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synesthesia, for which see details.
bowl movement, etc). The nose senses water (āpo), which is actually the cohesiveness of matter, what holds it together. “Water” as liquid is a phase of matter in between earth (solid) and wind (gas), which includes smell molecules. The tongue senses fire (teja) or heat or decay. While smell is the minute dispersal of matter as it decomposes, taste reflects the internal physical change (eg the tastlessness of an unripe fruit, its sweetness on ripening, and rancidity when rotting). The body senses the earth (pathavī), or what occupies space, that is, mass, which is really hardness, softness, smoothness, roughness, and resistance.\(^{21}\)

What I have given here is not orthodox Buddhist teachings, but a personal reflection on the possible connections between the five physical senses and the five elements (earth, water, fire, wind and space). This reflection is based on the understanding that whatever any of the physical senses detect is some aspect of form (rūpa) as the four elements.

It is the mind (mano) and mind-consciousness (mano, viññāṇa) which make sense of all the physical experiences. And here is where the teachings of the Bahu, dhātuka Sutta (M 115)—which speaks of the mind-element, the mind-object element, and the mind-consciousness element\(^{22}\)—throws some light in our current discussion. The mind-element (mano, dhātu), according to Abhidhamma, includes the consciousness that advert to the five sense-objects impinging on the five physical sense-faculties (pañca dvārāvajjana, citta) and the consciousness that receives the object after it has been cognized through the senses (sampaṭṭicchana, citta).\(^{23}\)

The mind-object element (dhamma, dhātu) includes the types of subtle material phenomena not involved in sense-cognition, the three mental aggregates of feeling, perception, and formations, and nirvana. It does not include concepts, abstract ideas, judgements, etc. Though these latter ideas are incl in the notion of mind-object (dhamma ārammaṇa), the mind-object element includes only things that exist by their own nature, not things constructed by the mind.\(^{24}\)

The mind-consciousness element (mano, viññāṇa, dhātu) includes all types of consciousness except the five sense-consciousnesses and the mind-element. In other words, it consists of purely mental events. And this is “where” synaesthesia or the interacting and overlapping of sense-experiences occur. The mind is the master creator, conjuror, and con-artist who manipulates the sense inputs, stores them and cues them on the stage of consciousness under the directorship of the latent tendencies of lust, aversion and ignorance.

In other words, synaesthesia is ever occurring in our subconscious, and we may or may not notice this. Or more likely, we choose increasingly not to notice it as we mature by our predispositions and by external conditionings. Once our minds become overly analytical at the cost of wholesome feelings, we refuse to acknowledge the multiple-sense creativity that the artistic mind or meditative mind is capable of.

On a deep meditation level, when the physical body, that is, the five physical senses, cease altogether (at least for the duration of the samadhi, the mind\(^{25}\) works on itself synaesthetically. It starts off as a wonder world of supersensory forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches of such exquisite pleasure and peace. These synaesthetic glory meld every closer together through the dhyanic experience, so that in the fourth dhyana, they unify as a single-minded stillness of supreme bliss.

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\(^{21}\) See Mahā Hatthipadopama S (M 28.6-27/1185-191) = SD 6.16; Rāhul’ovāda S (M 62.8-17/1:421-426) = SD 3.11; & Dhātu Vibhaṅga S (M 140.13-18/3:240-242) = SD 4.17. See also Rūpa = SD 17.2a.

\(^{22}\) M 115.4/3:62 = SD 29.1.

\(^{23}\) See Nimitta & Anuvyañjana = SD 19.14 (2).

\(^{24}\) See M:NB 1324 n1077.

\(^{25}\) In keeping with the early Buddhist spirit, I have not differentiated any type of mind here: on viññāṇa, mano and citta, see Viññāṇa = SD 17.8a (12).
The Discourse to the Brahmin Uṇṇābha
(S 48.42/5:217-219)

1 Originating at Sāvatthī.

Uṇṇābha questions the Buddha
2 Then the Brahmin Uṇṇābha approached the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and friendly exchange was concluded, he sat down at one side. Sitting thus as one side, the brahmin Uṇṇābha said this to the Blessed One:

3a “Master Gotama, these five faculties have five different ranges, five different fields. They do not experience each others’ range or domain.

3b What are the five?
(1) The eye-faculty,
(2) the ear-faculty,
(3) the nose-faculty,
(4) the tongue-faculty,
(5) the body-faculty.

Now, master Gotama, since these five faculties have five different ranges, five different fields, they do not experience each others’ range or domain.

So what is it that they resort to? What is it that experiences their range or domain?

The range of the five faculties
4 “Brahmin, these five faculties have five different ranges, five different fields. They do not experience each others’ range or domain.

What are the five?
(1) The eye-faculty,
(2) the ear-faculty,
(3) the nose-faculty,
(4) the tongue-faculty,
(5) the body-faculty.

Now, brahmin, these five faculties have five different ranges, five different fields, and they do not experience each others’ range or domain.

Brahmin, they have the mind as resort, and the mind experiences their range and field.”
The progress of the training

5 “But, master Gotama, what is it that the mind resorts to?”
   “The mind’s resort, brahmin, is mindfulness.”

6 “But, master Gotama, what is it that mindfulness resorts to?”
   “Mindfulness’ resort, brahmin, is liberation.”

7a “But, master Gotama, what is it that liberation resorts to?”
   “Liberation’s resort, brahmin, is nirvana.”

7b “But, master Gotama, what is it that nirvana resorts to?”
   “Brahmin, you have exceeded the question! You are unable to grasp the limit of the question.”

8 For, brahmin, the holy life is lived with nirvana as its form footing, as its final end, nirvana as its utter end.

Unnābha becomes a non-returner

9 Then the brahmin Unnābha, having delighted and rejoiced in the Blessed One’s word, rose from
his seat, saluted the Blessed One, and keeping the Blessed One on his right, departed.

10 Then, not long after the Brahmin Unnābha had left, the Blessed One addressed the monks, thus:
   “Suppose, bhikshus, in a gabled house, or a gabled house with a hall, outside the eastern window,
   the sun were rising. When its rays enter through the window, where would they settle?”
   “On the western wall, bhante.”

12 “Even so, bhikshus, the brahmin Unnābha has gained faith in the Tathagata that is settled, well
rooted, established, firm, so that it cannot be removed by any ascetic or brahmin or deva or Mara or brahma
or by anyone else in the world.

If, bhikshus, the brahmin Unnābha were to die at this time, there is no fetter bound by which the
brahmin Unnābha might again come to this world.”

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SD 29.3 S 48.42/5:217-219 Unnābha Brāhmāna Sutta

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