

Meditation on consciousness¹

Consciousness here is easiest understood, for the sake of meditation or reflection, as a momentary series of “event windows” in our life. This is where we reflect on the very basic process of cognition, of our experiencing the world we have ourselves created.

How we see

We need at least 3 conditions for the conscious experience of seeing:

- (1) Our *eyes*² must be in working order: not too bad-sighted, or momentarily blinded by dust, etc, and there must be enough light and the object is within our field of vision.
- (2) There is a *visual object or shape* before us to be seen and recognized.
- (3) Our *attention* is there focussed on this visual object or vision.

Try to observe even now as we read these words. We might move our eyes across these words and not make sense of any of them. We know they are words, but if we do not direct our attention to make out their meaning, they would make no sense.

We see what is before us in an “upright” manner, but the reality is that these images (what we are seeing right now) are formed upside-down on our eyes’ retina. But when these visual impulses reach the brain, the image is rectified, seen as *appearing* upright. Things are not always what they appear to be. What we see is not always what we get.

How we hear

Similarly, we need the three conditions for hearing: the ear, a sound, and our attention. Notice how our mind is able to wander about from sound-source to sound-source, depending on what we want to attend to. We might hear a clock ticking, or a fan turning, or an aircon humming, or the traffic noise, or someone talking. After a while, all these seem to fade away: we have stop attending to them.

This is the same with “sounds” within our minds, like tiny ringings. We seem to notice them at first with some discomfort, but after awhile we simply turn our attention away from them.

How we smell

The three conditions for smelling are: the nose, an odour, and our attention. A pleasant or fragrant smell is easily tolerated, but they are impermanent. Notice that there are moments when we do not seem to detect anything, that is, moments of non-smelling, as it were, even in between our smelling something fragrant.

There is actually more to learn in our experience of an offensive odour. At first, we might even notice a sense of repulsion. However, we can consciously make an effort not to “absorb” more of such an odour, and just let go of the negative reaction. One way is to reflect on why some people smell bad, say in a crowded train: they have been working hard and they are now returning home to their loved ones. We might ourselves smell this way if we were working hard out there, too.

How we taste

¹ This is an excerpt from “Meditation on the 5 aggregates,” SD 42.10 (2), 2013. You are recommended to read the full meditation for your own practice and benefit.

² As these are contemplative exercises, we need not get into the scientific details of how seeing occurs, as this would generate thoughts and distract us. However, if we are very familiar with the scientific process, we could use this knowledge to help our reflection without allowing any thought to intervene discursively. This applies to all the other exercises in this set.

Just before we start eating, try mindfully chewing a spoonful of rice, or a small morsel of bread, or a piece of potato, or a bit of plain soup. Or even a mindful sip of plain water when we are really thirsty. It really tastes good. Then, as the flood of tastes fill our mouth, we begin to notice conflicting tastes, some tasting better than others, and so on.

Notice too that when we are really hungry, any simple food seems to taste great; or when we are really thirsty, just some water or plain soup tastes really good. Taste, as such, is not an absolute experience, but a subjective one. They are impermanent responses depending of various conditions.

How our body feels

This is a reflection on touch and bodily feelings. Consider how we react to heat or cold, or the weather. Consider too that we do not always have the power of touch or feeling. For example, if we hold something too long or too briefly, we don't feel it at all. Sometimes, when there is a lack of blood circulation in our limbs, we lose our feeling of them. Our experience of feeling is not only impermanent, but only makes sense in terms of change and other experiences.

Now with our finger-tips, just gently touch the table-top or some flat object. Consider what we feel at the finger-tips. Is it the object touched that produces the feeling, or does the feeling arise from our own finger-tips, or rather from our own mind? The answer is clear: all feelings, whether bodily or mental, arise in the mind. In other words, all feelings are conditioned and impermanent.

How we think

Our thinking arises in two ways: through the physical senses and in our mind. In our active waking life, we usually experience and process thoughts in response to our sense-consciousnesses or sense-impressions. We think about what we see, hear, smell, taste, or touch. Then, one thought brings on many others, and this often explodes into a mental proliferation (*papañca*).³

Our physical senses, in other words, sense only the 5 elements—earth, water, fire, wind and space.⁴ They are merely sense-impressions of these basic elements. However, the mind processes these experiences and *names* them according to categories we have invented or are familiar with, such as person, name, tree, house, table, cat, car, money, and so on. Our mind is good in making up things and giving names: these are called “mind-objects” or more simply, *thoughts*.

Even when we are physically or socially inactive, especially when we are alone, we can often be “lost in thoughts.” Such thoughts or conceptual impressions arise in our own minds. The mind creates its own ideas of what we have experienced through the 5 physical senses: these are mind-consciousnesses. They create the world we inhabit and project to others. But it is an unstable, shifting world, subject to the uncertain stream of thoughts that flow through us. We are really momentary beings, deluded by the view that we are cold, solid, unfeeling, eternal rock.⁵

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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³ On mental proliferation (*papañca*), see **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18) @ SD 6.14 (2): [link](#).

⁴ Modern science speaks of the 4 states of matter as being solids, liquids, gases and plasma. These however are not the same as the early Buddhist conception, esp where the 4 elements are meant to be a reflection of our shifting state or, better, the process of matter, that we and everything in this world are impermanent, changing and becoming other. On details of the 4 elements, see **Rūpa**, SD 17. 2a: [link](#).

⁵ See **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 (1.3.3): [link](#).