

Vicikicchā

Spiritual doubt

Theme: The fifth of the five mental hindrances

An essay by Piya Tan ©2010

1. *Vicikicchā*: definitions and related words

1.1 ASPECTS OF VICIKICCHĀ.

1.1.1 Meaning of *vicikicchā*. *Vicikicchā* (f) literally means “the desire to discern or think over” (*vicikicchā*), where the prefix *vi-* has a sense of duality or separation, and *cikicchā* comes from the verb *cikicchāti*¹ (“he thinks over, reflects, aims at, intends”). Hence, the verb, *vicikicchati*, “he doubts.” As such, it is usually translated as “doubt, perplexity, uncertainty.” (Dhs 205).

The **Abhidhamm’attha Vibhāvinī Tīkā** (AbhsVT), a sub-commentary (*tīkā*) to the Abhidhamm’attha Saṅgaha (late 6th or early 7th century Abhidhamma compendium by Sumaṅgala), commenting on *vicikicchā*, notes that there are two etymologies for it, namely:

- (1) “vexation due to perplexed thinking” = *vici-* (ie *vicinanto*), “inquiring” + *kicch*, “being vexed”;
- (2) “being devoid of (*vi-*) the remedy (*cikicchā*) consisting in knowledge.”²

More specifically, *vicikicchā* is spiritual doubt, that is, regarding moral virtues and the teachings, which clouds up our meditation (a *psychological hindrance*), preventing us from focusing mentally, that is, as the fifth and last of the five hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇa*).³ On a deeper level, *vicikicchā*, as uncertainty regarding true reality and our capability for self-awakening, is one of the three fetters (*ti samyojana*) that prevents us from becoming a streamwinner (that is, a *soteriological hindrance*). [1.1.2]

1.1.2 *Vicikicchā* as a fetter. The three fetters—self-identity view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b, bata parāmāsa*) and spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*)⁴—are the first three of the ten fetters (*dasa samyojana*),⁵ which bind us to samsaric life, preventing our awakening. Self-identity view is the notion that we have a fixed personality; that we cannot really change; even that we are fated to be what we are. Clinging to rituals and vows is holding on to the view that merely keeping to rituals and vows can bring one purification. Our lack of wisdom fuels our doubts that in turn sustain such wrong views. The first effective step on the path to awakening (as a streamwinner) is for us to overcome these three fetters.⁶ [4.5]

Spiritual doubt [1.1.1], as such, is the uncertainty over what is wholesome and unwholesome, whether a deed should be done or not, the nature of moral virtue and personal development. It is the lack of a des-

¹ Skt *cikīṣati*; desid of √CIT, “to perceive, know, appear,” as in *cinteti* or *ceteti*, “he thinks.”

² See Abhs:BRS 38, 370 n3; Abhs:WG 17. Cf ***Vicikicchā* ti vigatā cikicchā vicikicchā, sabhāvaṃ vā vicinanto kicchati kilamati etāyāti vicikicchā** (NmA 2:429); also Vism 14.177/471. These defs are from **Abhidhamm’attha Vibhāvinī Tīkā** = Abhidhamm’attha, saṅgaha Mahā Tīkā: for eds, see Abhs:WG 373. For Abhs:BRS full text, click [here](#).

³ **D 13.30/1:246, 25.17/3:49, 33.1.10(19)/3:216** (3 fetters), **33.2.1(6)/3:234, 33.3.3.(5)/3:269; S 3.24.14/1:99, 22.84/3:106** f (*dharmesu* ~, “doubt about the teaching), **42.13.42/4:350; A 6.13.7/3:292, 6.89.2/3:438, 7.51.2/4:68, 7.81/4:144, 7.81/4:145; Sn 343, 437, 540; Vv 81** (= *soḷasavatthuka*~ VvA 317); **J 248/2:266; Pug 59; Vbh 168, 341, 364; Dhs 425; Nett 11; Tikap 108, 122, 152 f, 171, 255, 275; Dukap 170 f, 265 f, 289 f; Vism 14.177/471** (= *vigatā cikicchā ti* ~ etc), **19.6/599; VbhA 209; VvA 156; MA 116; Sdhp 459.**

⁴ **D 6.13/1:156, 18.1/2:200; M 2.11/1:9** (*āsava* abandoned by “seeing,” *dassana*), **11.12/3:81; S 22.109/3:161, 48.2+3/5:193, 55.24+25/5:377, 378; A 3.85.2/1:231 f, 4.88.2/2:88 f.** See ***Bhāvanā*** = SD 15.1 (8.3).

⁵ **The 10 fetters** (*dasa samyojana*), which are: (1) self-identity view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), (2) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma, rāga*), (5) aversion (*paṭigha*), (6) greed for form existence (*rūpa, rāga*), (7) greed for formless existence (*arūpa, rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (or remorse) (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61; A 5:13; Vbh 377). In some places, no 5 (*kāma, rāga*) is replaced by ill will (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are the lower fetters (*orambhāgiya*), and the rest, the higher fetters (*uddhambhāgiya*). The abandonment of the lower 5 fetters makes one a non-returner (*opapātika* or *anāgāmī*): see **Ānāpānasati S** (M 118.10 = 7.13). On the streamwinner, see **Entering the Stream** = SD 3.3.

⁶ See **Entering the Stream** = SD 3.3 & **Streamwinning** = SD 70.1.

ire to heal and help ourselves, and being indecisively partial due to our unwise attention (Vism 14.177/-471). Another way of putting is that we need at least to give up fatalism, superstition and blind faith. In short, we need to make sustained efforts to clearly think things out for ourselves.

1.1.3 *Vicikicchā* as an adjective. The word *vicikicchā* also appears as an adjective, for example, *tiṇṇa, vicikicchā* (f), “one who has overcome all doubt,”⁷ which is synonymous with *tiṇṇa, kathānkatha*, “having crossed over uncertainty, free from doubt”⁸ [1.3]. Another related adjective is *nibbīkicchā* (f), resolved as *nis* (without) + *vicikicchā*, meaning “without doubt” or “surety, reliance, trust” (S 12.51).⁹ It is also found in **the Pubba,koṭṭhaka Sutta** (S 48.44), where its commentary glosses it as *nikkankhā*, “without doubt.”¹⁰ This verse from **the Sirimā Vimāna, vatthu** (Vv 146), where the courtesan sings of her attaining of streamwinning and celestial rebirth, has two synonyms, alluding to her freedom from doubt:

<i>Laddhān’ham amata, varam visesanam ekamsikā abhisamaye visesiya asamsayā bahu, jana, pūjitā aham khiḍḍā, ratim paccanubhom’anappakam</i>	Having attained the noble death-free distinctive state, <u>I am certain</u> , distinguished in realization, <u>without a doubt</u> , worshipped by masses am I, No mean sport and delight do I enjoy.
	(Vv 1.16.10/18)

The Vimāna, vatthu Commentary explains *ekamsika* (“I am certain”) as “I was without doubt (*nibbīkicchā*) about the Three Jewels, possessing the certainty that the Blessed One is the fully self-awakened one, that the Dharma is well taught, that the Sangha is well conducted.”¹¹ *Asamsayā* (from *na*, “without” + *samsaya*, “uncertainty, doubt”) means “with uncertainty departed through having abandoned the doubt on account of the 16 points and on account of the 8 points.”¹²

1.1.4 Types of doubts. We find a number of lists of doubts in the Canon and Commentaries. The shortest list is perhaps that of **the 3 kinds of darkness (*tama*)**, found in **the Saṅgīta Sutta** (D 33), stated as follows: “One in uncertain about (*kaṅkhati*), doubts over (*vicikicchati*), is undecided about (*nādhimuccati*), is unsettled over (*na sampasīdati*) about the past, the future, the present.”¹³ Then, we have the 5 kinds of doubt listed in **the Ceto, khila Sutta** (M 16), namely:

- (1) doubt about the Teacher (the Buddha),
- (2) doubt about the Teaching (Dhamma),
- (3) doubt about the Sangha (sainthood and attainment of liberation),
- (4) doubt about the training (regarding moral virtue, mental cultivation and wisdom), and
- (5) resentment towards our colleagues in spiritual training.

As a result, our minds are not inclined to spiritual effort and devotion, lost in these five spiritual wilderness.¹⁴

The 16 doubts are listed in **the Sabb’āsava Sutta** (M 2), **Mahā Taṇhā, saṅkhaya S** (M 38) and **the Paccaya Sutta** (S 12.20) and they reflect the speculative nature of doubts concerning being and becoming, as follows:¹⁵

⁷ V 1:16; D 2.68/1:71, 3.2.21/1:110, 19.12/2:224, 12.27/2:229; M 2.8/1:8 (*kathaṅ, kathī*); A 4.198.13/2:211, 5.-75.12/3:92, 6.16.2/3:297, 8.12.10/4:186, 8.21.6/4:210; Pug 5.3/68, 17-18; DA 1:211. See also Abhs:R 242; DhsA:PR 425n.

⁸ **Uraga S** (Sn 17b), **Cunda S** (Sn 86a), **Sammā Paribbājaniya S** (Sn 367c).

⁹ **Parivimaṃsana S** (S 12.51/2:84 = 11.15) = SD 11.5.

¹⁰ S 48.44.4/5:221 = SD 10.7.

¹¹ *Ekamsikā ti sammā, sambuddho bhagavā, svākkhāto dhammo, suppaṭipanno saṅgho ti ekamsa, gāha, vatī ratana-t, taye nibbīkicchā* (VvA 85).

¹² *Asamsayā ti soḷasa, vatthukāya aṭṭha, vatthukāya ca vicikicchāya pahīnattā apagata, samsayā* (VvA 85).

¹³ D 33.1.10(29)/3:217.

¹⁴ M 16/1:101-104 = SD 51.4. The first 4 doubts are elaborated in **the Attha, sālinī** (DhsA 354), qu below here.

¹⁵ This passage on the 16 doubts is found in **Sabb’āsava S** (M 2.7 f/1:8) = SD 30.3, **Mahā Taṇhā, saṅkhaya S** (M 38.23/1:265) = SD 7.10, **Paccaya S** (S 12.20/2:26 f) = SD 39.5 & **Vism** 19.6/599.

See **Bhadd’eka, ratta S** (M 131) = SD 8.9 Intro (3).

He unwisely attends in this way:

- (1) ‘Was I in the past?’
- (2) ‘Was I not in the past?’
- (3) ‘What was I in the past?’
- (4) ‘How was I in the past?’¹⁶
- (5) ‘Having been what, did I become in the past? [What was I before I became that in the past?]
- (6) ‘Will I be in the future?’
- (7) ‘Am I not in the future?’
- (8) ‘What will I be in the future?’
- (9) ‘How will I be in the future?’
- (10) ‘Having been what, what will I become in the future? [What now would lead me to that future state?]

Or else, right now he inwardly has doubts about the present, thus:

- (11) ‘Am I?’¹⁷
- (12) ‘Am I not?’
- (13) ‘What am I?’
- (14) ‘How am I?’
- (15) ‘Where has this being come from?’
- (16) ‘Where will it [this being] go?’¹⁸

The Paccaya Sutta (S 12.20) says that one who sees dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*) with right wisdom would not speculate in these ways.¹⁹

The Mahā Niddesa, explaining on the phrase *kathaṅkathā, salla*, in its commentary on the *Atta, daṇḍa Sutta* (Sn 939) and **the Cūḷa Niddesa**, commenting on a *Dhoṭaka Māṇava Pucchā* verse (Sn 1063d), gives this important list of **8 doubts**, that is,

(1) doubt about suffering	<i>dukkhe kaṅkhā,</i>
(2) doubt about the arising of suffering	<i>dukkha, samudaye kaṅkhā,</i>
(3) doubt about the ending of suffering	<i>dukkha, nirodhe kaṅkhā,</i>
(4) doubt about the path leading to ending of suffering	<i>dukkha, nirodhagāminiyā paṭipadāya kaṅkhā,</i>
(5) doubt about the past	<i>pubb’ante kaṅkhā,</i>
(6) doubt about the future	<i>apar’ante kaṅkhā,</i>
(7) doubt about the past and future	<i>pubb’antâpar’ante kaṅkhā,</i>
(8) doubt about specific conditionality and dependent arisen states	<i>idap, paccayatā paṭicca, samuppannesu dhammesu kaṅkhā. (Nm 2:616 = Nc 90)</i>

The 8 doubts, on the other hand, as given in the *Abhidhamma*, such as **the Dhamma, saṅgaṇī** and **the Vibhaṅga**, deal with philosophical speculation and emotional uncertainty, as well as with spiritual doubts relating to the teachings and true reality, that is, one has doubts regarding the following:

- (1) the Teacher, that is, the Buddha (*sathā*),
- (2) the Dharma or the true teachings,
- (3) the Sangha or community of noble saints,

¹⁶ Comy: Eg “What was I like, tall or short, fair or dark?” (MA 1:69).

¹⁷ Comy: He doubts his own aggregates, or his own existence (MA 1:69).

¹⁸ Comy says that this passage shows that the influx of views (*diṭṭh’āsava*) (not expressly mentioned in the *Sutta*), is subsumed under the heading of doubt (MA 1:70). “However,” notes Bodhi, “it might be more correct to say that the taint [*āsava*] of views, disclosed by §8, emerges out of unwise attention in the form of doubt. The various types of doubt are already pregnant with the wrong views that will come to explicit expression in the next section” (M:ÑB 1170 n38)

¹⁹ S 12.20.18-20/2:26 f.

- (4) the training (*sikkhā*), that is, keeping to the Buddhist life and realizing our spiritual potential,
- (5) the past (*pubb'anta*),
- (6) the future (*aparanta*),
- (7) both the past and the future, and
- (8) specific conditionality (*idap, paccayatā*) and dependently arisen states (*paṭicca, samuppannesu dhammesu*).
(Nc 1 = Dhs 1004 = 1118) = (Vbh 915/364 f) = DA 988

The **Attha, sālinī**, the commentary to the Dhamma, saṅgaṇī, gives a rather scholastic explanation of these eight doubts, as follows:

- (1) **Doubts about the Teacher** here refers to uncertainty concerning the Buddha's body and his virtues. Doubt regarding the Buddha's body is the uncertainty whether he has the 32 marks or not.²⁰ Doubt regarding the Buddha's virtue is the uncertainty whether he has omniscience, that is, knowledge of the past, the present and the future.²¹ Or, doubting both, one doubts whether there is or not a Buddha endowed with the 80 lesser marks and glorious halo, who has attained omniscience, with knowledge of all things, and is the world savior.
 - (2) **Doubts about the Dharma** here refers to the uncertainty whether there are the four noble paths and their fruitions²² that abandon the defilements; or whether there really is nirvana,²³ the goal of the paths and fruitions; or whether the teaching brings us salvation.
 - (3) **Doubts about the Sangha** here refers to the uncertainty as to whether the Sangha Jewel really comprises the four paths and fruitions (that is, the eight kinds of saints),²⁴ or whether such saints are well-conducted or not; or whether making offerings to the Sangha is fruitful or not.²⁵
 - (4) **Doubts regarding the training** here refers to the uncertainty whether there are the three stages of training or not.²⁶
 - (5) **Doubts regarding the past** here refers to the uncertainty of the existence of the aggregates,²⁷ elements²⁸ and sense-bases²⁹ in the past.³⁰
 - (6) **Doubts about the future** here refers to the uncertainty whether there a future or not.³¹
 - (7) **Doubts about both the past and the future** here refers uncertainty about both times.
 - (8) **Doubts about dependent arising** here refers to the uncertainty whether there is the cycle of the twelve links. By "specific conditionality" is meant how one link conditions another.³²
- (DhsA 354, paraphrased and abridged)

1.2 WORDS RELATED TO *VICKICCHĀ*

1.2.1 Synonyms. A common phrase that is a synonym of *vicikicchā* (as "doubt" in general) is *katham, kathā*, meaning "Saying how? Wondering how?" that is, doubt, uncertainty, unsettled mind, and glossed as *vicikicchā* (Nc 90).³³ Some other examples include:

²⁰ See **Lakkhaṇa S** D 30/3: 142-179 = SD 36.9 Intro (3). See also **Buddhānussati** = SD 15.7(4.1) n.

²¹ On the Buddha's omniscience, see **Kaṇṇaka-t, thala S** (M 90/2: 125-133) = SD 10.8 Intro (2) & **Sandaka S** (M 76) = SD 35.7.

²² On the paths (*magga*), see **Aṭṭha, puggala S** (A 8.59) = SD 15.10a Intro (4).

²³ On problem of explaining nirvana, see **Aggi Vacchagotta S** (M 72) = SD 6.15 Intro (4). On speculating, see **The Buddha's Silence** = SD 44.1.

²⁴ On the 8 kinds of saints (*ariya, puggala*), see **Aṭṭha, puggala S** (A 8.59) = SD 15.10a Intro (4).

²⁵ On the noble Sangha, see **Aṭṭha, puggala S** (A 8.59) = SD 15.10a.

²⁶ On the 3 trainings (*sikkhā*), see **Sīla Samādhi Paññā** = SD 21.6.

²⁷ On the 5 aggregates (*pañca-k.khandha*) = SD 17.

²⁸ On the elements (*dhātu*), see **Bahu, dhātuka S** (M 115/3: 61-67) = SD 29.1.

²⁹ On the sense-bases (*āyatana*), see **Rūpa** = SD 17.2a (9).

³⁰ Cf the doubts about the past in the 16 doubts above.

³¹ Cf the doubts about the future in the 16 doubts above.

³² See **Vism** 17.1-24/517-522.

³³ D 2:282; Sn 500, 866, 1063, 1088; DhA 4:194; as adj and at end of cpd: D 1:110 = V 1:12.

tiṇṇa,katham,kathā ~ *visalla*, “crossed over doubt, dart-free” (Sn 17, 86, 367).
katham,kathā,salla “the dart of uncertainty, doubt” (D 2:283,26 *vicikicchā* ~).
katham,kathī “having doubts, unsettled, uncertain” (D 2:286 *vicikiccho* ~; M 1:8
ajjhattam ~ *hoti*; S 2:26 ~ *bhavissāmi*; Nc 191; DhsA 352).

1.2.2 Antonyms. The phrase *akatham,kathī*, “free from doubt,” is an epithet of an arhat, which the Dīgha Commentary explains as “not saying how and how is this?” (DA 1:211).³⁴ **The Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2) relates how the hindrance of doubt is overcome, leading to the attaining of dhyana, a statement which is also found in **the Puggala Paññatti**, thus:

Vicikiccham pahāya tiṇṇa,vicikiccho viharati, akatham,kathī kusalesu dhammesu vicikicchā-ya cittam parisodheti.

Abandoning **spiritual doubt**, he dwells having crossed over doubt, with no perplexity with regard to wholesome mental states. He cleanses his mind of doubt.

(D 2.68/1:71,29 f = Pug 4.24/59,25 f)

The Dhammapada and **the Sutta Nipāta** describe an awakened practitioner as “a meditator, gone to the far shore, | lust-free, **doubt-free** (*akatham,kathī*)”³⁵ [4.4]. Another phrase used in the clearing up of doubt is *katham,kara* (adj), “how acting, what doing?” as in the question, “How is a disciple good?” (~ *sāvako sādhu hoti*, Sn 376).³⁶

1.2.3 Lexical lists. The Abhidhamma and Commentaries have at least two lexical lists defining *vicikicchā*. The shorter list of 6 synonyms is found in **the Vibhaṅga**, thus:

Yā evarūpā kaṅkhā kaṅkhāyanā kaṅkhāyittam thambhitattam cittassa mano,vilekha—ayam vuccati vicikicchā.

Similarly, uncertainty, being uncertain, a state of uncertainty, mental rigidity, perplexity of mind—this is called **doubt** (*vicikicchā*). (Vbh 560/255 = 915/365)

A longer list of 14 synonyms is found in the Abhidhamma and Commentaries, as follows:

...kaṅkhā kaṅkhāyanā kaṅkhāyittam vimati vicikicchā dveḷhakam dvedhā,patho³⁷ saṃsayo anekamāsa-g,gāho³⁸ āsappanā parisappanā aperiyoḡāhaṇā chambhitattam cittassa mano,vilekha.

...uncertainty, being uncertain, a state of uncertainty, perplexity, doubt, dilemma, a forked path, doubtfulness, dubiety of grasp, indecision, hesitance, lack of depth, mental rigidity, perplexity of mind. (Nm 2:414 = Nc:VRI 77 = 94 = Vbh 168 = 183 = 255 = Dhs 425/85 = 1994/183 = 1118/198 = 1161/205 = 1235/216 = ItA 2:177)³⁹

Here, *parisappanā* (f) (from the verb, *parisappati*), meaning “running about, vacillating, fear, hesitation, doubt,” is one of those artificial words coined by commentators in their glosses. It is found only in combination with *āsappanā*, with reference to the exegesis of “doubt” (*vicikicchā* or *kaṅkhā*).⁴⁰

³⁴ M 1:108; It 49; Sn 534, 635, 868, 1064.

³⁵ *Tiṇṇo pāragato jhāyī | anejo akatham,kathī* (Dh 414 (DhA 4:194) = Sn 638), see closing below.

³⁶ See also J 4:75, 330, 5:148.

³⁷ On *dvedhā,patha*, see **Vammika S** (M 23.7/1:142) = SD 28.13 Intro (5) & **(Thīna,middha) Tissa S** (S 22.-84.25-26/3:108 = SD 32.12).

³⁸ See ItA:M 789 n2.

³⁹ Nm 2:414 (as *katham,kathā,salla*) = Nc:VRI 77 = 94 = Vbh 168 (as *vedanā,paccayā vicikicchā*) = 183 = 255 = Dhs 425/85 = 1994/183 = 1118/198 (as *samyojana*) = 1161/205 (as *nīvaraṇa*) = 1235/216 = ItA 2:177; see DhsA 259 for defs; cf Peṭk 535/132. See also ItA:M 2:789 n1.

⁴⁰ Nc 1; Dhs 425/85 (cf Dhs:R 106 & DhsA 260); DA 1:69.

The term *anekamsa-gāha* is a bit complicated: it is usually resolved as *na* (“not”)+ *ekamsa* (“one-sided”) (as implied by ItA 1:122). Here (Dhs 425/85 etc), it is an explanation of *kaṅkhā* as a synonym of *vicikicchā*.⁴¹ All this is related to *ekamsa* and *ekamsika* (CPD svv), both meaning “one-sided.”

Gāha (from *gaṇhāti*, “he seizes”) here means “doubt, error, preconceived notion” in *anekam sa + gāha* in the definition of *kaṅkhā* and *vicikicchā*.⁴² This meaning is also found in the expression, *gāham viṣṣajjeti*, “he gives up a preconceived notion” (J 279/2:387). The phrase *ekamsa* can also be resolved as *an-eka* (literally, “not one,” “many”) + *aṃsa* (“parts, sides”),⁴³ which *Ñāṇamoli* follows, rendering it as “taking various sides.”⁴⁴

2 *Vicikicchā* on an unconscious level

2.1 VICIKICCHĀ AS A FETTER.

2.1.1 Mental immobility and blindness. Doubt is a hindrance to the development of mental stillness, as well as to the cultivation of liberating insight. **The Te,vijja Sutta** (D 13) compares the effect of the five mental hindrances to a man who, wishing to cross over a river, instead sits on its bank with a shawl covering his head.⁴⁵ Not only do the hindrances immobilize us, but they also prevent us from really seeing where we are going so that we might fall into the river and drown, rather than building a raft to cross its dangerous waters for the safety of the far shore.⁴⁶ [3.1.1]

Doubt, or more exactly, spiritual doubt, prevents the arising of liberating insight, by working as a fetter (*saṃyojana*), holding us on to samsara. Understandably, it is one of the three fetters that need to be broken by streamwinning (M 1:9) [1.1.1]. As such, using the parable of the shawled man on the river-bank, we could see doubt as *a mental immobilization* (the man’s sitting on the bank) and as *a blindness* or unwillingness to see (the man’s being covered in a shawl).

Spiritual doubt arises and grows in us when we do not use our minds wisely, that is, through “unwise attention” (*ayoniso manasikāra*) [2.2.1]. According to **the Vibhaṅga**, “unwise attention” is the taking of what is impermanent as permanent, what is painful as pleasurable, what is not self as self, what is foul as beautiful.⁴⁷ These are called the four “perversions” (*vipallāsa*) (MA 1:64), which are psychological inversions of true reality.⁴⁸

2.1.2 The bases for doubts. **The (Nīvaraṇa Bojjhaṅga) Āhāra Sutta** (S 46.51) investigates further:

7 (5) And what, monks, is food for the arising of unarisen **doubt** (*vicikicchā*) and for the growth and abundance of arisen doubt?

There are, monks, the bases for doubt. Frequently giving *unwise attention* to them is food for the arising of unarisen doubt and for the growth and abundance of arisen doubt.

(S 46.51.7/5:103) = SD 7.15

These “bases for doubts” (*vicikicchā-t,ṭhāniya dhamma*) are phenomena (things that occur in and around us) that, through our perception,⁴⁹ that is, through unwise attention, are regarded as being impermanent, pleasurable and having an abiding entity, and thus fail to see their true nature of impermanence.⁵⁰

Both the Suttas and the Commentaries are silent on the definition of “the bases for doubt” (*vicikicchā-t,ṭhāniya dhammā*). The reason for this, I think, is simple enough: as I have mentioned above, they refer to any event we perceive within or without ourselves, and failing to see their inherent nature of being im-

⁴¹ = *ekamsam gahetum asamatthāya na ekamsa, gāho* (DhsA 260,2 = NmA 429,23).

⁴² Nc 1; Vbh 168; *ekamsa~ & apanṇaka~* “certainty, right thought,” J 1:97. PED sv *gāha*.

⁴³ Vism:Ñ 14.17/533. Expl as *anekamsassa ārammaṇe nānā,sabhāvassa gahaṇa,kārena* (VismMṭ 2:153 VRI).

⁴⁴ See ItA:M 789 n2.

⁴⁵ D 13.29-30/1:246 = SD 1.8.

⁴⁶ For the parable of the raft, see **Alagaddûpa ma S** (M 22.12-14/1:134,30-135,26) = SD 3.13.

⁴⁷ Vbh 936/373; MA 1:64.

⁴⁸ See **Vipallāsa S** (A 4.49/2:52; Vism 22.68/685) = SD 16.11; **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** = SD 13.1 (4.1a).

⁴⁹ On perception, see **Saññā** = SD 17.4.

⁵⁰ See **Nīvaraṇa Pahāna Vagga** (A 1.2/1:4) = SD 16.3 Intro (6).

permanent. Nevertheless, from the commentarial list of means of overcoming doubt [4.2], we can deduce and summarize these 6 conditions as being conducive to doubt: (1) little learning; (2) lack of questioning [and investigation]; (3) ignorance of [monastic or lay] Vinaya practice; (4) lack of conviction [to spiritual practice]; (5) evil friendship; and (6) frivolous talk.

All the above methods of overcoming doubt can be summarized, as done in **the Aṅguttara Commentary**, by “the voice of another” (*parato ghosa*), that is, listening to the true teaching (*saddhamma, -savana*) and wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*), that is, relating all our sense-experiences as being impermanent. (AA 2:157)

2.2 VICIKICCHĀ AS A LATENT TENDENCY.

2.2.1 Unwise attention. According to **the Mahā Māluṅkyāputta Sutta** (M 64), the latent tendency (*anusaya*) that is the root of the fetter of doubt is present even in a new-born baby, even though an infant would not even know anything from which spiritual doubt could arise.⁵¹ Hence, to overcome and uproot spiritual doubt means that we ultimately need to remove the latent tendency of ignorance (*avijjā 'nusaya*) from our minds.

Before we can do this, we need to know how ignorance arises, or to put the question more correctly, what is it that feeds ignorance? According to **the (Nīvaraṇa Bojjhaṅga) Sutta** (S 46.51), giving unwise attention to phenomena that cause doubt is the main factor or “nourishment” that leads to the arising of doubt.⁵² “Unwise attention” (*ayoniso manasikāra*), as we have noted [2.1], is the key condition for the arising of doubt. This is clearly stated in fifth sutta of **the Nīvaraṇa Vagga** (A 1.2.5):

Nāham, bhikkhave, aññaṃ eka, dhammam pi samanupassāmi yena anuppannā vā vicikicchā uppajjati, uppannā vā vicikicchā bhīyyo, bhāvāya vepullāya samvattati, yatha-y-idam, bhikkhave, ayoniso, manasikāro.

Ayoniso, bhikkhave, manasi karoto anuppannā c'eva vicikicchā uppajjati, uppannā ca vicikicchā bhīyyo, bhāvāya vepullāya samvattatī ti.

No other single thing, bhikshus, do I see on account of which unarisen doubt would arise, and arisen doubt would increase, would become abundant, that is to say, bhikshus, unwise attention.

On account of unwise attention, bhikshus, unarisen doubt arises, and arisen doubt increases, becomes abundant. (A 1.2.5/1:4) = SD 16.3

In **the (Akusala Mūla) Añña Titthiya Sutta** (A 3.68), unwise attention is also noted to bring about the arising, increase and strengthening of delusion.⁵³

2.2.2 Wise attention. The opposite of unwise attention is, of course, “wise attention” (*yoniso manasikāra*), which should be directed to the distinction between what is unwholesome or wholesome, what is blameable or blameless, inferior and superior, dark and bright. Turning away from the former, and cultivating the latter, is to stop feeding doubt: this is what is “not food” (*anāhāra*) for doubt. More specifically, doubt is overcoming by the cultivation mental stillness (*cetaso vūpasama*).⁵⁴

This mental stillness works in two ways. First, when the mind is calm, it settles and becomes clear so that we can think better and wisely. Secondly, on a higher level, when the mind becomes very clear, we actually do *not* feel like thinking at all: for, any thought would sound jarring in the beautiful inner stillness. This is a time when we truly begin to *feel*, that is, experience reality directly, without and beyond words. Moreover, when the mind is immersed in blissful stillness, there is no need for any other thought, especially doubts.

2.2.3 Doubt as motivation for investigation. What we have discussed so far shows that the hindrance of doubt is especially concerned with our inability to see the true nature of things. When we cannot understand properly enough the nature of impermanence, we are more likely to be troubled by doubts,

⁵¹ M 64.3/1:433 = SD 21.10.

⁵² S 46.51.7/5:103 = SD 7.15.

⁵³ A 3.68.4/1:201 = SD 16.4.

⁵⁴ S 46.51.18/5:106 = SD 7.15.

especially spiritual doubt. Now let us look at another aspect of doubt, which arises when we begin to see or accept that we have some inherent goodness.

Due to a lack of wisdom, we may often fail to clearly recognize what is wholesome (*kusala*) and what is unwholesome (*akusala*), what is conducive to our wellbeing and spiritual development, and what is not. Conversely, the desire to know what is wholesome and what is unwholesome the “food” (*āhāra*) or key factor for the awakening-factor of dharma-discernment (*dhamma, vicaya sambojjaṅga*).⁵⁵

The (Nīvaraṇa Bojjaṅga) Āhāra Sutta (S 46.51.8-14), in its section on “food for the awakening-factors” (S 46.51.8-14), instructs how we should cultivate the awakening-factors:

- (1) Through giving wise attention to “the bases for the awakening-factor of mindfulness,”⁵⁶ practise the four focuses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), as it conduces to mindfulness (*sati*).
- (2) Wisely attend to the “wholesome and unwholesome states, blameworthy and blameless things, low and sublime states, and dark and bright states,” understanding that they are different. This conduces to dharma-discernment (*dhamma, vicaya*).
- (3) Wisely attend to “the element of initiative, the element of exertion and the element of strength,”⁵⁷ that is, put in every effort to focus the mind correctly. This conduces to energy (*virīya*).
- (4) Wisely attend to the joyful zest (*pīti*): enjoy the meditation, meditate happily.
- (5) Wisely attend to the tranquillity of body and of the mind (*passaddhi*).⁵⁸
- (6) Wisely attend to the sign of calm (*samatha nimitta*), letting it grow ever steady.
- (7) Wisely attend to what conduces to mental equanimity. (S 46.51.9/5:104) = SD 7.15⁵⁹ [3.1.2]

When all these seven stages are fully successful, the five hindrances are abandoned, at least suppressed for the duration of the meditation and for a period thereafter. If other difficulties should arise, then we go on to investigate what is “feeding” the hindrances and deal with them accordingly, which is explained in the following section of the (Nīvaraṇa Bojjaṅga) Āhāra Sutta (S 46.51.15-19).⁶⁰

3 Vicikicchā on a conscious level

3.1 THE NATURE OF VICIKICCHĀ.

3.1.1 Unwholesome doubt. Doubt is often seen in world religions as the enemy of truth, since it prevents faith from arising. Early Buddhism, however, sees faith only truly spiritual where it arises from wisdom. For faith could arise from blind belief. The vitality of wise faith in spiritual liberation is reflected in two well known parables we have discussed, which we shall now compare.

⁵⁵ *Dhamma, vicaya* is sometimes taken as “investigation of the Dharma [Doctrine],” but the meaning here actually is “discernment of bodily and mental phenomena” (D:W Walshe 1995 n690). This is the key awakening-factor, ie, “awakening” itself, while the others are the “factors” that help this awakening to be realized (Nm 456).

Milinda, pañha compares *dhamma, vicaya sambojjaṅga* to a sword, which in order to cut needs the use of the hands (representing the other 5 factors) (Miln 83): see Gethin 2001:185. On the two applications of *dhamma, vicaya*—in the teaching and in the meditation contexts—see **Bojjaṅga Sila S** (S 46.3) = SD 10.1(1) [4.1].

⁵⁶ *Sati, sambojjaṅga-ṭ, thāniyā dhammā*, ie, the 4 focusses of mindfulness (SAPṬ:VRI 2:126).

⁵⁷ *Ārambha, dhātu, nikkama, dhātu* and *parakkama, dhātu* respectively. These are the 3 phases of effort: the initial phase, intermediate phase (gathering strength through overcoming sloth) and full intensity phase respectively: qu at MA 1:284. **The Atta, kāri S** (A 6.38) uses these words in a literal sense (A 6.38.3b, 4-6 = 3:337), as part of the Buddha’s answer that there is self-agency (SD 7.6).

⁵⁸ Comy adds the following 7 conditions that lead to the arising of the awakening-factor of tranquillity: (1) nutritious diet; (2) congenial climate; (3) proper posture; (4) showing impartiality (reflecting on one’s karma and that of others); (5) avoiding restless people; (6) associating with calm people; (7) right resolution (a mind that bent towards the establishment of tranquillity) (SA 3:162).

⁵⁹ In practical terms, the awakening-factors (*bojjaṅga*) are the opposites of the mental hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*), ie, when the latter are suppressed, the awakening-factors begin to operate taking us into the heights of meditative concentration. For further details on each of the 7 awakening-factors, see (Nīvaraṇa Bojjaṅga) Āhāra S (S 46.51.8-14/5:103-105 = SD 7.15. On def of *bojjaṅga*, see **Bojjaṅga Sila S** (S 46.3/5:67-70) = SD 10.15.

⁶⁰ S 46.51.15-19/5:105 f = SD 7.15.

The (Nīvaraṇā) Saṅgārava Sutta (S 46.55) compares spiritual doubt to our looking for our reflection in a bowl of turbid muddy water left in the dark.⁶¹ It is interesting that this comparison parallels closely to **the Te,vijja Sutta** (D 13) parable of the shawled man on the river bank [2.1.1]. In both parables, there are the imageries of *immobility* (the man stuck on the river bank and the water heavy with mud) and *blindness* (the shawl over the man and the bowl of muddy water left in the dark).

In **the Padhāna Sutta** (Sn 3.2), an early account of the Buddha's struggle for awakening, we find a mythology of evil where doubt is personified as the "seventh army" (*pañcamī senā*) in these verses which allude to the mental hindrances:

436	<i>Kāmā te paṭhamā senā dutiya arati vuccati tatiya khup,pipāsā te catutthī taṇhā pavuccati</i>	Sensual pleasures are your first army. Discontent is your second called. Your third is hunger-and-thirst. The fourth is craving called.
437	<i>Pañcamāṃ thina,middham⁶² te chaṭṭhā bhūṇū pavuccati sattamī vicikicchā te makkho thambho te aṭṭhamo</i>	Your fifth is sloth-and-torpor. The sixth is fear called. Your seventh is doubt. Hypocrisy and obstinacy are the eighth.
438	<i>Lābho siloko sakkāro micchā,laddho ca yo yaso yo c'attānaṃ samukkamse pare ca avajānati</i>	Gain, repute, honour, and whatever fame ill-gotten, and whoever praises himself but belittles others,
439	<i>Esā namuci te senā kaṇhassābhīppahārīnī na naṃ asūro jināti jetvā ca labhate sukhaṃ</i>	that, Namuci, is your army— the strike-force of the dark one [Kaṇha]. Who is not a hero [Jina] cannot conquer it, but having conquered it, he gains happiness. (Sn 436-439) = SD 51.5

Here, mental cultivation is depicted as a battle or struggle against evil, a language familiar to the Buddha's audience who witnessed wars between the Indian kings and the republican leaders of their times over territorial expansion and control.

The main actor, whom the Buddha apostrophizes,⁶³ in the Padhāna Sutta is Māra the evil one, who is represented by two titles: Namuci and Kaṇha. **Namuci** (Sn 439a) is originally the name of an asura (fierce war-like demon in the R̥g Veda) because he does not release (*na muñcati*) his victims.⁶⁴ Māra is also called **Kaṇha**, the "dark one" (Sn 439b),⁶⁵ which is an ancient synonym for *pisāca* ("goblin," D 1:93).⁶⁶

Apparently, as Buddhism spread over ancient India, and the region became more unified and peaceful, we see a shift in the kinds of imagery and parables used to reflect the prosperity and concerns of such times. The Majjhima Commentary, for example, compares doubt to a traveller going through a danger-

⁶¹ This simile, and the other four are found in **(Nīvaraṇā) Saṅgārava S** (S 46.55/5:121-126) = SD 3.12. For comy on the similes of the 5 hindrances (MA 2:318-321), see SD 10.13 Appendix.

⁶² On this as *thīna-m-iddha* (increase of sleepiness), see **Thīna,middha** = SD 32.6 (1.1).

⁶³ To *apostrophize* is to address an imaginary or absent person or being; (n) apostrophe.

⁶⁴ SnA 386; Nm 455.

⁶⁵ Also at D 2:262, M 1: 377, Sn 355, Tha 1189.

⁶⁶ Ironically, the Skt equivalent of Kaṇha is **Krishna** (*kr̥ṣṇa*) who appears in the Bhagavad Gītā (ch 1) where he justifies war and encourages Arjuna to kill his enemies. Though it is anachronistic to compare Māra with Krishna (for the latter is a later arrival), there are some interesting parallels between them on a doctrinal level. It is possible that while Kaṇha, in early Buddhism refers to Māra, the Buddha's antithesis, the later brahminical theologians strategically let him evolve into Kṛṣṇa, whose worship began prob around 2nd century BCE.

ous territory (MA 2:319).⁶⁷ Under such circumstances, doubt can have an uncertain impact on such people which could be described as *kampana,rasa*, “whose essence is to tremble” (DhsA 259).

On a positive note, **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2) and **the Mahā Assa,pura Sutta** (M 39), reflecting a more prosperous sociopolitical situation, gives this parable of the merchant who arrives safely through the wilderness, thus:

Now, monks suppose that a man, carrying money and goods, is journeying on a road through the wilderness.⁶⁸ As time passes, he eventually emerges from the wilderness, safe and sound, with no loss of property. The thought would occur to him,

‘Before, carrying money and goods, I was journey on a road through the wilderness. Now I have emerged from the wilderness, safe and sound, with no loss of my property.’

Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

(D 2.69-75/1:71-73) = SD 8.10 & (M 39.14/1:276) = SD 10.13

A similar sentiment is said of a person who is cleared of the hindrance of doubt, so that with his mind goes on to focus in a calm and clear and attain wisdom.

3.1.2 Wholesome doubt. As we have already noted [2.2.3], doubt is not always a bad thing, especially in situation that merit doubt, or where it serves as a prelude to knowledge and understanding. In a number of discourses, we see the Buddha reassuring the people that their doubt is justified. In **the Pāṭaliya Sutta** (S 42.13), for example, the Koliya headman Pāṭaliya tells the Buddha that he has heard people claiming that the Buddha is an illusionist (*māyāvī*) and asks the Buddha about the truth of the matter, and in the ensuing conversation, Pāṭaliya goes on to tell the Buddha that he is confused by the conflicting claims of the four sectarian teachers who used to visit his rest-house

Bhante, we are uncertain and in doubt: Which of these good recluses speak truth and which speak falsehood?”

“It is fitting that you, headman, are uncertain, that you doubt. Doubt has arisen in you over what is doubtful.” (*Alaṃ hi te gāmaṇi kaṅkhituṃ alaṃ vicikicchitūṃ. Kaṅkhanīye ca pana te thāne vicikicchā uppannā ti*) (S 42.13.42/4:350) = SD 65.1

In **the Kutūhala Sālā Sutta** (S 44.9), the wanderer Vaccha,gotta tells the Buddha that he has heard about the various teachings and claims on rebirth by the six sectarian teachers, and is confused about them:

“There is uncertainty in me, master Gotama, there is doubt in me. How should the Dharma of the recluse Gotama to be understood?”

“It is fitting that you are uncertain, that you doubt, Vaccha. Doubt has arisen in you over what is doubtful.” (S 44.9.11-12a/2:400) = SD 23.15

And in **the Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65), the Kālāmas complain to the Buddha that various recluses and brahmins have come to them proclaiming their own doctrines and reviling those of others, leaving them confused as to who is speaking the truth:

Bhante, we are uncertain and in doubt: Which of these good recluses speak truth and which speak falsehood?”

“It is fitting that you are uncertain, that you doubt, Kālāmas. Doubt has arisen in you over what is doubtful.” (A 3.65.2/1:189) = SD 35.4a

Furthermore, it is recorded in **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) that even on his death-bed, the Buddha allows the wanderer Subhadda to approach him and have his doubts resolved (D 2:149).⁶⁹ Some

⁶⁷ See *Nīvaraṇa* = SD 32.1 (3.2.5).

⁶⁸ “Journeying...through the wilderness,” *kantār’addha,magga*.

time later, the Buddha goes on to encourage the assembly to voice any doubt they might have, so that it could be clarified while he is still alive (D 2:155).⁷⁰ All this shows that although doubt may hinder meditation and insight, it still has its proper role if it leads to investigating what should be investigated.

3.2 IMAGERIES OF VICIKICCHĀ. Doubt has been compared to a shawled man on a river bank [2.1.1] and to a bowl of muddy water standing in the dark [3.1.1], and mythologized as an evil army [3.1.1]. Psychologically, doubt is a mental dilemma (at least), and this is represented by a fork in our path (*dvedhā, patha*) in **the Vammika Sutta** (M 23) and **the (Thīna, middha) Tissa Sutta** (S 22.84) [1.2.3n]. There is also a double metaphor for doubt: one troubled by doubt is like a traveller or merchant going through a dangerous wilderness or desert, and one who has cleared away his doubts is like one who has safely reached his destination, with his life and goods intact [3.1.1].

The Ceto, khila Sutta (M 16) applies the wilderness imagery to the mind, taking it as “mental barrenness” (*ceto, khila*) [1.1.4]. When the mind is riddled with doubts (or even a single doubt), it temporarily loses its capacity for clarity, and so becomes like a wilderness.⁷¹ Then, we lose our energy for spiritual training, becoming mentally stuck and lost, as if blinded. All these parables for doubt are also united by the imagery of sight and seeing:

- the muddy bowl of water standing in the dark cannot be seen (doubt clouds up the mind);
- Māra’s armies are fearful to behold (doubt induces fear in us);
- the forked path can be seen, but we are not sure which is the right way;
- as a traveller or merchant, we know our way and can see the path, but there is great fear that danger might lurk ahead; and
- the wilderness or desert can be vast and empty, so that we can see nothing over the distance.

The (Saṅkhitta) Kilesa Sutta (S 46.33) gives us another imagery of sight (or beauty), comparing the five hindrances to various metals that corrupt the purity of gold. In this simile, doubt is represented by silver. When silver is mixed with gold, it becomes brittle and unfit for use by the goldsmith, since then its malleability is significantly diminished.⁷²

From all such imageries, we can also deduce that doubt can arise as a hindrance internally (concerning our mind-objects) or externally (regarding physical sense-objects), as stated in **the (Nīvaraṇa Bojjhaṅga) Pariyāya Sutta** (S 46.52).⁷³ Moreover, according to **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33)⁷⁴ and the (Nīvaraṇa Bojjhaṅga) Pariyāya Sutta (S 46.52),⁷⁵ doubt may also arise regarding the past, the present, or the future.

4 How to overcome vicikicchā

4.1 DOUBT AND THEORETICAL INQUIRY. We have already examined the importance of dharma-discernment (*dhama, vicaya*), and its roles in bring about the awakening-factors [2.2.3]. We will now look at an alternate aspect of *dhama, vicaya*, that is, as that of “investigating the Dharma [the teaching].” In fact, this is actually how **the (Bojjhaṅga) Sila Sutta** (S 46.3) speaks of *dhama, vicaya*.

The (Bojjhaṅga) Sila Sutta opens with an instruction regarding cultivating what is conducive to overcoming doubt, that is, associating with Dharma-spirited monks, thus:

⁶⁹ D 16.5.23-28/1:148-152 = SD 9.

⁷⁰ D 16.6.5/1:155 = SD 9.

⁷¹ M 16/1:101-104 = SD 51.4.

⁷² S 46.33/5:92 = SD 74.6. For a more elaborate parable of impurity in gold, see **Paṃsu, dhovaka S** (A 3.100a-1:253-256) = SD 19.11.

⁷³ S 46.52/5:110 = SD 62.6.

⁷⁴ D 33.1.10(29)/3:217. Cf **Bhadraka S** (S 42.11.3/4:327).

⁷⁵ For imageries on the 5 hindrances, see **(Nīvaraṇa) Saṅgārava S** (S 46.55/5:121-126) = SD 3.12; **(Manta) Saṅgārava S** (A 5.193/3:230-236) = SD 73.3. For comy on the similes of the 5 hindrances (MA 2:318-321), see SD 10.13 Appendix. See also Nyanaponika, *The Five Mental Hindrances*, BPS Wheel no 26, 1961:27-34.

2 Bhikshus, those monks who are **accomplished in moral virtue, accomplished in mental concentration, accomplished in wisdom, accomplished in liberation, accomplished in the knowledge and vision of liberation—**

- | | |
|---|-------------------------|
| even the <u>sight</u> of such monks | is very helpful, I say; |
| 3 even <u>listening</u> to those monks | is very helpful, I say; |
| even <u>approaching</u> those monks | is very helpful, I say; |
| even <u>attending on</u> those monks | is very helpful, I say; |
| even recollecting those monks | is very helpful, I say; |
| even <u>going forth after</u> those monks | is very helpful, I say. |

4a What is the reason for this?

Because when he has heard the Dharma from such monks, he dwells in solitude by way of **two kinds of solitude**, that is, the solitude of body and the solitude of mind.⁷⁶

4b Dwelling thus in solitude, he recollects and reflects upon the Dharma.

(S 46.3/2-4/5:67) = SD 10.15

A more elaborate list of such learning stages is found in **the Caṅkī Sutta** (M 95) and **the Kīṭāgiri Sutta** (M 70), that is, the 12-step “gradual training” (*anupubba, sikkhā*), namely:

- (1) Faith (*saddhā*) conduces one to visit (that is, to see) a teacher.
- (2) Approaching (*upasaṅkamana*) the teacher conduces one to respectfully attending to the teacher.
- (3) Respectfully drawing near (*payirupāsana*) to the teacher conduces to lending the ear.
- (4) Lending the ear [listening attentively] (*soṭāvadhāna*) conduces to listening to the Dharma.⁷⁷
- (5) Listening to the Dharma (*dhamma, savana*) conduces to remembering the Dharma.
- (6) Remembering the Dharma (*dhamma, dhāraṇā*) conduces to the examination of its meaning.
- (7) Investigating the meaning (*atth’upaparikkhā*) of the teachings helps us reflectively accept them (or to accept them after pondering on them).
- (8) Reflectively accepting the teachings (*dhamma, nijjhāna, khanti*)⁷⁸ conduces to will-power [desire].
- (9) Will-power [wholesome desire] (*chanda*) conduces to effort.
- (10) Exertion (*ussāha*) conduces to scrutiny.
- (11) Weighing [balancing the practice] (*tulanā*) conduces to striving.
- (12) Striving on (*pahit’atta*), he realizes through his own body the supreme truth and sees it by penetrating it with wisdom [arhatness].

(M 70.23-24/1:480 = SD 11.1) = (M 95.20/2:173 = SD 21.15)

The Mahā Gopālaka Sutta (M 33) summarizes these 12 steps as follows. To clear his doubt and gain wisdom, we should from time to time approach monastics (and teachers) who are well learned, well versed in the teaching traditions (*āgat’āgama*), Dharma experts, Vinaya experts, experts in the monastic codes, and question them as appropriate. Such a student is said to be like a cowherd who knows the river-crossings (*tittham jānāti*).⁷⁹ The imagery is very apt as a cowherd must know where the safe shallow waters are so that the cows can have their drink, and also where it is safe to cross the river—that is to say, we need to water our minds with wisdom, and avoid what is not conducive to wholesome learning.

⁷⁶ “One dwells in solitude...solitude of mind,” *dvaṃyena vūpakāsenā vūpakatṭho viharati kāya, vūpakāsenā ca citta, vūpakāsenā ca*. Sometimes, 3 kinds of solitude (*viveka*) are mentioned: (1) solitude of body (*kāya, viveka*), ie physical solitude or keeping to moral virtue; (2) solitude of mind (*citta, viveka*), ie the dhyanas and the noble paths and fruitions; and (3) solitude from the substrates (*upadhi, viveka*), ie a life free from the substrates of existence, or nirvana (Nm 26, 140, 157, 341).

⁷⁷ This incl esp totally switching off our handphones and similar devices, and definitely not using them during such teaching or meditation sessions. We should also prepare ourselves by not conversing about unrelated topics, so that the mind is calm and clear to receive the Dharma.

⁷⁸ The phrasing here shows or suggests how *dhamma, nijjhāna, khanti* should be resolved, ie with *dhammā* as pl.

⁷⁹ M 33.22/1:223 = SD 52.6.

A similar discourse on questioning to clear our doubts is given in **the Sakka Pañha Sutta** (D 21). The discourse records how Sakra, the leader of the heaven of the 33, in what appears to be their first meeting, asks the Buddha a set of questions. When the Buddha finishes answering all his questions, Sakra declares himself as “here, crossed over doubt am I, one with uncertainty abandoned” (*tiñṇā m’ettha kaṅkhā, vigatā kathamkathā*). The discourse closes by stating that Sakra’s removal of doubt is quite complete, as he attained streamwinning while listening to the Buddha’s answers.⁸⁰

4.2 KNOWING THE BUDDHA. The central figure in Buddhism is of course the Buddha. Historically, we can know the Buddha through his teachings, the Buddha Dharma. Listening to the Dharma and asking questions about it are conducive to understanding it for the removal of spiritual doubt. **The Dhamma-s-savanna Sutta** (A 5.202) says that these are the five benefits of listening to the Dharma (*ānisamsā dhamma-s,savane*), namely,

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| (1) He hears what has not been heard | (<i>assutaṃ suṇāti</i>), |
| (2) Having heard, he purifies himself | (<i>sutaṃ pariyodāpeti</i>), |
| (3) He crosses over doubt | (<i>kaṅkhaṃ vitarati</i>), |
| (4) He straightens his views | (<i>diṭṭhiṃ ujuṃ karoti</i>), and |
| (5) His mind brightens with faith | (<i>cittamassa pasīdati</i>). |

(A 5.202/3:248) = SD 3.2 (5.1); cf D 33.2.1(25)/3:241

The Buddha Dharma is an expression of the Buddha’s wisdom, which encompasses his full and right understanding of life and the world through his own striving and realization. In short, all this is his direct experience of true reality which in turn liberates him from ignorance and suffering, establishing him in goodness and wisdom.

The Buddha does not have to teach the Dharma to us, and we have done nothing for the Buddha to deserve the benefit of his teachings. Yet the Buddha teaches the Dharma to the world, out of compassion, that is, he teaches the liberating Dharma even when we do not deserve.⁸¹

Even when, on the Buddha’s last day, the twin sal trees, out of season, burst forth with blossoms and fruits; celestial flowers falling upon and covering him; and fragrant sandalwood wafted in the air, resonant with divine music—the Buddha declares that this is *not* the supreme worship of the Buddha. The supreme worship is practising the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, and living the Dharma.⁸²

Such a Dharma-moved life would include our listening to the Dharma, which means that we would hear things we have not heard before, that is, how to truly live a morally virtuous life and its benefits, how to know, train and free our minds, and to be fully liberated from ignorance and suffering.

When we hear and understand the Dharma, we begin to purify ourselves. This is not a ritual purification, which is merely an external act and belief-based. This is an inner purification which begins with respecting our body and speech, as they have become the vehicles of awakening. Respecting the body and speech means communicating with others in a wholesome way so that wherever we are we inspire a wholesome community and society. This is the spirit of keeping to the five precepts.

As our understanding of the Dharma, we begin to see more clearly what life and the world are. As our understanding of life and reality deepen, our doubts clear up and lessen. As we our understanding widen by seeing more directly into true reality, we are able to let go of doubts about our salvation. We begin to straighten our views regarding how to realize our natural potential to save ourselves without any external help.

Just the thought of being able to saving ourselves is so empowering, like realizing that we have recovered from a troubling sickness, or that we have not been sick in the first place! And to brighten up with faith that if we have this potential of self-liberation, other beings, too, would be able to be free from ignorance and suffering. They too can be assured of salvation.

⁸⁰ D 21/2:263-289 = SD 70.6.

⁸¹ It would have been gratitude if we had done something of great value to the Buddha that he teaches us the Dharma. Then that would be his *gratitude* to us.

⁸² D 16.5.2-3/3:137 & SD 9 Intro (7b).

Such a wonderful liberated feeling of joyful and wise faith is common amongst the great saints of the Buddha's time. One of the best examples of this is recorded in **the Sampasādanīya Sutta** (D 28), which is a testimony of Sāriputta's lion-roar by his presentation of 16 unsurpassable qualities of the Buddha. The Sutta concludes by stating that these topics listed therein are especially efficacious for overcoming doubt in regard to the Buddha.⁸³

4.3 KNOWING THE DHARMA. Knowing more about the Buddha is a great way of spiritually strengthening ourselves, if we are faith-inclined, which inspires us to go on to know more about the Dharma, so that we grow wiser in our faith. Knowing the Dharma is always beneficial because we will come across the Dharma again and again in our lives, whether we call ourselves "Buddhist" or not. This knowledge gives us the vocabulary and the mental tools with which we can correctly identify what is troubling us, and the skills with which to solve such troubles.

Like those familiar with the sounds of a drum or a conch-shell, says **the Sotānugata Sutta** (A 4.-191), if we are familiar with the Dharma, we would have no doubt about it when we hear it again.⁸⁴ **The Dhamma-s, savana Sutta** (A 5.202), as we have noted, says that we could overcome doubt (*kankham vitarati*) by merely listening to the Dharma, such as the wanderer Dīgha, nakha, as reported in **the Dīgha, -nakha Sutta** (M 74).⁸⁵

Although listening to the Dharma may *occasion* the attaining of streamwinning in some (especially those who have the spiritual capacity to realize the truth), this is not always the case. Nevertheless, clearing our doubts conduces to preparing ourselves for the arising of the Dharma-eye [4.5]. A number of discourses record junior monks visiting elder monks to question them to clear their doubts (*kankham paṭivindenti*), although such occasions do not make streamwinners of them.⁸⁶

The same goes for understanding moral virtue and the Vinaya. Just as lay followers need to well understand the precepts and the value of moral virtue,⁸⁷ monastics, on their part, need to remove ignorance and doubts regarding the Vinaya, which explains why the title given to the commentary on the monastic code of conduct (*pāṭimokkha*) is **Kaṅkhā, vitaranī**, the "Dispeller of Doubt." Monastics who understand the Vinaya well and diligent in practising it, will find it easier to direct their energies to their avowed spiritual life.

The degree to which Vinaya matters might lead to the arising of doubts in monastics is evident in such names as **Kaṅkhā Revata**, "Revata the doubter," who apparently is given this nickname because he greatly worries about proper moral conduct (UA 314). Kaṅkhā Revata succeeds in settling his doubts for good. **The Kaṅkhā Revata Sutta** (U 5.7) tells us how, while he is seated in meditation, he reviews his own purification through overcoming doubt (*kaṅkhā, vitarana, visuddhi*, U 60).⁸⁸

As this reference shows, the removal of *kaṅkhā*, a synonym for *vicikicchā*, is not only vital to the proper keeping to the Vinaya, but also in spiritual development, which constitutes a distinct stage in the series of purifications leading up to liberation (M 1:147).

The urgency of overcoming doubt is reflected in the fact that a number of important Commentaries which list the following ways of overcoming and preventing doubt:

- (1) a good knowledge of the discourses,
- (2) clarification of the discourses through questioning,
- (3) being well versed in the Vinaya,
- (4) strong commitment (great resolution),

⁸³ D 28/3:99-116 = SD 14.14, esp the ending (D 22/3:116).

⁸⁴ A 4.191.2-3/1:185 f = SD 58.2.

⁸⁵ M 74.15/1:501 = SD 16.1. The same sutta records how Sāriputta, who is standing beside the Buddha, fanning him, merely *listening* to the discourse, becomes an arhat (M 74.14/1:500 f).

⁸⁶ D 34.2.1(1)/3:285,9; M 33.24/1:234,36; A 3.20/1:117,31, 8.2.3/4:152,8, 10.11.3/5:16,5, 11.18.25/5:352,14.

⁸⁷ On the 5 precepts, see **Veḷu, dvāreyya S** (S 55.7/5:352-356) = SD 1.5; on **moral virtue**, see **Sṭlānussati** = SD 15.11.

⁸⁸ U 5.7/60 = SD 32.15.

- (5) spiritual friends, and
 (6) conducive conversation. (SA 3:168; ItA 182; VbhA 1294/274; see VbhA:Ñ 337 f)

4.4 DOUBT AND MEDITATIVE INQUIRY.

4.4.1 Two kinds of faith. The opposite of doubt is faith (*saddhā*), which arises when our doubts about the Dharma or the Vinaya are cleared up. But faith can be already present in us in some measure. We could be faith-inclined people who easily believe others. This is good when we follow good and wise teachers, but bad when we are misled by dubious gurus.

Early Buddhism distinguishes between blind faith or “rootless faith” (*amūlika, saddhā*), that is, baseless or irrational faith,⁸⁹ and wise faith (*avecca-p, pasāda*),⁹⁰ that is, “faith with a good cause” (*ākāravati, saddhā*), faith founded on seeing.⁹¹ The Vinaya defines the word *amūlika* as “not seen, not heard, not suspected.”⁹² This definition is a *legal* one, ascertaining whether something has been seen, or spoken by someone, or suspected to have happened so that proper action follows. But both in a Vinaya and Dharma situation, further investigation is often necessary or desirable for the truth to be revealed. True reality, as a liberating experience, however, can only be discovered by us for ourselves: it is a personal and direct experience.

The British Buddhist scholar **Rupert Gethin** explains that there are two kinds of faith: the cognitive and the affective:

Faith in its cognitive dimension is seen as concerning belief in propositions or statements of which one does not—or perhaps cannot—have knowledge proper (however that should be defined); cognitive faith is a mode of knowing in a different category from that knowledge. Faith in its affective dimension is a more straightforward positive response to trust or confidence towards something or somebody... the conception of *saddhā* in Buddhist writings appears almost, if not entirely affective, the cognitive element is completely secondary.” (2001:207; my emphases)⁹³

Using Gethin’s definition, we could say that in the Vinaya, the truth is mostly *cognitive* since the main purpose here is to ascertain whether a precept has been broken, or whether a case or event has been properly carried out, and so on. We have faith in the Vinaya, just as we have faith in a country’s law that is well formulated and executed with justice.

Affective faith, on the other hand, arises mostly out of the Dharma. It is a joyful confidence that arises from having heard the Dharma, or from benefitting from the goodness of others, or from rejoicing in our wholesome and selfless acts and in those of others. Such a Dharma-moved faith empowers us with spiritual courage or intrepidity (*vesārajja*) because where no doubt lurks, fear is absent, too.⁹⁴

4.4.2 Doubt and dharma-investigation. The contrast between cognitive faith and affective faith can also be seen in the relationship between the hindrance of doubt (*vicikicchā nīvaraṇa*) and the awakening-factor of dharma-discernment (*dharmā, vicaya sambojjhaṅga*). The same factor that overcomes the former is responsible for the development of the latter—and this is very significant. This shows that in early Buddhism, doubt is not truly overcome by faith or belief alone. Doubt can only be wholesomely and fully overcome and uprooted by the clarity and wisdom arising from a process of discernment and investigation—both actions pregnant in the verb, *vicinati*, of which the noun is *vicaya*.

According to the detailed treatment of the awakening-factors given in **the Ānāpānasati Sutta** (M 118), the awakening-factor of dharma-discernment arises based on the previous development of mindful-

⁸⁹ **Caṅkī S** (M 95.13/2:170,21).

⁹⁰ **Pañca Vera, bhaya S** (S 12.41.11/2:69) = SD 3.3.

⁹¹ **Vīmaṃsaka S** (M 47.15/1:320,8); **Apāṇṇaka S** (M 60.4/3:401,23).

⁹² *Diṭṭha, suta, parisāṅkita* (V 2:243); **amūlakam nāma aditṭham asutaṃ aparisaṅkitaṃ** (V 3:163); VA 3:585; *diṭṭhena vā sutena vā parisāṅkāya vā*: V 1:159 f, 162 f, 172, 4:51, 2:244-246, 255, 276, 4:314; A 4:277.

⁹³ See also ERE: Faith, & Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963:387.

⁹⁴ On *vesārajja*, see **Piṇḍolya S** (S 22.90/3:91-94) = SD 28.9a Intro (3).

ness.⁹⁵ This suggests that the type of discernment required to overcome doubt is closely related to mindfulness, in the sense of *mindfully* “investigating” the true nature of phenomena.

In fact, notes **Analyo**, the author of *Satipaṭṭhāna: The direct path to realization*, is explicitly qualified to be a “straightforward” and “direct” path (*ekāyana magga*),⁹⁶ an expression explained in the commentary to imply that *satipaṭṭhāna* is not a forked path (*eka, maggo ayaṃ, na dvedhā, patha, bhūto*, MA 1:229). As such, the cultivation of mindfulness is clearly the appropriate method for overcoming the forked path of doubt.⁹⁷

4.5 STREAMWINNING AND DOUBT. Let us end our study of *vicikicchā* by looking at a crucial point in the overcoming of doubt in the spiritual path. When spiritual doubt is uprooted, we attain streamwinning (*sotāpatti*),⁹⁸ so that the streamwinner (*sotāpanna*) is described as “one who has overcome doubt” (*tiṇṇa, vicikiccha*).⁹⁹

The final removal of spiritual doubt, in other words, occurs at the moment of streamwinning itself (A 1:242; Sn 231), when, according to **the Pubba Koṭṭhaka Sutta** (S 48.44), the deathless element (nirvana) is seen as the final goal.¹⁰⁰ Such direct realization is famously described in the discourses as the arising of the Dharma-eye (*dhamma, cakkhu*), thus:

And in ⟨so-and-so⟩ there arose the dustfree stainless Dharma-eye [vision of truth],¹⁰¹ thus:
“All that is subject to arising is subject to ending.”¹⁰²

⟨The streamwinner⟩ saw the truth,¹⁰³ won the truth, knew the truth, plunged into the truth, crossed over doubt, abandoned uncertainty, who, independent of others, has gained self-confidence [intrepidity] in the Teacher’s Teaching.¹⁰⁴

According to **the Abhabba Sutta** (A 10.76), only after the tree fetters—self-identity view, spiritual doubt, and attachment to rituals and vows [1.1.2]—has been overcome in this way, will it be possible to

⁹⁵ M 118.31-32/3:85 = SD 7.13.

⁹⁶ On *ekāyana*, see **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10.2/1:55) = SD 13.3.

⁹⁷ See Analyo 2003:235 f, 2009:73. See also Brahmavamsa 2006:46 f.

⁹⁸ S 24.1/3:203 = SD 70-9.

⁹⁹ D 3.2.2/1:110 = SD 21.3.

¹⁰⁰ S 48.44 /5:220-222 = SD 10.7.

¹⁰¹ **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3.2.2/1:110), **Kūṭa, danta S** (D 5.30/1:148), **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14.3.11/2:41, 3.14/2:42, 3.21/2:44), **Sakka Pañha S** (D 21.2.10/2:288); **Upāli S** (M 56.18/1:380), **Dīgha, nakha S** (M 74.15/1:501), **Brahm’āyu S** (M 91.36/2:145), **Cūla Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 147.9/3:280), **Gilāna S 1** (S 35.74.15/4:47), **Rāhulo’vāda S** (S 35.121.13/4:107), **Dhassma, cakkha-p, pavattana S** (S 56.11.18/5:423 f); **Sarada S** (A 3.92.4/1:242), **Sīha S** (8.12.-9/4:186), **Ugga S 1** (A 8.21.6/4:210), **Ugga S 2** (A 8.22.6/4:213); **Suppabuddha Kutthi S** (U 5.3/50); ... *pana... ~assa virajam vīta, malam dhamma, cakkhum udapādi*. Comy says that the “Dharma-eye” (*dhamma, cakkhu*) is the path of streamwinning. In **Brahm’āyu S** (M 91.36/2:145), it refers to the (first) 3 holy paths (*tiṇṇam maggānāni*), ie as culminating in non-return; in **Cūla Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 147.9/3:280), the destruction of influxes (*āsava-k, khaya*).

¹⁰² *Yaṃ kiñci samudaya, dhammaṃ sabbam taṃ nirodha, dhamman ti*: this sentence shows the mode in which the path arises. The path takes ending (*nirodha*, or nirvana) as its object, but its function is to penetrate all conditioned states as being subject to arising and ending (*taṃ hi nirodham ārammaṇam katvā kicca, vasena evaṃ taṃ sabba, saṅkhatam paṭivijjhantam uppajjati*, MA 3:92).

¹⁰³ “The truth” (*dhamma*) here refers to the 4 noble truths. Having seen the truth for himself, he cuts off the fetter of doubt and now has “the noble and liberating view that accordingly leads the practitioner to the complete destruction of suffering” (*ya’yaṃ diṭṭhi ariyā niyyānikā niyyāti tak, karassa sammā, dukkha-k, khayāya*, **Kosambiya S**, M 48.7/1:322)

¹⁰⁴ *Atha kho... diṭṭha, dhammo patta, dhammo vidita, dhammo pariyoḡāha, dhammo tiṇṇa, vicikiccho vigata, -kathan, katha vesārajja-p, patto apara-p, paccayo satthu, sāsane*. The basic statement as at V 1:12; **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3.2.2/1:110); **Kūṭadanta S** (D 5.29/1:149); **Cūla Saccaka S** (M 35.24/1:234, 26/1:235); **Upāli S** (M 18/1:380); **Mahā Vaccha, gotta S** (M 73.10/1:491); **Dīgha, nakha S** (M 74.15/1:501); **Brahmāyu S** (M 91.36/2:145); **Sīha S** (A 8.12.9/4:186); **Ugga S 1** (A 8.21/4:209); **Ugga S 2** (A 8.22/4:214); **Kutthi S** (U 5.3/49).

remove lust, anger and delusion be removed in due course.¹⁰⁵ The discourses mention other benefits of overcoming doubt: **the Abhaya Sutta** (A 4.184) says that, if any deadly illness were to occur to us, we will meet it with calm and composure,¹⁰⁶ and **the Bhaya Bherava Sutta** (M 4) adds that we will be able to live a solitary forest life (or any kind of spiritual solitude) without fear.¹⁰⁷

The streamwinner is one whose spiritual doubt is fully uprooted, and is a noble disciple endowed with unwavering faith (*avecca-p,pasāda*, S 5:357) in the true teaching. The point here is to remind ourselves that faith is needed so that we will understand, it is with understanding that true and wise faith arises: it is the result of the proper removal of doubt through discernment.¹⁰⁸ [4.4.2]

*Yo imaṃ paḷi, pathaṃ duggaṃ
saṃsāraṃ moham accagā
Tiṇṇo pārāgato jhāyī
anejo akathaṇ, kathī
anupādāya nibbuto,
tam ahaṃ brūmi brāhmaṇaṃ.*

Who has gone beyond this difficult path, an obstacle,
has gone beyond samsara that is delusion,
a meditator, gone to the far shore,
lust-free, doubt-free,
quenched with no more clinging—
him I call a brahmin.

(Dh 414 (DhA 4:194) = Sn 638)

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100304; 100314, 100715; 101118

¹⁰⁵ A 10.76.25/5:147 = SD 2.4. Evidently, with the attaining of streamwinning, all the 3 fetters, incl spiritual doubt, are *simultaneously* eradicated: A 3.92.4/1:242,19; Sn 231.

¹⁰⁶ A 4.184.6/2:175 = SD 14.8.

¹⁰⁷ M 4.12/1:18 = SD 44.3.

¹⁰⁸ See “Faith in Buddhism” = SD 35.4a Intro (4).