

**SD 62.10d****(Chakka) Saññā Sutta**The (Sixes) Discourse on Perceptions | **A 6.110**Theme: *Saññā* and its many roles

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## 1 Summary and significance

### 1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY AND RELATED SUTTAS

#### 1.1.1 Summary of A 6.110

In this Sutta, *saññā* means memories and perceptions. **The (Chakka) Saññā Sutta** (A 6.1109) is about the contents of our memories and perceptions, especially those that are unwholesome—*sensual perception, perception of ill will, and violent perception*—and which need to be abandoned for wholesome ones—perceptions of renunciation, of non-ill will and of non-violence respectively—which are to be cultivated.

#### 1.1.2 Related suttas

**1.1.2.1** These 3 suttas in **the Tika Vagga** [SD 62.10a (1.1.1 f)] are closely related and should be studied together in their natural sequence:

|         |                               |  |           |
|---------|-------------------------------|--|-----------|
| A 6.109 | <b>(Chakka) Vitakka Sutta</b> | the 3 unwholesome <u>thoughts</u> and their opposites    | SD 62.10c |
| A 6.110 | <b>(Chakka) Saññā Sutta</b>   | the 3 unwholesome <u>perceptions</u> and their opposites | SD 62.10d |
| A 6.111 | <b>(Chakka) Dhātu Sutta</b>   | the 3 unwholesome <u>elements</u> and their opposites    | SD 62.10e |

**1.1.2.2** While **the (Chakka) Vitakka Sutta** (A 6.109) explains the kinds of thoughts and intentions, **the (Chakka) Saññā Sutta** (A 6.110) describes how memory and perception shape and affect our thoughts. **The (Chakka) Dhātu Sutta** (A 6.111) discusses how we construct “something” (ideas and fancies) out of nothing (or nonself).

We should thus first familiarize ourselves with the nature of “thoughts” (*vitakka*) [A 6.109];<sup>1</sup> then, study “perception” (*saññā*), and how it functions with *vitakka*; finally, we go on to see what “elements” (*dhātu*) are, and how the 3 function together.

### 1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

#### 1.2.1 (Chakka) Saññā Sutta (A 6.110)

**The (Chakka) Saññā Sutta**, the (sixes) discourse on perception, is a brief introduction to the laity and beginners on the practical nature of **perception**. The teaching is succinct; it basically only says: Perceptions that are sensual, ill willed or violent should be abandoned. In their place, wholesome perceptions, that is, those of renunciation, non-ill will and non-violence, are to be cultivated. This is what the Buddha teaches.

#### 1.2.2 The perceptual process

**1.2.2.1** It should be noted that *vitakka* functions in 2 ways: one “thinks” (*vitakketi*) and one “ponders” (*vicāreti*) repetitively: *anuvitakketi anuvicāreti*.<sup>2</sup> This dual function occurs following *saññā* (perception), which is in turn preceded by *vedanā* (feeling). Essentially, this is the perceptual process according to early Buddhist psychology, which can be represented thus in this flow-chart:

<sup>1</sup> See Cousins’ insightful note on *vitakka, vicāra* in his “Vitakka/Vitarka and vicāra” (1992:139); also at SD 62.10c (2.9.2.5).

<sup>2</sup> D 3:242; A 1:264, 3:178

(1) *vedeti*, “one feels” → (2) *sañjānāti*, “one perceives” → (3) *vitakketi vicāreti*, “one thinks and ponders.”

(1) *Vedanā*, this is the experience of feelings (before any emotions arise). Let’s say one sees someone that one loves (say one’s parent or one’s child) on a happy occasion, such as a family gathering. On *seeing* them, one feels happy; these are *pleasant feelings*.

(2) *Saññā*, this is one’s perception of the person and occasion. One recalls some past happy events with that person and relates these to the person; the pleasant feelings continue and one feels gratified and comforted.

(3) *Vitakka, vicāra*, this is thinking and pondering. The “thinking” is an initiating (a first) thought, “This is my mother ... my father ... my daughter ... my son ... .” Further thinking connects one deeper with that person by way of being together, going through various experiences. [SD 62.10c (2.8)]

**1.2.2.2 *Saṅkhārā*** (karma-formations) refers the emotions that arise in the above connection. On this happy occasion, one’s emotions are likely to be those of “letting go” (*nekkhamma*, renunciation), that is, accepting them as they are, “loving” (*avyāpāda*, non-ill will), and “caring” (*avihiṃsa*, non-violence). These are, of course, wholesome karma. A bad memory may momentarily arise—as *vitakka*—but one at once lets it go; that’s fine (as stated in **the (Chakka) Vitakka Sutta** (A 6.109), SD 62.10c). On the other hand, when a negative thought arises and one dwells on it (*vicāra*), one then is filled with some negative thoughts; bad mental karma has been formed. This is still not too late if one mindfully switches to loving-kindness cultivation instead, even at some later time.

Now that we are able to see how emotions (*saṅkhārā*) bring about karma, we can apply another term used in the 3<sup>rd</sup> text—**(Chakka) Dhātu Sutta** (A 6.111)—mentioned above [1.2.1.2]. The interesting term *dhātu* has a number of important senses used in early Buddhist psychology.<sup>3</sup> Here, the term *dhātu* means “a psychological element; a disposition; constitution.” It often refers to a personal tendency (*ajjhāsayā*), that is, one’s wish, disposition or intention.<sup>4</sup>

**1.2.2.3** Clearly then, *dhātu* is a term for “intention” (*cetanā*), that is, the “(conative) elements” in personal action. To be exact, there are 6 “elements”—as listed in **the (Chakka) Dhātu Sutta** (A 6.111), and elsewhere, such as **the Vibhaṅga**, that is,

|                                |                          |            |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|------------|
| the element of sensual element | <i>kāma, dhātu,</i>      |            |
| the element of ill will        | <i>vyāpāda, dhātu,</i>   |            |
| the element of violence        | <i>vihiṃsā, dhātu,</i>   |            |
| the element of renunciation    | <i>nekkhamma, dhātu,</i> |            |
| the element of non-ill will    | <i>avāpāda, dhātu,</i>   |            |
| the element of non-violence    | <i>avihiṃsā, dhātu.</i>  | (Vbh 86,4) |

We should thus see the perceptual process not as a sequence of discreet stages, but rather as a series of overlapping stages [1.2.2.1]. Thus, it can be said that:

One feels → one perceives → one thinks and ponders over it.

<sup>3</sup> See DP sv dhātu.

<sup>4</sup> S 2:154,20 = It 70,1

Even as one thinks and ponders over one's perception, karma is created. In fact, since the stages of the perceptual process are fluid and overlapping, we should be mindful as soon as one notices one feels an experience (*vedeti*).

In fact, in early Buddhist psychology, "to feel" is a synonym for "to experience." Thus, **the (Chakka) Arati Sutta** (A 6.113) advises us to abandon any state of discontent (*arati*), violence (*vihiṃsā*) or any conduct against what is true and real (*adhamma, cariyā*), and to instead cultivate gladness (*muditā*), non-violence (*avihiṃsā*) and dharma-faring (*dhamma, cariyā*).

## 2 Functions of *saññā*

### **2.0 RULES OF CONTEXTUALITY**

#### **2.0.1 Definitions of *saññā***

*The APA Dictionary of Psychology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed 2015) defines **perception** as:

the process or result of becoming aware of objects, relationships, and events by means of the senses, which includes such activities as recognizing, observing, and discriminating. These activities enable organisms to organize and interpret the stimuli received into meaningful knowledge and to act in a coordinated manner.

This is, of course, not an early Buddhist definition of *saññā* although the definition is very helpful in giving us the words and ideas with which to think about how the suttas use the word and idea of *saññā*.

#### **2.0.2 Early Buddhist psychology**

**2.0.2.1** Early Buddhist psychology is not modern psychology in the sense that the former is the way the early Buddhist texts describe the nature of the mind and human behaviour in personal and social contexts in terms of moral and mental developments as the bases for personal awakening, that is, freedom from suffering. Early Buddhist psychology arose well over a millennia before modern psychology.

We see today a growing acceptance and adoption by modern psychology of Buddhist psychology, especially its ideas and terms such as mindfulness, meditation, stillness and so on. This does not mean that modern psychology and early Buddhism share the same psychological theory or practices though the parallels and overlappings are numerous and remarkable. However, the differences between the two systems are both significant. Modern psychology is a secular discipline while early Buddhism is a teaching and path of awakening.

**2.0.2.2** It is thus important to understand that Buddhist psychological terminology and modern psychological terminology may often sound the same or even overlap in their definitions, but they often have very significant differences in meaning, usage and purpose. Thus, terms like "the mind," "mindfulness," "meditation," "consciousness," "perception" and so on may be common to both but do not always have the same senses or usages, and are best taken in their respective contexts.

More significantly, early Buddhism is not trying to formulate or explain some scientific theory of meditation psychology. Rather, the suttas are a record of personal instructions given by the Buddha and the Buddha's direct disciples regarding the nature of the mind and meditative experience to practitioners so that they better understand what they are going through and have the words for discourse.

### 2.0.3 The 3 basic dimensions of *saññā*

**2.0.3.1** In early Buddhism, *saññā* or “perception” has 3 broad dimensions, that is, those of:

- |  |       |
|--|-------|
| (1) “perception,” that is, as an aggregate ( <i>khandha</i> );                             | [2.1] |
| (2) “consciousness,” as a synonym of <i>viññāṇa</i> , but used in a different context; and | [2.5] |
| (3) “ideas,” as objects of meditation or as meditation methods.                            | [2.4] |

These terms are themselves not water-tight definitions but they focus on the key usage or application of *saññā* in a particular context, and hence have significant overlappings so that they all deserve the term *saññā*. These overlappings are vital in reminding us that we are dealing with related terms in a network of mental functioning and spiritual experiences.

**2.0.3.2** In terms of usage, however, *saññā*, basing itself on any one of the above 3 dimensions—whether one is *perceiving*, or *being conscious at some sense-experience*, or *cultivating a meditation-object*—goes on to cover a much wider range of our experiences. Broadly, then, when **perceive** [2.1] something, we also apperceive, remember, recognize, name, recollect and are conscious at some level [2.2.2.1].

Thus when we “perceive,” we are actually experiencing our mind that is experiencing realities out there on our sense-fields and mind. However, when speaking of our “experience,” the words necessarily, as it were, cut away a jig-saw piece of that experience so that we can talk about it, discourse over it, communicate it. None of these “jigsaw” pieces is thus our complete experience; we communicate only a piece of this experience.

When someone communicate this one or even a few pieces of their experience, we can only relate properly to it or to them when we have actually experienced them ourselves. Then again how we identify such pieces of another’s experiences, we only begin to have a clearer picture when we hear them often enough with a clear mind. In this way, we piece together the jigsaws of another’s experience. In short, then, this is how we **know** a person.

**2.0.3.3** Essentially then early Buddhism teaches us to understand that what is before us—what we *see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think*—to be but a part of an on-going whole. We should then work to see this jigsaw piece of experience as a window into how we, right this moment, are interconnected with everything else in and around us. It is like looking at a map; in order to know where we are and where we should be heading, we must look at how where we are connected with the other parts of the map. Seeing this vista of experience and reality, we are then ready to move on the journey heading for a safe place.

Our spiritual journey comprises knowing where we are right now which then shows us what the next step is or can be, and to take that next step, one after another. The present moment is our mindfulness (*sati*); the next step we make is our awareness (*sampajaññā*). When all this is applied properly, there is progress, there is **the path**.

In this sense, nothing is “fixed” in our experience; it is how we connect with everything else through our wisdom. We are related to everyone and everything around us; our being is relative. “Our” being means that we are *not alone* but exist related to “all” through our 6 senses. We *are* the world.

For this reason, too, we have very few technical terms in the early Pali texts. The texts—especially the suttas—help to guide us see and understand this existential relativity and how to live a fuller life with this wisdom. **Pali polysemy**—the openly relative nature of Pali words—allows the subtler or more complex aspects of mental processes to be explained in a versatile manner more relevant to actual experience, and to enrich our understanding of such experiences. This is the language of the mind and

body living interactively to rise from our past, free ourselves from the future; and by living in the on-going present, we can touch the time-free element; so that we can see nirvana.

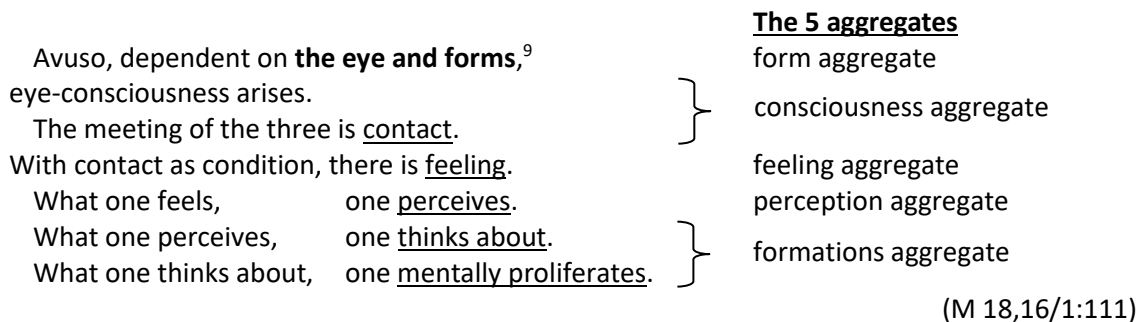
## 2.1 SAÑÑĀ AS AN AGGREGATE

### 2.1.1 Saññā as a mental factor

**2.1.1.1** *Saññā* is one of the 5 aggregates (*pañca-khandha*) and one of the 7 mental factors (*cetasika*)<sup>5</sup> that are inseparably bound up with all consciousness [2.1.1.2]. **The 5 aggregates** are as follows:

- |                   |                 |   |
|-------------------|-----------------|---|
| (1) form          | <i>rūpa</i>     | the body with the 5 sense-faculties activated by the mind;    |
| (2) feeling       | <i>vedanā</i>   | the initial and foremost level of experience;                 |
| (3) perception    | <i>saññā</i>    | our memory and its influences on our feelings;                |
| (4) formations    | <i>saṅkhārā</i> | the moral quality of our responses to recognized feelings;    |
| (5) consciousness | <i>viññāṇa</i>  | the interactive network of sense-faculties and sense-objects. |

From this summary, we can see that the 5 aggregates are not separate entities, but function interdependently as an integral whole. Each aggregate functions fully dependent on every other aggregate.<sup>6</sup> As evident from **the Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18), for example, we see perception co-operating<sup>7</sup> or co-arising with other aspects of the perceptual process comprising the aggregates, thus:<sup>8</sup>



**Diagram 2.1.1.** Dynamics of the 5 aggregates

**2.1.1.2** *Saññā* is one of the 7 mental factors (*cetasika*)<sup>10</sup> that are inseparably bound up with all consciousnesses. The suttas describe “**mind**” (*nāma*), that is, any consciousness, as comprising 5 factors:

<sup>5</sup> Whereas in the suttas all phenomena of existence are summed up under the 5 aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness), the Abhidhamma treats them under 3 philosophical aspects: consciousness, mental factors and form (*citta*, *cetasika*, *rūpa*). In this set, **mental factors** (*cetasika*) comprise feeling, perception and the 50 mental formations, totaling 52 mental factors [2.1.3.1]. See BDict sv *cetasika*, Tab II, III; SD 17.1a (4.3.2); SD 60.1b Table 13.1.1.

<sup>6</sup> See SD 17.1b (1).

<sup>7</sup> Note that here this word means “working together,” and not its usual dictionary sense.

<sup>8</sup> “Perceptual process” refers to the mental process centering upon perception (*saññā*); “cognitive process” refers to the same, centering upon consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

<sup>9</sup> Here and the foll phrase includes the other 5 sense-processes: *ear, sound and ear-consciousness ... mind, thoughts and mind-consciousness*. The mind is understood as the “6<sup>th</sup> sense” as the 6 sense-bases (*saḷ-āyatana*).

<sup>10</sup> The suttas def “**mind**” (*nāma*), thus any consciousness, as comprising feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), intention (*cetanā*), sense-contact (*phassa*), and attention (*manasikāra*): **Mahā Nidāna S** (D 15,20), SD 5.17; **Sammā**

feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), intention (*cetanā*), sense-contact (*phassa*), and attention (*manasikāra*).<sup>11</sup> The Abhidhamma adds 2 more mental factors: life faculty (*jīvita*) and one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*); thus totalling the 7 “universal” mental factors.<sup>12</sup>

Very briefly, these **7 universal mental factors** (*sabba, citta, sādharmaṇa*) are mental factors present in all consciousnesses (*sabba, citta*). According to Abhidharma psychology, they perform the most basic and essential cognitive functions, without which there is no consciousness of any object.

**(1) Contact** (*phassa*) as a mental factor refers to the “sense-stimulus” when the sense-faculty meets (“touches”) the object that has arisen, thereby initiating the cognitive event. In terms of the fourfold defining device used in the Commentaries,<sup>13</sup> contact has the characteristic of touching. Its function is impingement, as it causes consciousness and the object to impinge. Its manifestation is the concurrence of consciousness, sense-faculty, and object. Its proximate cause is an objective field that has come into focus.<sup>14</sup>

**(2) Feeling** (*vedanā*) is the mental factor that first and foremost experiences (“feels”) the object. This is when no “emotion” (*saṅkhārā*) has arisen but there is only the bare affective quality of an experience, which may be either pleasant, painful or neutral. Feeling is said to have the characteristic of being felt (*vedayita*). Its function is experiencing, or it is to enjoy the desirable aspect of the object. Its manifestation is the relishing of the associated mental factors. Its proximate cause is tranquillity.<sup>15</sup> While the other mental factors experience the object only derivatively, feeling experiences it *directly and fully*.

Thus, at this stage, *the other factors* are (in a popular simile) like a cook and his assistants who prepare dishes for a king but who only sample the food while preparing them, while feeling is the king who enjoys the meal as much as he likes.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in the 5 aggregates, form (the body) is listed first; then feeling, followed by perception, formations and consciousness. (The last aggregate, as it were, is the most passive of them.)

**(3) Perception** (*saññā*) is the characteristic of recognizing the qualities of the object. Its function is to make a sign as a marker for recognizing, “This is the same,” or it is that of recognizing what has been previously perceived. It becomes manifest as the interpreting of the object (*abhinivesa*) by way of the features that had been apprehended. Its proximate cause is the object as it appears. Its procedure is compared to a carpenter’s recognition of certain kinds of wood by the mark he has made on each.

**Diṭṭhi S** (M 9), SD 11.14; **(Nidāna) Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2), SD 5.15. The Abhidhamma adds 2 more mental factors: life faculty (*jīvita*) and one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*); thus totalling the 7 “universal” mental factors (Abhs 2,2; Abhs:BRS 78-81).

<sup>11</sup> **Mahā Nidāna S** (D 15,20), SD 5.17; **Sammā Diṭṭhi S** (M 9), SD 11.14; **(Nidāna) Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2), SD 5.15.

<sup>12</sup> Abhs 2,2; Abhs:BRS 78-81.

<sup>13</sup> The 4 defining devices are (1) its characteristics (*lakkhana*), ie, the salient quality of the phenomenon; (2) its function (*rasa*) is its performance of a specific task (*kicca*) or attainment of a goal (*sampatti*); (3) its manifestation (*paccupatṭhāna*) is the way it presents itself as experience; and (4) its proximate cause (*padaṭṭhāna*) is the principal condition on which it depends. (Peṭk 221; PmA 1:14, 2:434; DhsA 63). See foll n.

<sup>14</sup> See Vism 4.88-100, 9.93-96, 14.134-177; DhsA 107-133, 247-260 (DhsA:M 142-180, 330-346).

<sup>15</sup> Comys seem to suggest “tranquillity” precedes feeling. But here tranquillity as proximate cause applies solely to the pleasant feeling arisen when developing concentration; or Comys take *padaṭṭhāna* as meaning “proximate effect.” A more general proximate cause for feeling would be contact, following the principle “with contact as condition, there is feeling” (*phassa, paccayā vedanā*). For a fuller treatment of feeling in all its variety: Abhs 3.2-4 (Abhs:BRS 115-119).

<sup>16</sup> Cf a similar parable at **Suda S** (S 47.8/5:149-152); Vism 4:122/150 f.



**(4) Volition** (*cetanā*) is the mental factor concerned with the actualization of a goal, that is, the conative or volitional aspect of cognition. The Commentaries explain that *cetanā* organizes its associated mental factors in acting upon the object. Its characteristic is the state of willing, its function is to accumulate karma, and its manifestation is coordination. Its proximate cause is the associated states. Just as a head student recites his own lesson and also makes the other students recite their lessons; so when volition starts to work on its object, it sets the associated states to do their own tasks as well. Volition determines the moral quality of the action, and is thus the most significant mental factor in generating karma.

**(5) One-pointedness** (*ekaggatā*) is the unification of the mind on its object. Although this factor comes to prominence in the dhyanas, where it functions as a dhyana-factor, the Abhidhamma teaches that the germ of that capacity for mental unification is present in all types of consciousness, even the most rudimentary. There, it functions as the factor which fixes the mind on its object. One-pointedness' characteristic is non-wandering of the mind or non-distraction. Its function is to bring together or unite the associated states. It is manifested as peace, and its proximate cause is happiness.<sup>17</sup>

**(6) Mental life-faculty** (*jīvit'indriya*). There are of 2 kinds of life-faculty, the mental, which vitalizes the associated mental states, and the physical, which vitalizes physical conditions. Only the mental life faculty works as a mental factor. It has the characteristic of maintaining the associated mental states, the function of arousing them, manifesting their presence, and its proximate cause is the mental states to be maintained.

**(7) Attention** (*manasikāra*, “mind-making”) functions as the mental factor responsible for the mind's advertence to the object, by virtue of which consciousness becomes aware of the object. Its characteristic is the conducting (*sāraṇa*) of the associated mental states towards the object. Its function is to fix the associated states to the object. It is manifested as engaging an object, and its proximate cause is the object itself. Attention is like a ship's rudder, keeping it on course for its destination, or like a charioteer who drives the well-trained horses (the associated states) towards the goal (the object). *Manasikāra* should be distinguished from *vitakka*: while the former turns its associated states towards the object, the latter applies them to the object. *Manasikāra* is a mental factor that must be present in all states of consciousness [2.1.1.2]; *vitakka* is a specialized factor which is not indispensable to cognition.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.1.2 Saññā as an object

**2.1.2.1** *Saññā* is sixfold as the perceptions of the 5 physical sense-objects and of mental objects: one sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches (feels) and thinks. It is here the awareness of an object's distinctive marks is established. **The Mahā Vedalla Sutta** (M 43) and **the Khajjanīya Sutta** (S 22.79), for example, define perception (*saññā*) as follows:

It perceives, avuso, it perceives, therefore it is called **perception**.<sup>19</sup>  
And what does it perceive?

<sup>17</sup> These last 2 comy statements however only fit one-pointedness at a very deep level. Apparently, Comys seem to take *padaṭṭhāna* (proximate cause) as “proximate effect” (as above).

<sup>18</sup> We have here only examined the universals amongst the 52 mental factors (*cetasika*) (sufficient for our study here). For the rest, see Abhs ch 2 (Abhs:BRS 76-113).

<sup>19</sup> *Saññānāti saññānāti ti kho āvuso, tasmā saññā ti vuccati*. On *saññā*, see SD 17.5. **Sue Hamilton**, in *Identity and Experience*, points out that although the def of *viññāṇa* here encroaches on that of *saññā*, we should understand that *saññā* does the actual discrimination of the 5 sensory objects, identifying say, a taste, more precisely, while *viññāṇa* “is the awareness by which we experience every stage of the cognitive process, including the process of discriminating” (1996a:92). See S:B 1072 n114; also *Viññāṇa*, SD 17.8a.1.



It perceives blue, it perceives yellow, it perceives red, it perceives white.

It perceives, avuso, it perceives, therefore it is called perception.

(M 43,8/1:293), SD 30.2 = (S 22.79,9/3:87), SD 17.9

Perception of course encompasses all the senses and the mind, not just colours and seeing. The examples of colour are used here to highlight the apperceiving of an external reality (a colour) and its corresponding memory and recognition, “this or that colour.” One can thus also perceive sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts. Each of these becomes an object of perception.

**2.1.2.2** The Sanskrit form of *saññā* is *saṃjñā*—from the prefix *saṃ* (Latin *com* or Greek *syn*, suggesting “putting together”) + √JÑĀ, “to know,” to know by putting it together—that is, based on our memories and identifying those memory fragments in what is perceived. That **idea** [2.3] is then named (*nāmati*, “bent towards”)<sup>20</sup> what one recalls; it is but a “name” (*nāma*)<sup>21</sup> we have created. In other words, the perceived object is shaped in accordance with our memories. This is in fact how we recognize people we know; but the habit goes deeper: we tend to see the present person or situation with what we have experienced before. Perception is, as such, a conditioned reaction.

**2.1.2.3** Among the aggregates, **perception** (*saññā*) works very closely with consciousness (*viññāṇa*).<sup>22</sup> Once we are conscious of an object through one of the sense-doors (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind)—that is, through “contact” (*phassa*) or sense-stimulus—we perceive (*sañjānāti*, or technically, *apperceive* [2.3.1.1]) it as “form”: we then try to make sense of it by naming it so that we can control it, as it were, and do things with it.

This is the well-known “forming and naming” (*nāma, rūpa*) process by which we create something out of nothing! We are caught in a “**God**” **complex** of expecting and demanding that these “creations” or “creatures” of ours should serve and obey us in every way. This is of course **craving** (*taṇhā*) rooted in existential ignorance (*avijjā*) of samsaric dimension. We have created ourselves.

What we are perceiving are merely what we have “**named**” and tagged as “agreeable,” “disagreeable” or simply disregarded when we feel nothing about it. The mind becomes especially obsessed with the agreeable and the disagreeable. As a result, mental constructs and ideas proliferate (*papañceti*). From one comes many, and from many, many more. And so suffering begins and rapidly grows, feeding on itself in a life crowded with names of this and that. Yet, the name is not the named.<sup>23</sup>

### 2.1.3 Saññā as memory

**2.1.3.1** When *saññā* is a repeated perception of an object, whereby these marks are recognized, it functions as **memory**.<sup>24</sup> *Sati* (mindfulness) however occurs only in “good consciousness” (*sobhana, citta*). This means that *sati* is here *sammā, sati*, “right mindfulness,” referring to the 4 “establishments of mindfulness” (*satipaṭṭhāna*). However, *sati* (Skt *smṛti*) as meaning “memory” still has its place in the definition of *saññā* given in **the Dhamma, saṅgaṇī**, but it always refers to “good consciousness.”

Memory, however, is not included amongst the 52 mental factors (*cetasika*)<sup>25</sup> constituting consciousness [2.1.1.1]. Surely, we may ask, why memory (*sati*), being such a frequent and important mental

<sup>20</sup> S 1:186; Sn 1143; Nc §327.

<sup>21</sup> SED: *saṃjñā*. On other words with √JÑĀ, “to know,” see SD 17.1b (1.3).

<sup>22</sup> For further discussion on the differences between perception and consciousness, see SD 17.8a (8.2).

<sup>23</sup> SD 17.4 (4); SD 26.3 (5.1.2.5).

<sup>24</sup> See Nyanaponika, *Abhidhamma Studies*, Kandy, 1<sup>st</sup> ed 1949; 5<sup>th</sup> ed 2010: 67-69 (Appendix 2).

<sup>25</sup> Abhidhamma philosophy recognizes **52 mental factors** (*cetasika*), classified into 8 broad categories: (1) 7 universals; (2) 6 occasionals; (3) 4 unwholesome universals; (4) 10 unwholesome occasionals; (5) 19 beautiful univer-

function that is neutral, should not be included amongst the 52 mental factors? This question of memory as an ethically “neutral” function was actually raised in the Atthasālinī (DhsA), thus:

In this (unwholesome) consciousness *faith, mindfulness, wisdom, and the 6 qualitative pairs* have not been included. And why?

There is no faith in an unbelieving mind, therefore that has not been included ... . And there is no mindfulness in a mind unguarded by mindfulness, therefore that has not been included. How, then, do not adherents of wrong views remember their own deeds?

They do. But that is not *sati* (“mindfulness”). It is merely an unwholesome thought-process occurring in that aspect (*ten’ākārena akusala, citta-p, pavatti*). That is why *sati* is not included (in unwholesome consciousness).

But why, then, is wrong mindfulness (*micchā, sati*) mentioned in the suttas?

For the following reasons: because unwholesome aggregates are devoid of mindfulness; because it is the opposite of mindfulness; and in order to complete the group of factors of the wrong path (*micchā, magga*).

For these reasons, wrong mindfulness is mentioned in an exposition of relative truth (*pariyāyena*). But in an exposition of absolute truth (*nippariyāyena*) it has no place. (DhsA 249)

**2.1.3.2** Some of us may wonder that the above still leaves unanswered the question why memory has not been included in the list *under some other name*, such as *paṭissati*, to distinguish it from *sammā sati*. The Subcommentary (*ṭīkā*) to the above passage [2.1.3.1] does, in fact, give further explanation for the omission of memory from the list of 52 mental factors, thus:

[According to DhsA 249 passage just quoted] wrong mindfulness is explained as the unwholesome aggregates that are devoid of mindfulness and contrary to it. This again should be understood as follows: When reflecting on what was done long ago, those unwholesome aggregates are associated with keen perception (*paṭusaññā, sampayutta*). (DhsMT:Be 120)

Accepting this suggestion, we can assume that ancient Buddhist psychology included the main part of the process of memory in perception (*saññā*); it is merely as an aspect of perception. It should be recalled that *saññā* belongs to the pentad of sense-contact<sup>26</sup> and to the factors common to all consciousness (*sabba, citta, sādharmaṇa*) [2.1.1.2], so that the requirement of universal occurrence as a neutral and general factor is fulfilled.

We are supported in our theory by the definition of *saññā* found in **the Atthasālinī** (DhsA 110). Two explanations are given in the defining categories (*lakkhaṇa, rasa*, etc):

According to **the 1<sup>st</sup> explanation**, the characteristic (*lakkhaṇa*) of perception, applicable to all cases, is “perceiving” (*sañjānana*, literally, “fully cognizing”); the function (*rasa*) is “re-cognizing” (*paccabhiññāṇa*), said to be applicable only to certain cases, namely, when perception proceeds with the help of a distinctive mark of the object, either fixed to it intentionally (eg, as by woodcutters to trees) or being a characteristic of the object itself (eg, a mole on a person’s face).

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sals; (6) 3 abstinences, (7) 2 illimitables; (8) 1 non-delusion. The factors are called “List of Dhammas” in Nyanaponika, *Abhidhamma Studies*, 1949; 5<sup>th</sup> ed 2010. For full list, see Abhs:BRS 79 Table 2.1; details 77-91; SD 17.1a (4.3.2); SD 17.2a (Table 10); SD 60.1b Table 13.1.1.

<sup>26</sup> The visual pentad comprises: visual consciousness → visual contact → feeling arising from visual contact → perception of visual objects → volition relating to visual objects. The same applies to each of the other faculties.

**The 2<sup>nd</sup> explanation** is said to apply to *all* cases of perception. The characteristic is again “perceiving.” The function is: “making marks as a condition for a repeated perception” (ie, for recognizing or remembering; *puna,sañjānana,paccaya,nimitta,karaṇa*).

**2.1.3.3** To sum up: perception (*saññā*) is the taking hold,<sup>27</sup> the marking, and the remembering of the object’s distinctive marks. In this connection it is noteworthy that “mark” or “sign” is also one of the other meanings of the word *saññā* itself. Not only the “taking up” but also the “marking” and the “remembering” of marks may be relevant to all cases of perception if it is understood as follows: What really happens in a simple act of perception is that some features of the object (sometimes only a single striking one) are selected.

The mental note made by that perception is closely associated with those selected features; that is, we attach, as it were, a tag to the object (like labelling specimens), or make a mark on it (as woodcutters do on trees). So far every perception is “a making of marks” (*nimitta,karaṇa*). In order to understand how “remembering” or “recognizing,” too, is implied in every act of perception, we should mention that in the Abhidhamma analysis the apparently simple act of seeing **a sunset**, for example, is in reality a very complex process composed of different phases, each consisting of numerous smaller combinations of conscious processes (*citta,vīthi*), which again are made up of several moments of consciousness (*cittak,khaṇa*) following each other in a definite sequence of diverse functions.<sup>28</sup>

Among these phases there is one that connects the present perception of a sunset with a previous one, and there is another that attaches to the present perception the name “sunset,” remembered from a previous experience. Not only in relation to similar experiences in a relatively distant past, but also between those infinitesimally brief single phases and successive processes, the connecting function of rudimentary “memory” must be assumed to operate, because each phase and each lesser successive moment has to “remember” the previous one—a process called by the later Abhidhammikas “grasping the past” (*atīta,gahaṇa*).

**2.1.3.4** Finally, the individual contributions of all those different perceptual processes have to be remembered and coordinated in order to form the final and complete perception of a sunset. Not only in such moment-to-moment analysis of sense-perception but also in every consecutive thought-process, for example in reasoning, the phase of “grasping the past” can be observed, as for instance when the parts of an argument are connected or developed, that is, when conclusions are built on premises.

If that “grasp” of the past is too weak to be effective, one says that one has “lost the thread.” The way in which one remembers the earlier phases of one’s thought-process is likewise through selected marks (*nimitta,karaṇa*) because it is neither possible nor necessary to consider all the minor aspects of a thought.

But if the “selection” is too incomplete and overlooks essential features or consequences of the past thought, then the result is a faulty argument built on wrong premises. In these two ways we can understand how “remembering,” that is, connecting with the past, is a function of perception in general.

**2.1.3.5** We can now make the following definition: *saññā* is cognition as well as recognition, both being by way of identifying and connecting the selected marks. We can summarize our ideas as follows:

<sup>27</sup> “Perception means taking hold of the appearance of a thing” (*ākāra,gāhikam saññam*, Vism 14,213/477,17, VbhA 30,15; *ākāra(g),gāhikā saññā*, PmA 2:514,25). Note that the Latin word *per* (thorough, thoroughly) + *cipere* (to take, seize, etc; to apprehend with the mind or senses, understand, perceive), from which the English “perceive” is derived, means literally “to seize or take up thoroughly,” the prefix *per* corresponding here to the Pāli *sañ-* *jānana saññā*.

<sup>28</sup> See Abhs 4.12; Abhs:SR 32-36; Abhs:WG 129-134; Abhs:BRS 163-166. The perceptual “phases” listed in these works are later Abhidhamma elaborations not found in the older texts.

(1) **Memory**, as we normally understand it, is not mentioned as a distinct moment of consciousness because it is not a single mental factor but a complex process that is mentally constructed; hence, not always accurate and is subject to change. [2.2.2.1]

(2) The mental factor that is most important for the arising of memory is perception (*saññā* = *sañjānana*), being that kind of elementary cognition (*jānana*) that proceeds by way of taking up, making, and remembering (ie, identifying) marks.

(3) Apart from what we normally call “remembering,” the memory function of perception generally operates also:

- (a) in the imperceptibly brief phases of a complete perceptual process, the sequence of which is based on the connecting function of “grasping the past phases”;
- (b) in any consecutive train of thoughts where this “grasping of the past” is so habitual and refers to an event so close to the present that it is normally not called “memory,” though it is not much different from it.

**2.1.3.6** Another reason for the omission of memory from either the components or the classes of consciousness is this: remembrance means merely the fact that a state of consciousness has objects of the past (*atītārammaṇa*). **The Dhammasaṅgaṇī**,<sup>29</sup> in its opening treatment of the classification of consciousness lists them without any time relation of objects. This temporal aspect is treated separately in the “triad of things with past objects, etc” (*atītārammaṇa, tika*). But the fact that a moment of consciousness has objects of the past does not warrant the inclusion of a separate factor called memory.

As a point of comparison between the Pāli Abhidhamma of the Theravādins and the Abhidhamma of later Buddhist schools, it should be mentioned that in the lists of dhammas compiled by the pre-Mahāyānā Sarvāstivādins and by the Mahāyānist Vijñānavādins, *sati* (Skt *smṛti*) is given as a neutral factor. It is included there in a group called *mahā, bhūmikā*, composed of factors common to all consciousness, corresponding to the category of *sabba, citta, sādharmaṇa* in the Theravāda.

However, for the reasons given above, we may accept this omission of memory from the list of mental factors as being not only deliberate but fully justified. Upon close study, especially if our purpose is to seek and gain the path of freedom, the Theravāda’s 52 mental factors is clearly preferable; they are based on much more careful acceptance of psychological realities for personal development.<sup>30</sup>

## 2.2 DIMENSIONS OF SAÑÑĀ

### 2.2.1 What does *saññā* mean in English?

**2.2.1.1** Western scholars who pioneered the study of the early Buddhist texts come from a venerable tradition of biblical scholarship. The centuries of biblical studies have created much of what Christianity is today. The Bible is the Word—in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God—the Word became flesh through the prophets and finally in Christ.<sup>31</sup> All these beliefs were recorded in the Christian holy book, the Bible, which is also said to be the Word of God, that is,

<sup>29</sup> **Dhammasaṅgaṇī** opens with the Consciousness Chapter (*citt’uppāda, kaṇḍa*) (Dhs ch 1), giving (1) a classification of all consciousness and (2) a comprehensive analysis of each of them. (Dhs:F 1-89 on the wholesome cittas).

<sup>30</sup> See Nyanaponika, *Abhidhamma Studies: A Buddhist exploration of consciousness and time*, Colombo, 1949: App 2 Omission of memory from the “List of Dhammas”; 5<sup>th</sup> ed Bodhi, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> John 1.1-18 (The New Oxford Annotated Bible).

“inspired” (breathed) by God.<sup>32</sup> Despite the remarkably careful study of God’s Word, Bible scholars do not agree on everything, even in the key ideas, such as about God, Christ and salvation.

In significant ways, many Western scholars are still, consciously or unconsciously, using biblical standards in the study of the early Buddhist texts. By this I mean that many scholars tend to take early Buddhism *at its word*—the early Buddhist texts, its commentaries and related writings—without any need for practising it.

Since 2000,<sup>33</sup> with the publication of Roger Jackson and John Makransky’s *Buddhist Theology: Critical reflections by contemporary scholars*, many leading scholars of Buddhism have come forward openly declaring that they are not only scholars of Buddhism, but they are also practising Buddhists. This is the ultimate commitment that makes one an ideal Buddhist student, a musician, as it were, who loves music and plays good music.

Unlike the God-religions, Buddhism is much less text-based than it is **truth-based**. In a text-based religion, we can claim to have mastered the Word, translating and quoting the Word faithfully and rightly. Mastering the word or text of early Buddhism may make interesting discussion, but so long as one does not practise it, has not *tasted* it, so long as one is not *Buddhist*, one doesn’t really get it. Instead of looking for truth in Dharma, we are looking for “something” with which one has been conditioned from the past. One then is likely to consummately fail and “leave” Buddhism since one has never got it. This is the ultimate failure for a scholar of Buddhism.

**2.2.1.2** If we take **1881**, the year that Pali Text Society, London, was founded as an early marker, modern Buddhist studies is hardly 150 years old. During that period much has developed, changed and improved remarkably in terms of Buddhist studies generally. We now have complete canons of Pali texts and their commentaries, and also good modern translations and studies on the Buddha’s teachings.

The term “Buddha Word” (*buddha, vacana*)<sup>34</sup> is used in later canonical works; the older suttas usually speak of **the Dharma** (*dhmma*, the teaching and truth) or **the path** (*magga*). True reality is not the Buddha’s fiat but rather it is what is naturally true and universally real that he discovers, that frees him from the world, and which will similarly free us when we follow it, too.

Thus, the Buddha’s teaching is called **the path** of freedom; a path represents the journey that we must ourselves make, that is, the noble eightfold path. The journey on the path ennobles us as arhats (the worthy ones, worthy of spiritual nobility), truly noble, nobler than royalty and the gods. Thus, this path is said to be beautiful (*kalyāṇa*) “in the middle and in the end”; by following the path, we transform our body, beautifying it with moral virtue, beautifying the mind with wisdom, and so we become truly free.

**2.2.1.3** In contrast with this, we can see how, in **religion**, people identify with a certain external being and conceive ideas about this Being or these beings around whom they rally, in whose name they claim licence to create or destroy what is of value to others. This Being (God) or beings (gods, angels, spirits, etc) embody those powers or virtues that their creators desire, and weaknesses and evil that they fear, and perhaps they desire for greater advantage against distractors or enemies. In all these, we see the workings of **saññā**, how we discriminate or identify with our experiences (what we see, hear and sense) and conceive with the mind.

<sup>32</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:12 f; 2 Timothy 3:16 f. Such statements become problematic when they are taken *literally*, that “God” actually “breathes” (like a human) and yet is *not* human, not to be taken symbolically, and this is to be taken with faith, ie, with total belief. “For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” (1 Corinthians 3:19).

<sup>33</sup> Esp with the publication of Roger Jackson & John Makransky (edd), *Buddhist Theology*, Curzon Press, 2000.

<sup>34</sup> Sn 204; Tha 403; Ap 1.537/1:44, 11/40/1:143; V 2:139, 4:54,

*Saññā*, in other words, is a word for how we recognize and identify with our visions and views, and how we conceive and imagine with our thoughts, wishes and hopes. Scholars sometimes prefer the word **apperceive** for all that is described here. [2.3.1.1]

## 2.2.2 The polysemy of *saññā*

**2.2.2.1** The best known “definition” of *saññā* is found in **the Khajjanīya Sutta** (S 22.79), where the Buddha gives the following description of *saññā*:

### DEFINITION OF SAÑÑĀ

And what, bhikkhus, is called **perception**?

**(1) It perceives**, therefore it is called perception.<sup>35</sup>

And what does it perceive?

**(2) It perceives blue**, it perceives yellow,  
it perceives red, it perceives white.

It perceives, bhikkhus,  
therefore it is called perception.

*kiñ ca bhikkhave saññāṃ vadetha*

*sañjānāti ti saññā ti vuccati*

*kiñ ca sañjānāti*

*nīlam pi sañjānāti, pitakaṃ pi sañjānāti,*

*lohitaṃ pi sañjānāti, odātaṃ pi sañjānāti*

*sañjānāti tik ho bhikkhave*

*Tasmā saññā ti vuccati*

(S 22.79,7/3:87), SD 17.9; also (M 43,8/1:293), SD 30.2;

**(1)** *Viññāṇa*—at the *mano,dhatu* level [2.3.1.2 f]—thus operates at an “elementary” (*dhātu*) level; it cognizes an experience and discriminates it as *sight, sound, smell, taste, touch or thought (mental state)*. *Viññāṇa* also maintains a continuity (*santāna*) so that *saññā* can make sense of the experience. *Viññāṇa* senses, *saññā* makes sense of things.

**(2)** *Viññāṇa* cognizes a colour; *saññā* then recognizes it by naming it as “blue, yellow, red, white” and so on. These colours are merely **names**, that is, concepts (*paññatti*) used in common parlance (*vohāra*). In other words, the datum, as it were, is already there, and *saññā* merely “reads” it, that is, *saññā* “perceives (or apperceives), recognizes, remembers, names” those colours.

*Saññā* is thus **polysemic** (having more than one sense applicable at the same time). To understand early Buddhist psychology, we simply must think in Pali, or at least be aware of and respect Pali idiom. We will now briefly examine the polysemy of *saññā*.

**2.2.2.2** We can say that **the root meaning** of *saññā* is its derivation, that it is made up of *sañ* + *ñā*, “to know,” that is, to know “by putting together” sense-data and mind-states. In fact, its verb *sañ-jānāti* has Latin cognates: the prefix *sañ* in Latin is *co-* (“together”) + the stem, *gnoscere* (“to know”); hence, *sañjānāti* has both the senses “to cognize” and “to recognize.”

The Pali term *saññā* thus has rich derivative senses due to its prefix *sañ-*, which has the following senses, depending on the context and application, thus:

<sup>35</sup> On *saññā*, see SD 17.5. Sue Hamilton, *Identity and Experience*, points out that although the def of *viññāṇa* here encroaches on that of *saññā*, we should understand that *saññā* does the actual discrimination of the 5 sensory objects, identifying say, a taste, more precisely, while *viññāṇa* “is the awareness by which we experience every stage of the cognitive process, including the process of discriminating” (1996a:92). See S:B 1072 n114 & SD 17.8a (1). For details on perception, see *Saññā*, SD 17.4. On the difference between perception (*saññā*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*), see *Viññāṇa*, SD 17.8a (8.2).



**senses of saññā**

- (1) fully: fully grasp (an object), apperceive:
- (2) one, one and the same: to resemble,
- (3) connect (present with the past):
- (4) separate, expand (as an aggregate)
- (5) self (Skt *sva*-): to know for oneself:
- (6) = *sammā*-, right(ly): to rightly know,
- (7) contact, connect, engage:
- (8) diversity or manyness (*nānatta*)

**usages of saññā**

- |                             |                    |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| "to perceive";              | [2.1.2]            |
| "to recognize";             | [2.1.3]            |
| "to remember";              | [2.1.3.5]          |
| polysemy                    | [2.2]              |
| "to name";                  | [2.3]              |
| "to recollect (ideas)";     | [2.4]              |
| "to be conscious (of)."     | [2.5]              |
| causes mental proliferation | [2.3.1.2, Sn 874d] |

We can here see how Pali words are formed and how many of these words, such as *ñāṇa*, *paññā*, *viññāṇa*, and *abhiññā*, are formed from *prefixes* with the same *root*, *VIÑ*, "to know." This verbal richness contributes to **the polysemy**<sup>36</sup> for which Pali is renowned. Pali polysemy is a dexterous and playful linguistic tool (*paṭibhāṇa*) for expressing the awakening experience which is otherwise ineffable. Far from being a Word-based Faith, early Buddhism is thus a reality-based truth which employs and plays on words, enriching our language and culture, as well as our minds, freeing us from the limits of language and thought.

**2.2.2.3** Thus, we may see Pali terms and ideas *not* so much as jigsaw puzzles to be fitted together only in a certain way to form a particular picture, but rather like a **Lego** set that can be assembled depending on the player's craft and eye to form all sorts of amazing figures—the lesson of this craftsmanship is not in the final product but in the fact that it is *constructed from bits and pieces of parts*.

We can call this skill in putting the parts together as **the Pali idiom**—Pali works to reflect the constructed nature of our vision of reality. The truth of this vision is not about how to construct *the* most amazing Lego structure or model, but that the simple parts can be put together to produce more imaginative components, and so on, until some gratifying model is made.

The simplicity of most of the Lego tiles are such that they can interlock easily with each other, and, if needed, just as easily be disassembled. Ideally, even if merely in our imagination, all the Lego pieces in the world can be fitted together to form the final ultimate Lego model. These tiny pieces are easily fiddled by a child's carefree fingers or deployed by the measured digits of a visionary adult.

Similarly, sutta language can be so deceptively simple that a lucid unlettered person may understand, and its sense becomes more profound, read between the lines, by a keen student. However, some who lack insight into the early Buddhist or "sutta" spirit may mistake the simplicity of sutta words for an artless denseness of its writers:

"These verbs [*saññānāti* and *vijānāti*] are associated with cognition, but neither of them has a precise meaning and their use further indicates that the author(s) had difficulty in attempting to define *viññāṇa* and *saññā*." (Sue Hamilton, 1996a:25) [2.2.2.6]

**2.2.2.4** Another early text, **the Mahā Vedalla Sutta** (M 43), also gives a number of similar definitions of the mental aggregates: *vedanā*, *saññā* [2.2.2.1], *saṅkhārā* and *viññāṇa*. We shall make a list of these definitions and dynamics of these aggregates from these 2 suttas and see what we can learn from them:

<sup>36</sup> **Polysemy**, esp in Pali, is where words and ideas may have multiple meanings that apply simultaneously: SD 1.1 (4.4.5); SD 10.16 (1.3.1-1.3.2; 2.2); SD 54.3b (2.1.1.4).



## (1) DEFINITION AND DYNAMICS OF FEELING (VEDANĀ)

“It feels, it feels,” avuso,  
therefore, it is called **feeling**.<sup>37</sup>

And what does it feel?

It feels, “(This is) pleasant.”

It feels, “(This is) painful.”

It feels. “(This is) neither [neutral].”

‘It feels, it feels,’ avuso,  
therefore, it is called feeling.’’<sup>38</sup>

*vedeti vedetī ti kho āvuso*

*tasmā **vedanā** ti vuccati*

*kiñ ca vedeti*

*sukhan ti pi vedeti*

*dukkhan ti pi vedeti*

*adukkham-asukhan ti pi vedeti*

*vedeti vedetī ti kho āvuso*

*tasmā vedanā ti vuccatīti.*

(M 43,7/1:293), SD 30.2; (S 22.79,7/3:87), SD 17.9

The Pali term **vedanā** (feeling) is a term for “experience/s” of the 6 sense-bases—the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind—which is the totality (the “all”) of our human experience, as stated in **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23).<sup>39</sup> In early Buddhist psychology, all such sense-based<sup>40</sup> and mind-based experiences are affective by nature, that is, our experiences are *either pleasant, unpleasant (painful), or neither* (that is, neutral). As **affective experiences**, they are projected or “value-added” by how we recall or connect them with past memories. In other words, how we react to a sense-object or a thought depends (for one unawakened) on whether we relate it to a *pleasant* memory, which results in a pleasant experience; or to an *unpleasant* memory, which results in an unpleasant experience; or have *neither pleasant nor unpleasant* memory, which results in a neutral experience.<sup>41</sup>

**2.2.2.5 The (Saḷ-āyatana) Upavāṇa Sutta** (S 35.70), for example, records the Buddha as instructing that so long as we are fully aware whether lust exists or does not exist in our present experience, to that extent we are “seeing the Dharma” for ourself. When there is lust, there will also be hatred towards any hindrance to what is lusted after. Knowing the presence or the absence of lust (or hatred), we are at that moment *seeing the Dharma for ourself*. When we understand what we are doing, then, delusion, too, is absent from that experience.

<sup>37</sup> *Vedeti vedetī ti kho, āvuso, tasmā vedanā ti vuccati.* N **vedanā** (“feeling”) is derived from vb **vedeti** = *vedayati* (“he feels”), which is itself a denominative\* or causative\* form of **VID**, to know: cf *veti* (Tha 497). *Vedeti* has 2 senses: (1) he knows, (2) he feels; the exact sense is known from context. More specifically, **vediyati** (caus) means “he is made to experience, feels” (M 1:59,12): cf *paṭisaṃvedeti*, “he experiences, feels” (A 1:157); by-form, *paṭisaṃvediyati* (S 2:18, 256; It 38). Ind 1 sg *vediyāmi* (“I feel,” V 3:37,25); opt 1 sg *vediyeyyāṃ* (“I should, or have to, feel,” M 2:70,13); fut pass part (with opt sense), **vedanīya**, ‘to be [can be] felt’ [§23]: see A K Warder, *Pāli Grammar*, 1974: 104-107. \*On -y- denominative forms of **VID**, see Geiger, *Pāli Grammar* §136(4); on its causative forms, see §§176-(1) & 179(3). See PED: *vedeti*, for more examples. On feeling as an aggregate (*khandha*), see **Vedanā**, SD 17.3.

<sup>38</sup> Comy says that question and answer refer to mundane *feelings* (“of the 3 worlds,” *te, bhūmmaka*) that are the objective range of insight (MA 2:342). The phrase, “(It feels), ‘This is pleasant’,” **sukham pi vedeti**, etc, “shows feeling as simultaneously a quality of the object and an affective tone of the experience by which it is apprehended” (MA 43,30/2:342; M:NB 1237 n434). Comy adds that feeling itself “feels,” without any separate feeler (MA 43,31/-2:342). Comy (MA 43,30/2:342) qu (**Hetu, paccaya**) **Mahāli S** (S 22.60) which says that defilement arises on account of the 5 aggregates, based on causes and conditions (S 22.60,6-10/3:69 f), SD 83.2 n.

<sup>39</sup> S 35.23/4:15 (SD 7.1).

<sup>40</sup> Although “sense-based” technically refers to experiences of the 5 physical senses (the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body) it may, depending on the context, include *mind-based experiences* (thoughts), too. Otherwise, just to be sure, as here, we include the phrase, “mind-based.”

<sup>41</sup> The case of a pleasant memory inciting a pleasant reaction is that of meeting a leader or teacher who reminds us of our parent, who thus becomes a father-figure for us. Psychologically, this is also a case of “transference.” On the other hand, we may dislike a person because he reminds us of the times when we were poor, struggling socially.

On the other hand, when we are unmindful and unaware of the presence of lust in our experiences, then, the unwholesome roots (lust, hatred and delusion) will shape and drive that experience. This is when we have “**constructed the conditioned**” (*saṅkhatam abhisāṅkharontī*): our experiences are conditioned by lust, hatred and delusion:

- our form is “conditionally constructed”: our eye, ear, nose, tongue, or body is then under the power of a mind of lust, hatred or delusion;
- our feeling is “conditionally constructed”: we either like, we dislike it or we are confused;
- our perception is “conditionally constructed”: we perceive the lustful, the hateful or the deluded;
- our formations are “conditionally constructed”: we create unwholesome karma;
- our consciousness is “conditionally constructed”: the mind habituates in the unwholesome (feeding the latent tendencies).<sup>42</sup>

In fact, this is exactly what **the Khajjaniya Sutta** (S 22.79) says, thus:

(2) DEFINITION AND DYNAMICS OF FORMATIONS (*SAṆKHĀRĀ*)

They construct the conditioned, bhikkhus,  
therefore they are called **formations**.<sup>43</sup>

And what are the conditioned that they construct?

They construct conditioned form as form.

They construct conditioned feeling as feeling.

They construct conditioned perception as perception.

They construct conditioned formations as formations.

They construct conditioned consciousness as  
consciousness.

They construct the conditioned, bhikkhus,  
therefore they are called formations.

*saṅkhatam abhisāṅkharontī ti kho bhikkhave  
tasmā saṅkhārā ti vuccanti*

*kiñ ca saṅkhatam abhisāṅkharontī*

*rūpaṃ rūpattāya saṅkhatam abhisāṅkharontī*

*vedanaṃ vedanattāya saṅkhatam abhisāṅkharontī*

*saññāṃ saññattāya saṅkhatam abhisāṅkharontī*

*saṅkhāresāṅkhārattāya saṅkhatam abhisāṅkharontī*

*viññāṇaṃ viññāṇattāya saṅkhatam abhisāṅkharontī*

*saṅkhatam abhisāṅkharontī ti kho bhikkhave  
tasmā saṅkhārā ti vuccati*

(S 22.79,8/3:87), SD 17.9

DEFINITION AND DYNAMICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS (*VIÑÑĀṆA*) (1)

“It cognizes, it cognizes,” avuso,  
therefore, it is called consciousness.

And what does it cognize?

It cognizes pleasant, it cognizes painful,  
it cognizes neither [neutral].

It cognizes, it cognizes, avuso,  
therefore, it is called consciousness.

*vijānāti vijānāti ti kho āvuso*

*tasmā viññāṇaṃ ti vuccati*

*kiñ ca vijānāti*

*sukhaṃ ti pi vijānāti dukkhaṃ ti pi vijānāti*

*adukkham-asukhaṃ ti pi vijānāti*

*“vijānāti vijānāti ti kho āvuso*

*tasmā viññāṇaṃ ti vuccati ti*

(M 43,4/1:292), SD 30.2

<sup>42</sup> On the latent tendencies (*anusaya*), see **Anusaya** (SD 31.3).

<sup>43</sup> English is not rich enough to show the connection between the object *saṅkhata*, the vb *abhisāṅkharoti*, and the subject *saṅkhārā*, all of which come from the same root and stem. (Indeed, through such a discourse, the language is being enriched.) See S:B 1071 n112 and (S:B 44-47) *saṅkhārā*, & also (**Pacetana**) **Ratha, kārā S** (A 3.15/1:110-113), SD 17.7 Intro. This passage shows the active role of intention (*cetanā*), in constructing experienced reality. Intention influences the objective content of experience, and also shapes the psychophysical organism within which it has arisen. Karma also shapes the future 5 aggregates. In this connection, see (**Nava Purāṇa**) **Kamma S** (S 35.146), SD 4.12, on the 6 sense bases as “old karma.” See S:B 1071 n112. For details on formations, see **Saṅkhārā**, SD 17.6.

Then, **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*) processes the conditioned constructions and “cognizes” them as unwholesome formations, that is, the unwholesome forms (sense-experiences), the unwholesome feelings, and the unwholesome perceptions. This is a **passive** learning process; it is *a conditioned process*: this is what happens in most learning processes, especially in a power-based religion. The learning process is mostly passive and handed down from some authority figure.

**2.2.2.6** Now, there is an **active** learning process; this is when we start with noticing the experience without any idea of liking it or not liking it. In this initial phase, we simply acknowledge the experience for what it is. This is described in **the Khajjanīya Sutta** (S 22.79) as follows:

#### DEFINITION AND DYNAMICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS (*VIÑÑĀṆA*) (2)

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>“It cognizes,” avuso, therefore, it is called <b>consciousness</b><br/>         And what does it cognize?<br/>         It cognizes sour, it cognizes bitter,<br/>         it cognizes spicy hot, it cognizes sweet,<br/>         it cognizes sharp, it cognizes mild,<br/>         it cognizes salty, it cognizes bland [unsalted].<sup>44</sup><br/>         It cognizes, bhikkhus,<br/>         therefore, it is called <u>consciousness</u>.<sup>45</sup></p> | <p><i>vijānātī ti kho āvuso tasmā viññāṇan ti vuccati<br/>         kiñ ca vijānātī<br/>         ambilan pi vijānātī tittakam pi vijānātī<br/>         kaṭukam ti pi vijānātī madhukam pi vijānātī<br/>         khārikam pi vijānātī akhārikam pi vijānātī<br/>         loṇakam pi vijānātī aloṇakam pi vijānātī<br/>         vijānātī ti bhikkhave<br/>         tasmā viññāṇan ti vuccatī ti</i><br/>         (S 22.79,9/3:87), SD 17.9</p> |
|---|---|

*Viññāṇa* appears to discriminate whether something is *sour or bitter, spicy or sweet, sharp or mild, salty or bland [not salty]*. Hamilton makes “[t]he tentative suggestion ... that the difference between the discriminatory functions of *saññā* and *viññāṇa* might be one of degree: *viññāṇa* discerns that a taste is sweet or sour, but it is *saññā* that discriminates or identifies it more precisely as, for example, sugar or lemon.”<sup>46</sup> She is unimpressed with suttas’ “authors” (that is, Sāriputta in M 43 and the Buddha himself in S 22.79):

But we also noted that the author(s) both of this passage and the similar passage in the Mahā Vedalla Sutta seem to have difficulty describing the difference between *saññā* and *viññāṇa*, using standard formulas about colours and tastes.

The verbs used in both these passages to define *viññāṇa* and *saññā* are *vijānātī* and *sañjānātī* respectively. These verbs are associated with cognition, but neither of them has a precise meaning and their use further indicates that the author(s) had difficulty in attempting to define *viññāṇa* and *saññā*. ... the apparent confusion created by the author(s) of the Saṃyutta Nikāya passage and the Mahāvedalla Sutta. (Sue Hamilton, *Identity and Experience*, 1996a:92)

I have already mentioned the nature of **Pali polysemy** [2.2.2.2] and **Pali idiom** [2.2.2.3], and will not repeat it here. But the cognitive verbs—*sañjānātī* and *vijānātī*—both from the same root *VJÑA*, “to know,” are formed from different prefixes reflecting their special functions.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> The 8 kinds of taste are, respectively, *ambila*, *tittika*, *kaṭuka*, *madhuka*, *khārika*, *akhārika*, *loṇaka*, *aloṇaka*. See also **Sūda S** (S 47.8/5:149-152), SD 28.15, qu at Vism 4.122/150 f. See also SD 60.1e (12.3.2 (4)). For the difference btw perception (*saññā*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*), see **Viññāṇa**, SD 17.8a (8.2).

<sup>45</sup> See SD 53.5 (73.3.2).

<sup>46</sup> See Hamilton 1996a:92.

<sup>47</sup> On the senses of *sañ-* [2.2.2.2], and on *vi-* see PED.

**2.2.2.7** From the ways these 2 interesting verbs are used in the suttas (and commentaries), we can safely conclude that:

- **sañ-jānāti** works in a “synthesizing” way, putting ideas *together* with *saṃ*; and
- **vi-jānāti** gives an “analytical” view of a cognitive experience at the start of complex mental processes, that may be affective or conative in distinct yet overlapping processes.

The above explanation of *vi-jānāti* is found in **the Mahā Vedalla Sutta** (M 43) [2.2.2.7], which records Sāriputta as explaining the complex interrelationship amongst the aggregates, thus:

Feeling, perception and consciousness, avuso:

these states are associated, not dissociated.

And it is *not* possible to separate these states to describe their difference.

For, avuso, what one feels, that one perceives; what one perceives, that one cognizes.<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, avuso, these states are associated, not dissociated.

And it is impossible to separate these states to describe their difference.<sup>49</sup>

(M 43,9/1:293), SD 30.2

**2.2.2.8** That the existential processes of the aggregates “**overlap**” means that they are “associated” (**samsaṭṭha**), which the Commentary explains as “*associated by way of arising together, ceasing together, sharing the same basis (sense-faculty), sharing the same sense-object*” (*ek’uppāda,eka,nirodha,-eka,vatthuka,ek’ārammaṇatāya samsaṭṭhā*) (MA 2:342). This means that we can only study each aggregate theoretically, that is, studying a part for an understanding and vision of the whole.

Thus, when we study say only **saññā** (perception), we are only focusing on the aggregate’s *synthesizing* process but we will need to see the whole process of our physical being, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness in order to understand what really is going in the whole set-up that we are. We could deeply delve into the cognitive significance of **viññāṇa**, but we must still breathe the living air of each of the 5 aggregates as a vision of *the here and now*—we are but *body and mind*.

It’s like looking into the details in a huge masterly painting with numerous fine details. It is impossible at a single glance, or even after years of studious and loving gaze, that one would be able to relive, say, all of the details of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa / La Gioconda*.<sup>50</sup> We may wonder whether the figure in the painting was the wife of the Florentine merchant Francesco di Bartolomeo del Giocondo (thus, the work’s alternative title, *La Gioconda*); that she’s Leonardo’s mother, Caterina, conjured from Leonardo’s boyhood memories of her; or that it’s Leonardo’s self-portrait in drag. We can only return to merge with the painting’s silent beauty, losing oneself in it.

<sup>48</sup> See Sue Hamilton 1996:72.

<sup>49</sup> Comy: Wisdom is excluded here because the intention is to show only the states that are associated with every occasion of consciousness (MA 2:343).

<sup>50</sup> Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Florentine painter and polymath, painted *Mona Lisa* c 1503-05; oil on white poplar panel; 30¼ x 21 in (77 x 53.5 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris (since 1797). Created with extremely thin layers of glazes, the painting seems to glow from within. The haunting mountain background landscape echoes the enigmatic smile that shines through the corners of the Mona Lisa’s eyes and mouth, the effect of soft blending (*sfumato*) creating an ambiguous mood (E H Gombrich, *Story of Art*, 1950, 2023:219). The enigmatic woman is seated in what appears to be a narrow but open loggia before a low wall with dark pillar bases on either side. Behind her, a vast landscape recedes to icy mountains, winding paths and a distant bridge, giving only the slightest indications of human presence. Instead of placing the horizon line at the neck, as he did with *Ginevra de’ Benci*, he levelled it with the eyes, thus linking the figure with the landscape and highlighting the mysterious nature of the painting (J Woods-Marsden, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 1430-1520, in D A Brown (ed), *Virtue and Beauty*, London, 2001:77 n100). The bridge in the background was identified by Silvano Vincenti as the 4-arched Romito di Laterina bridge from Etruscan-Roman times near Laterina, Arezzo, over the Arno river (A Giuffrida, *The Guardian*, 3 May 2023).

If we have never tasted the profound bliss of the suttas, the silent mysterious beauty of the Mona Lisa gives us a very good idea of it, with which to begin.

## 2.3 SAÑÑĀ AS NAMING

### 2.3.1 Naming and forming

**2.3.1.1** People who are either unaware of or uncomfortable with the flexibility or polysemy of *saññā* [2.2] (or any other Pali term) try to pin it down to some exact or fixed definition. The proposed “best” translation of *saññā* is **apperceive** [2.1.2.3]—this is encompassed in the sense, “perception,” the most common translation of *saññā*. Yet, apperception is only one of over half a dozen functional senses of *saññā* [2.2.2.2]; it is *only* one of the activities of *saññā*—besides those of *perception, recognition, remembering, recollection and consciousness*!

**Apperception** may be seen as the mind’s *discriminating* or *identifying* function which is in effect one of “**naming**” (*namati*). This in turn leads on to the various thought-processes (*vitakka*)<sup>51</sup> of samsaric existence, and a separated or manifold way of interpreting our experiences. Basically, when we *name* things, we tend to imagine a sort of **separate**, independent existence from which arises a false notion of an abiding entity (such as an abiding soul) or “self” (such as an eternal self).

In other words, when we name an experience or a state, it becomes to us a “thing” or “something” (*kiñcana*); we have created *it*. We have divorced ourselves from reality, as it were. Against this serious wrong view, the Buddha teaches **nonself** (*anattatā*), and that everything in this world is conditioned (*saṅkhata*), arises through causes and effects but without any first cause. The “ending” of this samsaric cycle is when we realize this true reality.

When we name a thing, we also recognize more of such things; the *one* thing becomes *many* things. Such a thought explodes into numerous thoughts, and so on exponentially, arising through our experiences of *sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts*, all rooted in greed, hatred or delusion. These are called **papañca**, “mental (or thought) proliferation.” This is our “unconscious” that lurks in the karmic depths of our consciousness, shadowing and driving us life after life after life. It is the serpent that feeds on itself; this is how suffering is “self-created.”

**2.3.1.2** The Buddha or an arhat is thus said to be free of *saññā*, as stated in **the Kalaha, vivāda Sutta** (Sn 4.11) of the Sutta Nipāta, which says:

*Na sañña, saññī na visañña, saññī  
no pi asaññī na vibhūta, saññī  
evaṃ, sametassa vibhoti rūpaṃ  
saññā, nidānā hi papañca, saṅkhā*

He is neither a perceiver of perceptions nor a misperceiver,  
nor is he a non-perceiver, nor one without perception.  
For one who has won such a state, form ceases to be:  
for proliferative notions have perception as their source.<sup>52</sup>  
(Sn 874)<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> See **(Chakka) Vitakka S** (A 6.109), SD 62.10c.

<sup>52</sup> This line (Sn 874d) refers to the “diversity” or “manyness” (*nānatta*) of perception unwholesomely rooted: SD 62.10f (2.0.6.5).

<sup>53</sup> Briefly, line a means that an arhat is neither an “ordinary perceiver” (*sañña, saññī*) nor one with “distorted perception” (*visañña, saññī*); line b a “non-perceiver” (*asaññī*) is one of the non-conscious beings (*asañña, sattā*), or one in a state of cessation (*saññā, vedayita, nirodha*). “One without perception” (*na vibhūta, saññī*) is one with perception suppressed, as in the formless attainments. Line c refers to an arhat, one who perceives not “form.” Line d means that perception distorts reality as “thought proliferation” (*papañca*). For a fuller explanation of this verse, see SD 21.4 (3.4.2).



In this context, we see *saññā* functioning as **apperception**, implying “both that its function is discriminatory, and also that it incorporates a function of assimilation or comprehension of what has been perceived so that identification can take place” (Hamilton 1996a: 57 f). Such apperception is also the way we *name* our experience and *form* “something” of the mind-object [2.3.1.1].

As we become more familiar with these “things” *named* we connect or conjure them up with more similar or related “names-and-things” (*nāma,rūpa*); we even relate them to unrelated things. Thus we have our own **views** (*diṭṭhi*) about things. These are our thought-patterns, a network of countless mental chatter and visions. The quality and truth of this thought-proliferation depend on our level of unwholesomeness or our level of wholesome insight.

In Abhidhamma psychology, this active thought-process differs from the assimilatory function of ***mano,dhatu***, “the mind-element” (the mind when sensing),<sup>54</sup> in that *mano,dhātu* merely collates sense-impressions at the sense-doors, ordering or synthesizing them of the experience so that they are perceived. What the mind itself imagines (at the mind-door) is called ***mano,viññāṇa,dhatu***, “mind-consciousness element.”<sup>55</sup>

Thus we have a total of 7 kinds of perceptions; they are the 7 mind-elements (*mano,dhātu*): those of the 5 physical mind-elements, the mind-element itself, and the mind-consciousness-element.<sup>56</sup> According to **the Vimutti,magga**, “By way of *door*, there are thus 7 perceptions: (those) born of eye-contact, born of ear-contact, born of nose-contact, born of tongue-contact, born of body-contact, born of mind-element contact, born of mind-consciousness-element contact.”

Let’s look at a real-life example to better figure the difference between the roles of *viññāṇa* and *saññā* in our experiential process.

**2.3.1.3** My favourite example of this inspiring level of human experience is when we sit back and enjoy classical music, or any good music, well performed. We simply let the sounds and beauty sink into our being; we feel happily free from any thought or view, we may even lose track of time.

When the music ends or we are interrupted from listening, *saññā* then sets in. We replay, as it were, parts of what we have heard, and make evaluative or critical comments on the beauty of the execution of the piece, or how it should have been played, and so on. What we are here perceiving is not the actual playing of the piece, but how *mano,dhatu* has recorded and re-presented the sensory data to us.<sup>57</sup>

Let us simply call *mano,dhatu* by a more familiar term, **consciousness**. When we are conscious, we are always “conscious of” something. Consciousness never exists in itself except perhaps in religious fiction. We are conscious *of* sounds; we cognize music upon hearing it. Consciousness then presents us with sounds *without any comments*, as it were. Once we recognize *what* kind of music it is; we give it its *title* and so on, *saññā* has set it into experience.

<sup>54</sup> **Vimm 11.19** (Vimm:Ñ 577; see ch 11 n184). In **Vbh 88 f**, the *manodhātu* is def as the *citta* & *viññāṇa* arisen dependent upon the adverting to the 5 physical consciousnesses, while the *mano,viññāṇa,dhātu* is def as the *citta* & *viññāṇa* arisen dependent upon the *mano,dhātu*: *Cakkhu,viññāṇa,dhatuyā uppajjitvā niruddha,samanantarā uppajjati cittaṃ mano mānasam ... viññāṇaṃ viññāṇa-k,khandho tajiā,mano,dhātu; ... kāya,viññāṇa,dhātuyā uppajjitvā niruddha,samanantarā uppajjati ... tajiā,mano,dhātu, sabba,dhammesu vā pana paṭhama,samannāhāro uppajjati ... tajiā,mano,dhātu—ayaṃ vuccati mano,dhātu. ... Cakkhu,viññāṇa,dhātuyā uppajjitvā niruddha,samanantarā uppajjati mano,dhātu, mano,dhātuyā uppajjitvā niruddha,samanantarā uppajjati ... tajiā,mano,viññāṇa,dhātu; ... kāya,viññāṇa,dhātuyā uppajjitvā niruddha,samanantarā uppajjati mano,dhātu, mano,dhātuyā pi uppajjitvā niruddha,samanantarā uppajjati ... tajiā,mano,viññāṇa,dhātu, manañ ca paṭicca dhamme ca uppajjati ... tajiā,mano,viññāṇa,dhātu—ayaṃ vuccati mano,viññāṇa,dhātu.*

<sup>55</sup> On the 5-door perception and the mind-door, see SD 17.4 (2.2.4). On *mano,viññāṇa,dhatu*, see SD 60.1e (7.4.4).

<sup>56</sup> On *mano* and *mano,dhatu*, see SD 56.22 (1.1.1.4); SD 5.17 (5.3.2)

<sup>57</sup> See A Verdu, *Early Buddhist Philosophy in the Light of the Four Noble Truths*, Washington, DC, 1971:41.

After the conscious experience, in its absence, *saññā* recalls that music—“puts it together again,” *sañ-jānāti*—so that we can now comment on the experience in an *affective* way: what is good, what could be better, what is bad; what we like or do not like about it, and so on.

*Mano, dhatu* (sense-door consciousness) cognizes<sup>58</sup> the “raw experience” of the music session, *saññā* recalls it from memory, perceives it analytically. This distinction is in fact recognised in the Abhidharma, where it explicitly states that *saññā* operates on information from the *mano, dhātu*:

What then is *saññā*?

At that time, *saññā* is perception, apperceiving, the state of having apperceived arising from contact with *mano, dhātu*; this then is *saññā*.<sup>59</sup> (Dhs 10.3-6)

Clearly, then, *saññā* is associated, in some way, with discursive thought. The discrimination, assimilation, knowing, and “naming” of what may be called “cognitive data” all involve some degree of thinking about the data. Thus, we have a number of occasions in the Commentaries, for example, for the expression *saññam karosī*, as meaning, “You think.”<sup>60</sup>

### 2.3.2 *Saññā* as conception

**2.3.2.1** The naming tendency of *saññā* implies *conceiving of ideas*. *Saññā* thus includes conception or ideation.<sup>61</sup> In the context of *saññā* as naming faculty, this may be further explained as follows: *saññā* recognizes or identifies our experiences, and in the unawakened mind, they can only be identified with samsāric realities; in other words, *saññā* perceives our experiences in samsaric terms. *Saññā*, on its own, conditions us samsarically.

This samsaric conditioning occurs as the conceiving of ideas (as mentioned): that is, literally, making “something” out of nothing [2.1.2.3]. A characteristic feature of *saññā* conceptions—such as its *naming-and-forming* habit—is never a lucid process like the way I am writing this or the way you are reading it. What occurs in a *saññā* process is a dream-like transmogrification of our experiences into desirable images; anything that opposes or differs from the desired is discarded or destroyed; or simply ignored, as in the case of neutral objects.

**2.3.2.2** When *saññā* acts synchronously with the experience—like feeling a pleasurable touch—*saññā* **identifies** with it, seeing it as being desirable. When the object is perceived as undesirable—such as an ugly or painful experience, *saññā* conceives its opposite or rejects it. When the object is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, *saññā* ignores it.

However, when *saññā* perceives an object asynchronously—such as recalling a pleasant memory or day-dreaming about a desirable situation—*saññā* functions **conceptually**. One is then likely to resurrect some memory or imagine some desirable object or situation. *Saññā* will then put the mind into a sort of dazed dark state of fuzzy desirable images which, given time or urgency, will assume epic proportions.

<sup>58</sup> “Cognize” and other psychological terms are, as a rule, used in the early Buddhist context in a non-technical way.

<sup>59</sup> Dhs 10.3-6: *Katamā tasmim samaye saññā hoti? Yā tasmim samaye tujjā mano, viññāṇa, dhatu, samphassa jā saññā sañjānanā sañjānitattarū; ayaṃ tasmim samaye saññā hoti*. Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakośabāṣyā similarly states that *sañjñā* means “grasping the sign within the range (of sense objects)” (Abhk 11.24: *viśaya, nimittodgrahaṇa*, Abhk 11.23. Verdu 1979:411 mistakenly attr this to the Kośa itself.)

<sup>60</sup> SA 2:237; AA 1:371, 428; DhA 3:361, 483; ThĀ 100; **Baka J** (J 38/1:223), **Dūbhiya Makkaṭṭa Jātaka** (J 174/2:71).

<sup>61</sup> R E A Johansson uses the term “ideation” for the naming tendency of *saññā* because the colours referred to in the definitions of *saññā* can be both visually perceived as well as imagined (The *Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*, Curzon, 1979:92 f).



**2.3.2.3 The Mahā, nidāna Sutta** (D 15)—perhaps the Buddha’s longest and most detailed Dharma discourse—gives 2 unique terms for these time-bound activities of *saññā*. We have just noted that *saññā* functions as perception towards *present* sense-experiences, and as conception towards *absent* sense-based ideas. The Sutta refers to the perceptual tendency of *saññā* as *paṭigha, samphassa* (sense-impression), and to its conceptual tendency as *adhivacana, samphassa* (naming impression).<sup>62</sup>

The **Vibhaṅga** describes these perceptions as follows: those arising from sense-impression (from sense-stimulus) are “**gross**” (*olārika*), that is, reflective of our physical state; perceptions from naming impression (from conceptions) are “**subtle**” (*sukhuma*), that is, abstract (Vbh 6).

**2.3.2.4 The Vibhaṅga**, in the passage preceding the description of the “gross” and “subtle” types of *saññā*, describes, in simple terms, that perceptions are “**internal**” (*ajjhatta*) or “**external**” (*bahiddhā*), here laid out in 2 columns for easier comparative study, thus:

Therein, what is **internal perception**?  
It is that perception which,  
for these or those **beings** (*sattānaṃ*),  
  
is personal (*ajjhatta*), self-referring,  
one’s own, individual and  
is grasped (by craving and view), (that is,)  
perception born of eye-contact,  
perception born of ear-contact,  
perception born of nose-contact,  
perception born of tongue-contact,  
perception born of body-contact,  
perception born of mind-contact,  
This is called internal perception.

Therein, what is **external perception**?  
*It is that perception which,*  
for these or those **other beings** (*para, sattānaṃ*),  
**for other individuals** (*para, puggalānaṃ*),  
*is personal, self-referring,*  
*one’s own, individual and*  
*is grasped (by craving and view), (that is,)*  
*... pe ...*  
  
This is called external perception.

These 2 passages are practically identical except for the 3<sup>rd</sup> line of the “internal perception,” and the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> lines of the “external perception.”

**Internal perception** (*ajjhatta saññā*) refers to one’s **conceptualizing** of “beings” (*sattānaṃ*) (self and others); this arises from naming impression (*adhivacana, samphassa, ja*). They are one’s own perceptual imaginings. This conception may be based on present sense-experience or thought, or more likely on some memories; hence, this is likely to be an asynchronous conception [2.3.1.2].

**External perception** (*bahiddhā saññā*), on the other hand, refers to one’s present **sense-perception** of an external object, that is, “of other beings” (*para, sattānaṃ*), “of other individuals” (*para, puggalikānaṃ*), or states relating to others (other than oneself). This arises from sense-impression (*adhivacana, samphassa, ja*). This is a *synchronous* perception of (here and now) sense-experience/s.

**2.3.2.5** In an unawakened person, both the internal perception and the external perception are rooted in *greed, hatred or delusion* (or all of them). They are usually perceptions based on wrong notions, that is, a **perversion of perception** (*saññā, vipallāsa*), those in permanence (*nicca, saññā*), in pleasure (*sukha, saññā*), in the self (*atta, saññā*) or in beauty (*subha, saññā*).<sup>63</sup> When one perceives perma-

<sup>62</sup> D 15,20/2:62 + SD 5.17 (5.3.4); Vbh 6. The adjs of the 2 terms are respectively *paṭigha, samphassa, ja* (arising from sense-impression) and *adhivacana, samphassa, ja* (arising from naming impression).

<sup>63</sup> According to **Nīvaraṇa, pahāna Vagga** (A 1.2), sensual desire arises due to unwise attention to the “sign of beauty” (A 1.2,1/1:3) and aversion arises due to the “sign of repulsion” (A 1.2,2/1:3), SD 16.3. **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43) explains that *greed, hate and delusion* are each a “maker of signs” (*nimitta, karaṇa*) (M 43,37/1:298), ie, they ascribe a false significance to things as being *impermanent, pleasurable, self, or beautiful* (ie, in terms of the 4 per-

nence in the impermanent, pleasure in suffering, self in the nonself, or purity in the impure, then one is chasing after “sign” (*nimitta*), “something” that one has projected which is not there, like a dog chasing its own tail; doing something that is purposeless, not getting anywhere.<sup>64</sup>

## 2.4 SAÑÑĀ AS “IDEAS” FOR CULTIVATION<sup>65</sup>

### 2.4.1 The 5 objects of meditation

**2.4.1.1** Even in the Buddha’s own time, as the years of ministry passed and the teachings became more systematized, we see various sets of **meditations** recommended for the practice of both the renunciant and the laity. **The Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33), compiled by Sāriputta, lists “**the 5 perceptions fully ripening in liberation**” (*pañca vimutti, paripācaniyā saññā*), that is:

|  |                              |           |
|--|------------------------------|-----------|
| (1) the perception of impermanence                 | <i>anicca, saññā,</i>        | [2.4.2.5] |
| (2) the perception of suffering in the impermanent | <i>anicce dukkha, saññā,</i> | [2.4.2.6] |
| (3) the perception of nonself in suffering         | <i>dukkhe anatta, saññā,</i> | [2.4.2.7] |
| (4) the perception of abandoning                   | <i>pahāna, saññā,</i>        | [2.4.1.2] |
| (5) the perception of dispassion [fading away]     | <i>virāga, saññā.</i>        | [2.4.1.3] |

(D 33,2.1(26)/3:243)

This pentad of perceptions—on account of the simplicity—makes it probably the oldest set of perception as meditation, that is, on the 3 characteristics (impermanence, suffering and nonself). The perception of the 3 characteristics will be explained later; the last 2 perceptions—those of abandoning and of dispassion—will be explained next:

**2.4.1.2 The perception of abandoning** (*pahāna, saññā*), according to **the Giri-m-ānanda Sutta** (A 10.60), is the letting go and uprooting of the 3 unwholesome roots. By diligently keeping to moral training, the practitioner is, as a rule, able to abstain from act and speech driven by these unwholesome roots. Now, advancing his practice, he abandons even thoughts rooted in greed, hatred or delusion. We thus see “perception” (*saññā*) not merely as a “meditation” but as the mental resolution or determination to be free of the unwholesome roots.<sup>66</sup>

**2.4.1.3 The perception of dispassion** (*virāga, saññā*), according to **the Giri-m-ānanda Sutta** (A 10.60), is how the practitioner, on account of his successful perception of abandoning [2.4.1.2], is able to attain samadhi or dhyana, emerging from which he reflects thus: “This is peaceful! This is sublime! That is, the stilling of all formations, the letting go of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, *the cessation*, nirvana.”<sup>67</sup>

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versions, *vipallāsa*, A 2:52; Pm 2:80). **Uddesa Vibhaṅga S** (M 138) describes how when consciousness follows the sign, it becomes “tied and shackled by the gratification derived in the sign,” and thereby becomes fettered to the sign (M 138,10/3:225). It is also possible that a grasping at a “sign” may be followed by various types of thought that could be regarded as “association” (**Vitakka Saṇṭhāna S**, M 20,3/1:119), SD 1.6.

<sup>64</sup> There may be reasons *for a dog* to chase its own tail: boredom, playfulness (esp in puppies), seeking attention, anxiety, or some medical condition.

<sup>65</sup> For an overview of the various sets of perceptions, see Diagram 9.5.3 (SD 17.4). For an overview of “recollect-ions” (*anussati*), see SD 15.7 (1.1.2).

<sup>66</sup> A 10.60,8/5:110 (SD 19.16).

<sup>67</sup> A 10.60,9/5:110 f (SD 19.16).

From the details of the sutta passage—especially with the ensuing perception of cessation (*nirodha*, *saññā*), that is, the ending of suffering (here referring at best to the state of nonreturning). He has abandoned all the 3 roots, except the finer aspects of delusion, as embodied in the 5 higher fetters.<sup>68</sup>

This gives a clear hint that the above pentad of perceptions are to be done by monastics and the laity (since it is, as a rule, very difficult for the laity, with their household engagements, to attain arhathood).<sup>69</sup>

### 2.4.2 The 7 objects of meditation

**2.4.2.0** Since *saññā* are also ideas, we would do very well to ensure that they are *wholesome*, that is, free from *greed, hatred and delusion*. In fact, in the suttas, *saññā* may also refer to ideas that are meditation-objects, such as any of the 7 perceptions (*satta,saññā*), as listed, for example, in **the Satta Saññā Sutta** (A 7.46), namely,

|  |                                    |           |
|--|------------------------------------|-----------|
| (1) the perception of foulness,                        | <i>asubha,saññā</i>                | [2.4.2.1] |
| (2) the perception of death,                           | <i>maraṇa,saññā</i>                | [2.4.2.2] |
| (3) the perception of the loathsomeness of food,       | <i>āhāre paṭikkūla,saññā</i>       | [2.4.2.3] |
| (4) the perception of not delighting in all the world, | <i>sabba,loke anabhirata,saññā</i> | [2.4.2.4] |
| (5) the perception of impermanence,                    | <i>anicca,saññā</i>                | [2.4.2.5] |
| (6) the perception of suffering in the impermanent,    | <i>anicce dukkha,saññā</i>         | [2.4.2.6] |
| (7) the perception of the nonself in the suffering.    | <i>dukkhe anatta,saññā</i>         | [2.4.2.7] |

(A 7.46/4:46-53), SD 15.4

These perceptions are especially beneficial for the renunciant in helping them to live spiritually. The laity, too, may select any of these perceptions they feel drawn to and properly practise it along with the cultivation of lovingkindness.

**2.4.2.1** The perception of foulness (*asubha,saññā*) is of 2 basic kinds:

- (1) Reflecting that our living body is by nature “impure,” that is, in constant need of caring and cleaning; that our body may look appealing in certain ways, but otherwise mostly unappealing; it is subject to decay, disease and death. This practice is healing for those who are attached to their own body.
- (2) On a deeper level, foulness refers to the stages of bodily decomposition of a corpse. This meditation needs proper guidance by an experienced teacher, and is meant as a healing practice for one with lustful nature (*raga,carita*).<sup>70</sup>

One who calmly and mindfully practises perception of foulness will remove craving and be free of Māra’s bond (Dh 349 f).<sup>71</sup>

**2.4.2.2** There are 3 kinds of meditation related to **death** (*maraṇa*):

- (1) the perception of death (*maraṇa,saññā*);
- (2) the mindfulness of death (*maraṇa,sati*); and
- (3) the recollection of death (*maraṇānussati*).

<sup>68</sup> The 5 higher fetters (*uddham,bhāgiya sarīyojana*) are those of (6) lust for form existence, (7) lust for formless existence, (8) conceit, (9) restlessness, and (10) ignorance. See **Uddham,bhāgiya S** (S 45.180) + SD 50.12 (2.4); SD 10.16 (1.6.8).

<sup>69</sup> On laymen arhats, see SD 8.6 (13-20); SD 37.4 (4); SD 4.9 (5.3.5) SD 60.1c (6.2.1.3).

<sup>70</sup> SD 62.10a (3.1).

<sup>71</sup> SD 15.4 (1); SD 62.10c (2.10.2.2).

**The perception of death** (*marañā,saññā*) reminds us of the inevitability of death, with the purpose of arousing a sense of urgency in one's spiritual efforts. One reflects on the brevity, uncertainty and fragility of life, and of the numerous ways in which death may strike.<sup>72</sup>

**The mindfulness of death** (*marañā,sati* or *marañā-s,sati*) is a simpler practice that reminds us of the various ways that death may strike when we least expect it. Hence, one should not waste any time in one's spiritual practice to gain the path, such as stated in **the Marañā,sati Sutta 2** (A 6.20).<sup>73</sup>

**The recollection of death** (*marañānussati*) is the commentarial name for the perception of death or the mindfulness of death (above). This meditation is explained in detail in **the Visuddhi,magga**, chapter 8.<sup>74</sup>

**2.4.2.3 The perception of the loathsomeness of food** (*āhāre paṭikkūla,saññā*) is done by the renunciant with 10 aspects in mind:

- (1) the renunciant has to leave the peace of his remote dwelling in quest of almsfood;
- (2) one does not always receive almsfood, but may be ignored, berated or even chased away;
- (3) food loses its pleasant appearance once it is chewed, and looks and tastes nauseating;
- (4) once swallowed, food is mixed with secretions, and tastes unpleasant;
- (5) the belly has been like an unwashed cesspit since day one;
- (6) undigested food remains in the belly in a disgusting mix;
- (7) digested food gives off froth and bubbles, turning into dung and urine;
- (8) consumed food brings forth the earth element in our body; improperly digested, it makes us sick;
- (9) food enters by one door but exits through many as eye-dung, ear-dung, snot, urine, dung and so on;
- (10) food soils one's hands, lips, tongue, and palate, even after washing; food turns into waste products of various sorts (eye-dung, ear-dung, etc).

The purpose of this perception is to be moderate in eating to prevent drowsiness and laziness, to promote effort and enthusiasm in Dharma practice, and to live the spiritual life in simple comfort, as stated in **the Ahāre Paṭikkūla Saññā Sutta** (S 46.69).<sup>75</sup>

For economic reasons, this practice helps to cut down wastage of food and to cultivate moderation, simplicity and healthy eating. In that way, even the poor and those of limited resources will be able to make the occasional offering as their act of faith and merit.

**2.4.2.4 The perception of not delighting in all the world** (*sabba,loke anabhirata,saññā*) is especially beneficial for a new or young renunciant to identify and renounce worldly thoughts (*loka,cinta*)—"on account of mental standpoints, adherences [mindsets] and latent tendencies"—as taught in, for example, **the Giri-m-ānanda Sutta** (A 10.60). Briefly, this perception reminds us to abandon all views, all social engagement, and indulgence in worldly activities, letting go of even worldly thoughts. This is total renunciation.<sup>76</sup>

**2.4.2.5 The perception of impermanence** (*anicca,saññā*) is, as a regular practice, the most significant meditation for those, monastic or lay, who wish to gain the path (become streamwinners) in this life itself,

<sup>72</sup> See **Marāṇa-s,sati S 3** (A 6.19/3:303-306). See SD 15.4 (2).

<sup>73</sup> **A 6.20/3:306-308** (SD 48.12); also **Marāṇa-s,sati S 3** (A 6.19/3:303-306). See SD 15.4 (2); SD 3.8 (5+6).

<sup>74</sup> Vism ch 8/229-239.

<sup>75</sup> For details on the perception of the loathsomeness of food, see SD 15.4 (3).

<sup>76</sup> S 46.69/5:132; A 10.60,11/5:111 (SD 19.16). See SD 15.4 (4).

as the Buddha guarantees in **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1). The Sutta describes how the 6 sense-faculties should be constantly reflected on as being “impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise.”<sup>77</sup>

The (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta is the first of 10 suttas constituting **the Okkanta Saṃyutta** (ch 25), which are all short but remarkably efficacious suttas with only one teaching, that is, the reflection of impermanence on each of these subjects, as follows:<sup>78</sup>

|                                 |                               |                            |                |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|
| (1) the 6 internal senses       | <b>(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta</b>  | S 25.1/3:225 <sup>79</sup> | SD 16.7        |
| (2) the 6 external senses       | <b>(Anicca) Rūpa Sutta</b>    | S 25.2/3:225 f             |                |
| (3) the 6 sense-consciousnesses | <b>(Anicca) Viññāṇa Sutta</b> | S 25.3/3:226               |                |
| (4) the 6 sense-contacts        | <b>(Anicca) Phassa Sutta</b>  | S 25.4/3:226               |                |
| (5) the 6 feelings              | <b>(Anicca) Vedanā Sutta</b>  | S 25.5/3:226               | SD 17.3(4.5.1) |
| (6) the 6 perceptions           | <b>(Anicca) Saññā Sutta</b>   | S 25.6/3:227               | SD 17.4(10)    |
| (7) the 6 volitions             | <b>(Anicca) Cetanā Sutta</b>  | S 25.7/3:227               |                |
| (8) the 6 cravings              | <b>(Anicca) Taṇhā Sutta</b>   | S 25.8/3:227               |                |
| (9) the 6 elements              | <b>(Anicca) Dhātu Sutta</b>   | S 25.9/3:227               |                |
| (10) the 5 aggregates           | <b>(Anicca) Khandha Sutta</b> | S 25.10/3:227 f            | SD 42.17       |

One only needs to “firmly believe these truths” (regarding impermanence) or accept them “after just some pondering over them with wisdom” to gain the path of streamwinning. “One is incapable of dying without having attained the fruition of streamwinning.” (S 25.1,4.4 = 5.4)<sup>80</sup>

**2.4.2.6 The perception of suffering in the impermanent (*anicce dukkha,saññā*)** is described in **the Vitthāra Satta Saññā Sutta** (A 7.46) as seeing how all things in this world are conditioned; hence, impermanent. To run after things in the world is futile: they do not last; the pleasure they may give does not last, too. This is suffering, unsatisfactory (*dukkha*).

For one who has mastered such a perception, “a keen sense of danger is set up in him regarding lethargy [inaction], laziness, languor,<sup>81</sup> heedlessness, non-devotion and inattention, as if towards a murderer brandishing a sword.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, one sees the urgency in self-cultivation and attaining the path in this life itself.<sup>83</sup>

**2.4.2.7 The perception of the nonself in the suffering (*dukkhe anatta,saññā*)** is also described in **the Vitthāra Satta Saññā Sutta** (A 7.46) as seeing nothing abiding in the unsatisfactory nature of conditioned existence. These conditions are also those of nonself (*anatta*).

For one who has mastered such a perception, “his mental activity [mentation] is devoid of I-making, mine-making, and conceit regarding this conscious body and all external signs; it has transcended dis-

<sup>77</sup> S 25.1/3:225 (SD 16.7).

<sup>78</sup> For practical details on the perception of impermanence, see **Dīgh’āvu S** (S 55.3/5:344-347), SD 23.16.

<sup>79</sup> This first sutta is here tr in full.

<sup>80</sup> Cf **Aniccata Saññā S** (S 22.102/3:155-157), SD 12.12.

<sup>81</sup> “Languor,” *vissatṭhi*, vl *visatṭhi*, pp of *vissajjati*, “he gives up” (lit & fig). It may be alluding to sensual indulgence, since *sukka,visatṭhi* means “emission of semen, ejaculation” (V 2:38, 3:112). “Languor” means “a pleasant feeling being relaxed and not having any energy or interest in anything” (Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner’s Eng Dict).

<sup>82</sup> *Anicce dukkha,saññā,paricitenā bhikkhave bhikkhuno cetasā bahulaṃ viharato ālasse kosajje vissatṭhiye pamāde ananuyoge appaccavekkhanāya tibbā bhaya,saññā paccupatṭhitā hoti, seyyathā pi ukkhittāsike vadhake..*

<sup>83</sup> A 7.46,14/4:52 (SD 15.4).

crimination; it is peaceful and well liberated.” Such a perception, cultivated and well developed will bring one to the deathfree, nirvana.<sup>84</sup>

### 2.4.3 The 10 objects of meditation (1)

**2.4.3.1 The Das’uttara Sutta** (D 34) lists the following **9 perceptions** (*nava saññā*), that is:

|   |                                     |           |
|---|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| (1) the perception of foulness                        | <i>asubha,saññā,</i>                | [2.4.2.1] |
| (2) the perception of death                           | <i>maraṇa,saññā,</i>                | [2.4.2.2] |
| (3) the loathsomeness of food                         | <i>āhāre paṭikkūla,saññā,</i>       | [2.4.2.3] |
| (4) the perception of non-delighting in all the world | <i>sabba,loke anabhirati,saññā,</i> | [2.4.2.4] |
| (5) the perception of impermanence                    | <i>anicca,saññā,</i>                | [2.4.2.5] |
| (6) the perception of suffering in impermanence       | <i>anicce dukkha,saññā,</i>         | [2.4.2.6] |
| (7) the perception of not-self in suffering           | <i>dukkhe anatta,saññā,</i>         | [2.4.2.7] |
| (8) the perception of abandonment                     | <i>pahāna,saññā,</i>                | [2.4.1.2] |
| (9) the perception of fading away                     | <i>virāga,saññā.</i>                | [2.4.1.3] |

The first 7 have been mentioned above, where they are the 7 objects of meditation [2.4.2].

The nonad or ennead<sup>85</sup> here is described as the “**9 states to be brought into being**” (*nava dhamma uppādetabba*), that is, they should be cultivated and realized for oneself.<sup>86</sup>

The first 9 perceptions are listed in **the (Navaka) Saññā Sutta** (A 9.16/4:387)<sup>87</sup> and should be cultivated and developed “to bring great fruit, great benefit, for gaining the deathfree, bringing the final goal that is the deathfree” (*bhāvitā bahulī,kata maha-p,phalā honti mahānisaṃsā amat’ogadhā amata,pariyosānā*); and also as the first 7 perceptions in **the (Satta) Saññā Suttas 1 & 2** (A 7.45+46).<sup>88</sup> [2.4.2.0]

With the addition of:

|                                  |                       |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| (10) the perception of cessation | <i>nirodha,saññā.</i> |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|

the set is called “**the 10 states to be brought into being**” (*dasa dhamma uppādetabba*).<sup>89</sup> These 10 perceptions are also listed in **the (Dasaka) Saññā Sutta 1** (A 10.56) as being of “great fruit and great benefit for **immersing and culminating in nirvana**” (*amat’ogadhā amata,pariyosāna*). This refers to the attaining of arhathood.<sup>90</sup>

### 2.4.4 The 10 objects of meditation (2)

**2.4.4.1** Another set of 10 perceptions (*saññā*) appears in **the Giri-m-ānanda Sutta** (A 10.60), thus (the ideas with an asterisk \* are unique to this Sutta):

|                                    |                     |           |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------|
| (1) the perception of impermanence | <i>anicca,saññā</i> | [2.4.2.5] |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------|

<sup>84</sup> A 7.46,16/4:53 (SD 15.4).

<sup>85</sup> “Ennead” is as set of 9 things; “nonad” is a nonword to some, but makes good simple sense, meaning “a collection of 9 things.” It’s shorter than “ennead.”

<sup>86</sup> D 34,2.2(8)/3:289 f.

<sup>87</sup> A 9.16 is an expanded parallel of **(Satta) Saññā S 1** (A 7.48/4:46); and related to **(Pañcaka) Saññā S 1** (A 5.61/-3:79).

<sup>88</sup> S 7.45+46/4:46-53.

<sup>89</sup> D 34,2.3(8)/3:291.

<sup>90</sup> A 10.56/5:105,29 + Diagram 9.5.3; cf **(Dasaka) Saññā S 2**, A 10.57/5:106,10.



|   |                                       |           |
|---|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| (2) the perception of nonself*                              | <i>anatta,saññā</i>                   | [2.4.4.2] |
| (3) the perception of foulness                              | <i>asubha,saññā</i>                   | [2.4.2.1] |
| (4) the perception of danger [disadvantages]*               | <i>ādīnava,saññā</i>                  | [2.4.4.3] |
| (5) the perception of abandoning                            | <i>pahāna,saññā</i>                   | [2.4.1.2] |
| (6) the perception of fading away (of lust) [of dispassion] | <i>virāga,saññā</i>                   | [2.4.1.3] |
| (7) the perception of cessation*                            | <i>nirodha,saññā</i>                  | [2.4.4.4] |
| (8) the perception of not delighting in all the world       | <i>sabba,loke anabhirata,saññā</i>    | [2.4.2.4] |
| (9) the perception of wishlessness towards all formations*  | <i>sabba,saṅkhāresu aniccha,saññā</i> | [2.4.4.5] |
| (10) the mindfulness of the breath*                         | <i>ānāpāna,sati</i>                   | [2.4.4.6] |

(A 10.60,4-13/5:108-112), SD 19.16

The Giri-m-ānanda Sutta is unique in that the 10 meditation “ideas” are “**spoken**” (*bhāseyyasi; abhāsi*), that is, taught (not “recited” like a mantra) to the sick monk, Giri-m-ānanda, who, upon listening to the teachings, recovers at once. The Buddha teaches Ānanda the above **10 perceptions** (*saññā*), and Ānanda then teaches them to Giri-m-ānanda.

Notice that only the first 9 methods are actual “perceptions” while the 10<sup>th</sup> and last, **the breath meditation**, is a “mindfulness” (*sati*) practice. The breath meditation has been included in this decad for 2 key reasons:

- (1) in the breath meditation, one meditates on the idea of the breath, first as *a bodily state*, and as one gains deeper focus it becomes *a mental state*; this keeps the mind calm and clear;
- (2) Giri-m-ānanda does not merely listen to the teachings—like to a brahminical “mantra”—but reflects the first 9 ideas, and actually practises the breath meditation, even as Ānanda teaches it, as it were as a direct transmission from the Buddha himself.

What heals Giri-m-ānanda is not the sound effect of the Sutta but the **joy** that arises from listening to the Dharma teachings, culminating in the practice of the breath meditation. Through the meditation, Giri-m-ānanda is able to free himself from the sick body and dwell in the healthy mind freed by dhyana (or even merely by some level of samadhi with joyful faith).<sup>91</sup>

**2.4.4.2 The perception of nonself** (*anatta,saññā*) is the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 10 meditation ideas taught by the Buddha to Giri-m-ānanda. The Sutta describes this idea as a meditation that reflects on **the 12 sense-bases**—the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, and their respective objects, both one’s own (internally) and those of others (externally)—are nonself (*anatta*), without any abiding entity. [A 10.60,5]

**2.4.4.3 The perception of danger [disadvantages]** (*ādīnava,saññā*) is the 4<sup>th</sup> of the 10 meditation ideas taught by the Buddha to Giri-m-ānanda. This meditation idea is the perception that our body can fall sick from various kinds of illnesses.<sup>92</sup> Such an illness may be life-threatening or cause such discomfort or distraction that it will be difficult to sustain our Dharma practice. [A 10.60,7]

Clearly this is an urgent reminder to keep up the practice here and now while one is healthy, especially when young. It also means that good health is vital for the practitioner: “Health is the highest gain” (Dh 204).

**2.4.4.4 The perception of cessation** (*nirodha,saññā*) is the 7<sup>th</sup> of the 10 meditation ideas taught by the Buddha to Giri-m-ānanda. Basically, this is the reflection of the peace that is nirvana, that whatever profound peace one gains here and now reminds us that the peace of nirvana is far greater:

<sup>91</sup> From (**Gamaṇi**) **Asi,bandhaka,putta S** (S 42.6), SD 32.6.

<sup>92</sup> Early Buddhism had a long history of traditional Indian medicine: SD 5.6 (1); SD 43.4 (2).



“This is peaceful! This is sublime! That is, the stilling of all formations, the letting go of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, *the cessation*, nirvana.” [A 10.60,10]

**The perceptions of dispassion** (*virāga,saññā*) [idea 6] and **of cessation** (*nirodha,saññā*) [idea 7] are traditionally perceptions of nirvana. Technically, in the set of 40 meditations,<sup>93</sup> these 2 perceptions are subsumed under the “recollection of peace” (*upasamānussati*) that is, on nirvana. These 2 perceptions are explained in some detail in **the Visuddhi,magga**.<sup>94</sup> [A 10.60,7]

**2.4.4.5 The perception of wishlessness towards all formations** (*sabba,saṅkhāresu aniccha,saññā*) is the 9<sup>th</sup> of the 10 meditation ideas taught by the Buddha to Giri-m-ānanda. This is a reflection that one, as a meditator—and also as a renunciant—has nothing to do with the world. The meditative mind is “pained by all formations, ashamed of them, revulsed by them.” This is clearly the most powerful statement on true renunciation. [A 10.60,12]

**2.4.4.6 The mindfulness of the breath** (*ānāpāna,sati*) is the 10<sup>th</sup> and last of the 10 meditation ideas taught by the Buddha to Giri-m-ānanda. It is the full sequence of the 16 steps of the mindfulness of the in-and-out breath, as taught, for example, in **the Ānāpāna,sati Sutta** (M 118).<sup>95</sup> The first 9 ideas work as a preparation for Giri-m-ānanda to enter into a guided breath meditation (the 10<sup>th</sup> idea).

For the Buddha to give meditation teachings through Ānanda to the sick monk Giri-m-ānanda means at least 2 important things:

- (1) is that Giri-m-ānanda’s illness is not so serious as to warrant a visit, and
- (2) that Giri-m-ānanda is good and ready for instruction.

The Buddha instructs Ānanda, “If you approach the monk Giri-m-ānanda and speak to him regarding **the 10 perceptions**, it is possible that the monk Giri-m-ānanda, having heard the 10 perceptions, his illness will subside immediately.” [S2.2].

**2.4.4.7 The Giri-m-ānanda Sutta** does not imply in any way that it was due to the “mantric power” of merely hearing the Dharma that Giri-m-ānanda is healed. **The (Gamaṇi) Asi,bandhaka,putta Sutta** (S 42.6) clearly attests that neither prayers nor recitation of words will have any effect on the karma or destiny of another. Only by one’s own actions or karma brings one to arise in the heavens or to be reborn in a suffering state.<sup>96</sup>

We must thus imagine that Giri-m-ānanda is able to follow Ānanda’s instructions of the meditation step. Ānanda is, after all, a streamwinner, and Giri-m-ānanda not yet an arhat; and probably not yet a streamwinner, too. In such a personal guided meditation, it is unlikely that Giri-m-ānanda would have attained any dhyana. However, he would certainly be able to experience profound bliss by it. This is sufficient condition for his self-healing through joy. The Sutta closes with the Sutta narrator telling us:

“Then the venerable Giri-m-ānanda, upon hearing the 10 perceptions, his illness subsided immediately. The venerable Giri-m-ānanda recovered from his illness, and that is how the venerable Giri-m-ānanda was rid of his illness.” [A 10.60,15]

<sup>93</sup> On the 40 meditations, see R Gethin 1998:178 (Table 4); H Gunaratana 1985:219-221 (App 3); DEB App 2; SD 15.1 (Fig 8.1).

<sup>94</sup> Vism 8.245-251/293 f.

<sup>95</sup> M 118/3:78-88 (SD 7.13).

<sup>96</sup> S 42.6/4:311-314 (SD 39.9).

## 2.5 SAÑÑĀ AS CONSCIOUSNESS

### 2.5.1 Consciousness in its entirety

**2.5.1.1** In a number of places in the suttas, we see the word *saññā* carrying the sense of “consciousness,” broader than what *viññāṇa* usually means. In such cases, it is clear that while *viññāṇa* is used in a psychological sense, *saññā* has a meditative and cosmological—or psychocosmological—sense. **The Pañca-t, taya Sutta**, for example, uses the term *saññā* and *saññī* in the context of meditation, that is, in the context of the “mental bases” (*āyatana*) of meditation and existence.<sup>97</sup>

In such a context, *saññā* functions as “consciousness,” in the sense of “life-continuum,” especially in situations where many of the usual “sensors” of consciousness, the 5 physical senses (*pañc’indriya*), are missing (that is, temporarily not functioning) at this profound level of meditation or existence. Although *viññāṇa* may occur in such a context, there is still “conscious life” with *saññā* as the life-continuum. This, however, is only one special function of *saññā*, since it is also used in a broader, cosmological sense (as we shall see).

**2.5.1.2** When used in the names of the existential realms or meditation bases (*āyatana*), *saññā* refers to consciousness in its entirety, namely:

- “the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception” *n’eva, saññā, nāsaññ’āyatana;*
- “the non-conscious beings” *asaññā, satta.*

In both cases, *saññā* does not refer to perception alone, but also to all the other aspects of consciousness.

### 2.5.2 Saññā, gata

**2.5.2.1** In at least 2 suttas, we see the phrase, “there is the escape beyond coming into this consciousness” (*atthi imassa saññā, gatassa uttari nissaraṇaṃ*), that is:

|                         |           |          |
|-------------------------|-----------|----------|
| <b>Vatthūpama Sutta</b> | M 7,17    | SD 28.12 |
| <b>Sāḷha Sutta</b>      | A 3.66,15 | SD 43.6  |

Here, *saññā* appears by itself and means “consciousness” [2.5.1], or more specifically refers to the rebirth or existential consciousness.<sup>98</sup> In this special case—apparently, only in these 2 suttas—the term *saññāgata* (*saññā + āgata*), “a coming into consciousness,” has directly to do with the benefits of spiritual training, especially proper meditation. The commentary on **the Sāḷha Sutta** (A 3.66) explains this phrase as follows: “It should be understood as that by which there is the truth that is the ending (of suffering) consciousness (*saññā*), that is, of the insight into nirvana, the escape beyond this coming into consciousness”<sup>99</sup> (AA 2:307).

**2.5.2.2** In the **Cūḷa Suññata Sutta** (M 121), however, *saññāgata* has a narrow technical sense of “perception” as a meditation;<sup>100</sup> such a usage is common enough in terms of meditation.<sup>101</sup> In the medita-

<sup>97</sup> On *āyatana* as “mind-base,” see (**Āsava-k, khaya**) **Jhāna S** (A 9.36) @ SD 33,8 (2.2). On *āyatana* as “sense-base,” ie, sense-faculty, see eg, **Saḷ, āyatana Vibhaṅga S** (M 137/3:216-222), SD 29.5.

<sup>98</sup> M 7,17, SD 28.12; A 3.66,15, SD 43.6; also M 1:435-437, 3:104-108; S 4:106; A 2:128, 130, 4:422-426; all passim.

<sup>99</sup> *Imassa vipassanā, saññā, saṅkhātassa saññāgatassa uttari nissaraṇaṃ nibbānaṃ, tam atthīti iminā nirodha, -saccaṃ dasseti* (AA 2:307,22-24).

<sup>100</sup> M 121/3:104-108 (SD 11.3).

tion context, as we have seen [2.4], *saññā* refers to “ideas” that are used in meditation, especially in reference to meditation objects by way of states that we are familiar with or need to be familiar with.

The term *saññāgata*, however, also appears in the following texts, as part of the set of 5 aggregates,<sup>102</sup> and simply means “by way of perception,” “included in perception,” or “pertaining to perception,” without any other special sense:

|                                      |                    |          |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|----------|
| <b>Mahā Mālunḱyā,putta Sutta</b>     | M 64,9+10+11+12+13 | SD 21.10 |
| <b>Rahulo,vāda Sutta</b>             | S 35.121/4:106     | SD 93.6  |
| <b>(Nānā,karaṇa) Puggala Sutta 2</b> | A 4.124/2:128      | SD 23.8b |
| <b>(Nānā,karaṇa) Mettā Sutta 2</b>   | A 4.126/2:130      | SD 33.10 |
| <b>(Āsava-k,khaya) Jhāna Sutta</b>   | A 9.36/4:422-426   | SD 33.8  |

### 2.5.3 *Abhisaññā,nirodha*

**2.5.3.1** Another passage which refers to *saññā* is particularly interesting, although it is not a passage in which the physical and mental faculties are being analysed or explained. In **the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta** (D 9), the Blessed One is asked by the wanderer Poṭṭhapāda how the mental state of *abhisaññā,nirodha*<sup>103</sup> (the cessation of consciousness) comes about.<sup>104</sup>

During the conversation between Poṭṭhapāda and the Blessed One, we come across *saññī hoti* (he becomes conscious) in apposition with *asaññī hoti* (he becomes unconscious). Throughout the Sutta the word *saññā* is used in the sense of “**consciousness**” as a blanket term for mental awareness in general, or the sum of the mental faculties.

But it is also used in the sense of the arising or cessation of particular “conceptions,” or states of consciousness (such as joy or desire), which are achieved through training the mind,<sup>105</sup> and *saññā’aggam* (highest consciousness) is referred to as something which is to be achieved, a meditational goal, as it were (D 1:184). At a point where the Blessed One is describing various meditational states [the dhyanas and liberations, *vimokkha*], we also read: “there arises in him a consciousness, subtle but yet actual, of everything being within the sphere of the infinity of cognition.”<sup>106</sup>

**2.5.3.2** So in this Sutta as a whole, *saññā* appears to cover an extraordinarily wide range of meanings and functions. It is clear from the sutta context that the Buddha’s interlocutor, **Poṭṭhapāda**, was a wanderer (*paribbajjākā*), keen in spiritual matters. During his first meeting with the Buddha, he received a lengthy exposition on the “fruits of recluseship” (*sāmañña,phala*). It was during his 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting with the Buddha, 2-3 days later, that Poṭṭhapāda was able to ask about *abhisaññā,nirodha* (the cessation or suspension of consciousness during dhyana) and about the “peak of consciousness” (*saññā’agga*). This latter term, the Buddha explained as referring to the “base of nothingness” (*ākiñcaññ’āyatana*) (DA 2:373). The overall result of Poṭṭhapāda’s session with the Buddha was that Poṭṭhapāda’s view regarding the eternal soul was cleared up. He joined the sangha and became an arhat.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> See eg, SD 15.1: Fig 8.1.

<sup>102</sup> See SD 17.

<sup>103</sup> *Abhisaññā* first occurs at D 1:179.

<sup>104</sup> Poṭṭhapāda had, 2-3 days earlier, received the gradual teachings from the Buddha, which he did not fully understand but appreciated. On his 2<sup>nd</sup> visit, he asked the Buddha on these special terms. **D 9/1:178-203** (SD 7.14).

<sup>105</sup> D 1:182: *evam pi sikkhā ekā saññā uppajjant, sikkhā ekā saññā nirujjhanti.i*

<sup>106</sup> D 1:184: *viññāṇaṇcāyatana, sukhuma,sacca,saññā tasmim samaye hoti.*

<sup>107</sup> D 9/1:178-203 (SD 7.14).

## (Chakka) Saññā Sutta

### The (Sixes) Discourse on Perceptions

A 6.110

1 (Originating in Sāvatthi.)

(sāvatthī, nidanam)

2 There are, bhikkhus, these 3 states.

*tayo’me bhikkhave dhammā*

What are the three?

*katame tayo*

(1) **Perception of the sensual;**

*kāma, saññā*

(2) **perception of ill will;**

*vyāpāda, saññā*

(3) **perception of violence.**

*vihimsā, saññā*

These, bhikkhus, are the 3 states.

*ime kho bhikkhave tayo dhammā*

3 These are the 3 states, bhikkhus, to be abandoned.

*imesaṃ kho bhikkhave tiṇṇaṃ*

*dhammānaṃ pahānāya*

*tayo dhammā bhāvetabbā*

*katame tayo*

4 Three (other) states are to be cultivated.

*kāma, saññāya pahānāya*

What are the three?

*nekkhamma, saññā bhāvetabbo*

(1) For the abandoning of the sensual perception  
a perception of **renunciation** should be cultivated.

*vyāpāda, saññāya pahānāya*

(2) For the abandoning of the perception of ill will  
a perception of **non-ill will** should be cultivated.

*avyāpāda, saññā bhāvetabbo*

(1) For the abandoning of the violent perception  
a perception of **non-violence** should be cultivated.

*vihimsā, saññāya pahānāya*

*avihimsā, saññā bhāvetabbo*

5 These, bhikkhus, are the 3 states to be abandoned.

*imesaṃ kho bhikkhave tiṇṇaṃ*

*dhammānaṃ pahānāya*

These are the 3 states to be cultivated.

*ime tayo dhammā bhāvetabbā ti.*

—evaṃ—

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