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Saññā Nānatta Sutta
The Discourse on the Diversity of Perception  | S 14.7
Theme: How we interpret our sense-experiences
Translated by Piya Tan ©2006

1 The perceptual process

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY AND SIGNIFICANCE

1.1.1 Summary
The Saññā Nānatta Sutta (S 14.7) briefly shows how the diversity of elements (form, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought) conditions the arising of the diversity of perception, leading to the arising of the diversity of thoughts, to the arising of the diversity of desires, to the arising of the diversity of passions, and the arising of the diversity of search (or searching). The term “diversity” (nānatta) refers to each of these arising in connect with each of the external “elements,” that is, form, sound, smell, etc.¹

1.1.2 Amongst the world religions, indeed in history itself, the first theory of perception is found in the Buddha’s teachings—as in his analysis of sense-perception (saññā) found in the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (M 18).² This canonical version differs in some important aspects from the more developed Abhidhamma and Commentarial version, but one feature is common to both, that is, that an act of complete perception does not arise as an immediate result of the contact between the sense-faculty and the sense-object. Perception is regarded as a process of thought that begins as a simple sensation and ends up with the complete apprehension of the object.

1.2 THE ELEMENTS, INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL

While “the internal elements” [Table 2.1] refer to how the sense-faculties (the eye, ear, etc), their respective sense-objects and sense-consciousnesses interact through contact (phassa), “the external elements” refers the sense-objects: the seen (form), the heard (sound), the smelt, the tasted, the touched (felt) and thought. For example, dependent on form (sound, smell, etc), there arises perception, which conditions thought, and then desire, then passion, and then the quest for form (sounds, smells, etc).

1.3 THE CANONICAL THEORY OF THE PERCEPTUAL PROCESS

According to the suttas, the perceptual process comprises 6 stages, thus:³

1. Sense-consciousness, for example, visual consciousness (cakkhu, viññāna), which arises with the eye and visual object as its conditions. At this point, it is bare sensation before the object is fully apprehended (which is similarly understood in the Abhidhamma).

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¹ On “the internal elements,” see SD 58.5 (2.1.2).
² M 18,15-18/1:111 f + SD 6.14 (4).
³ Discussed in greater detail in Saññā, SD 17.4. See also Analayo, Satipaṭṭhāna: The direct path to realization, 2003:222-226.
2. **Sensory impression** or **sense-contact**, for example, eye impression or eye contact (cakkhu, sampathassa or -phassa), defined as the coordination amongst the sense-organ, the sense-object and sense-consciousness (tiṇṇam saṅgati phasso, M 18,16/1:111).

3. **Feeling** (vedanā), that is, the hedonic tone or emotional quality of the resultant experience.

4. **Perception** or apperception (saññā). The fact that viññāna (bare sensation) occurs before saññā [bare reaction] shows that saññā represents a more complex form of awareness. While viññāna refers to mere sensory awareness, saññā “suggests a state of awareness obtained by introducing distinctions to the earlier stage of bare awareness” (Karunadasa, 2001:211).

5. **Thinking** (vitakka), that is, when the mind directs itself to a sense-object or mind-object, or attend to it. As a natural process, this is followed by “pondering” (vicāra), when the object is **interpreted.** In meditation terms, it is translated as “initial application (of mind)”), suggesting a stage where the object is **perceived.** This is followed by “sustained application,” when the attention is kept focused on the object.

6. **Mental proliferation** (papañca) that “hints at the tendency of the individual’s imagination to break loose” (Ñāṇananda 1971:4). This is a very complex level of experience that is coloured by one’s desires and prejudices. This last stage in the perceptual process is clearly detailed in the short **Cetanā Sutta 1** (S 12.38):

   Monks, what one wills, and what one plans, and what lies latent—this is a support for the continuation of consciousness. When there is a support, there is a basis for the establishing of consciousness. When consciousness is established and increases, there occurs further rebirth. When there is further rebirth, there arise further birth, decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, anxiety and despair. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

   **Yañ ca kho bhikkhave ceteti yañ ca pakappeti yañ ca anuseti. Ārammaṇam eta hoti viññānassa thitiyā. Ārammaṇe sati patiṭṭhitā viññānassa hoti. Tasmiṁ patiṭṭhite viññāne virulhe āyatim puna-b, bhavābhinhībatti hoti. Āyatim puna-b, bhavābhinhībattiya sati āyatim jarā, maraṇam soka, parideva, dukkha, domanass’upāyāsā sambhavanti. Evam etass kevalassa dukkha-k-, khandhassa samudayo hoti.** (S 12.38/2:65 f)

2 The **dependent arising of perception**

2.1 **The perceptual process table**

The perceptual processes given in the Saññā Nānatta Sutta has been tabulated for easy reference in Table 2.1.

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5 Karunadasa argues that in this sixfold process, the final stage of perception is not “mental proliferation” (as proposed by Sarathchandra, 1958 & Ńānananda 1971:5 ff) but actually “perception” (stage 4) since “what follows saññā could be understood not as a process of sense-perception but as a purely ideational process set up by a process of perception. In point of fact, both Sarathchandra and Ńānananda (1971:5 ff, 41 ff) explain the stages subsequent to saññā as a process of interpretation and judgement.” (2001:212).

6 “Support,” ārammaṇa, also tr “object,” that is, one of the 6 sense-objects, forming the external support for sense-perception, and without them there is no sense-perception.

7 See S:B 757 n112.
The Saññā Nānatta Sutta is found in the Nānatta Vagga (the chapter on diversity, S 2.3.1), the first section of 14th saṁyutta, the Dhātu Saṁyutta (the connected discourses on the sense elements). The Nānatta Vagga is divided into 2 pentads (pañcaka): an “internal pentad” (ajjhatta pañcaka), dealing with the sense-faculties, and “external pentad” (bāhira pañcaka), dealing with the sense-objects.  

**Table 2.1: The human perceptual processes**

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8 See S:B 527 f.
9 Here, a synonym for cetanā.
10 For an explanation, see SD 58.8 (2.1.3).
The 1st section of the Nānatta Vagga comprises the “internal pentad,” 5 suttas dealing with the 6 sense-faculties. The very first of these 5 is the Dhātu Nānatta Sutta (S 14.1). The Vagga’s 2nd section comprises an “external pentad,” 5 suttas each dealing with the 6 sense-objects (SD 29.9). The Saññā Nānatta Sutta (S 14.7), the 7th sutta of the Vagga, shows how each of the 6 sense-objects, wrongly perceived, leads to further thoughts, intending (saṅkappa) for it, which then turns into desire (chanda) that is reinforced itself into passion or “fever” (pariḷāha), resulting in the searching or “quest” (pariyesanā) for the sense-object.12

![Fig 2.2: The 12-link dependent arising](http://dharmafarer.org)

### 2.2 EXPLANATION OF TERMS

#### 2.2.1 Dependent arising

This sequence of the 12-link dependent arising [Fig 2.2] effectively constitutes an equivalent to links 3 to 9 of the better known 12-link dependent arising formula, seen from the sense-object (“internal”) perspective. The Mahā Nidāna Sutta (D 15) has a ninefold sequence13 and a secondary sequence that gives another variation of the Saññā Nānatta Sutta sequence, namely:

11 For a correlation of the 5 aggregates, the 6 bases, 18 elements and their 4 ultimate realities (according to Abhidhamma), see Abhs:BRS 2nd ed 2009:288 Table 7.4.

12 Taking form as an example, Comy explains, “having grasped the sight (ie, sign, nimitta) of one’s companions, when the passion arises, one searches in order to obtain that form” (pariḷāhe uppanne sandiṭṭha,sambhatte gahe-tvā tassa rūpassa paṭilābh’atthāya pariyesanā) (SA 2:133).

13 Consciousness → name-and-form (→ consciousness → name-and-form) → contact → feeling → craving → clinging → existence → birth → decay-and-death. See SD 5.17.
Craving → searching → gain → decision-making → desire and lust → attachment → possessiveness → stinginess → safe-guarding → various evils, unwholesome phenomena (violence, quarrels, etc).

(M 15,9-18/2:58-61), SD 5.17

2.2.2 The role of chanda in perception

L S Cousins, in an email to the Buddha-L page, makes this observation, commenting especially on “desire” (chanda):

As regards chanda, it is rather frequent in the term kāma-c, chanda, normally used as a name for the first of the 5 hindrances. In the Saññā Nānatta Sutta (S 14.7) we see it in a type of conditioned arising:

dependent upon the visible object element arises labelling of visible objects,
dependent upon that arises thinking based upon visible objects,
dependent upon that arises chanda [desire] for visible objects,
dependent upon that arises feverish concern about visible objects,
dependent upon that arises searching for visible objects.

[The same is true for each of the other 5 kinds of object.]

Therefore it is due to the variety of kinds of object (of sense and mind) that the varieties of labelling, thinking, chanda, feverish concern and searching occur.

This particular discourse is part of a series of linked discourses (the Nānatta Vagga) which effectively constitute a presentation of an equivalent to links 3 to 9 of the common twelvefold version from various angles. The sequence from feeling through craving and searching and ultimately ending in quarrels, disputes, etc. is partly also derived from the Mahānidāna Sutta.

(L S Cousins, Buddha-L email, 2nd Feb 2006; highlighted)

2.2.3 Vitakka as thought and intention

2.2.3.1 The term “thought” (vitakka), too, needs some explanation. Bodhi translates it here as “intention,” but this is normally reserved for cetanā. This is only partly right, since vitakka has a broader sense that is applicable here. Let us first examine the meanings of these 2 important terms.

The Buddhist Dictionary defines vitakka, “thought,” as follows, following the (Chakka) Vitakka Sutta (A 6.109):

“Thought,” “thought-conception,” is one of the “secondary” (not constant) mental concomitants (see Table II), and may be either karmically wholesome, unwholesome or neutral.

“There are 3 karmically unwholesome (akusala) thoughts: sensual thought (kāma, vitakka), hating thought (vyāpāda, vitakka), and cruel thought (vihimsā, vitakka). There are 3 karmically wholesome (kusala) thoughts: thought of renunciation (nekkhamma, saṅkappa), of hatelessness (avyāpāda, vitakka), of not harming (avihiṁsā, vitakka).”

The latter three constitute “Right Thought,” the 2nd link of the eightfold path (see magga 2).

(Buddhist Dictionary: vitakka)

15 A 6.109/3:466 (SD 62.10).
2.2.3.2 The Buddhist Dictionary defines cetanā as follows:

“Volition,” will, is one of the seven mental factors (cetasika, qv) inseparably bound up with all consciousness, namely: sensorial or mental impression (phassa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), volition (cetanā), concentration (samādhi), vitality (jīvita), advertence (manasikāra). Cf Table II, III.

With regard to karmical volition (ie, wholesome or unwholesome karma), it is said in A 6.13: “Volition is action (karma), thus I say, O monks; for as soon as volition arises, one does the action, be it by body, speech or mind.”

For details, see paṭiccasamuppāda (10), Karma. (Buddhist Dictionary: cetanā)

2.2.3.3 Vitakka not only functions as intention (conative) but also broadly in a cognitive way as our thoughts. In other words, the mind behind most of our conscious or waking actions are of this nature, as stated in the (Chakka) Vitakka Sutta (A 6.109) [2.2.3.1]. It has karmic potency—working in a cycle of cause-effect-cause (the effect, in turns, acts as cause)—that is, depending on which emotion is driving us: the unwholesome roots of greed, hate, delusion, or the wholesome roots of non-greed, non-hate, non-delusion. [2.2.4]

2.2.3.4 Notice that while intentions (cetanā) refer only to either the wholesome roots (greed, hate, delusion) or the unwholesome roots (non-greed, non-hate, non-delusion), thoughts (vitakka) have a broader sense of wanting to put it into action, an external directing of the mind, unwholesomely, as sensuality, hate, or cruelty; or, wholesomely, as renunciation, hatelessness, or non-harming (non-violence).

In modern terms, we may speak of cetanā is coming from the unconscious, the latent tendencies (anusaya), while vitakka occurs at the preconscious, the mind just before acting. It is easier for us to see and stop the unwholesome intentions at the latter level, especially with the practice of moral virtue (sīla). The latent tendencies are more difficult to deal with at our present level of spiritual being! We need the help of mental concentration (samādhi), tapping the strength of deeper wisdom (paññā).

2.2.4 Understanding unwholesome perception

Clearly, then, “thought” (vitakka) in the Saññā Nānatta Sutta refers to the 3 karmically unwholesome thoughts (akusala,vitakka), those motivated by greed, by hate, by delusion [2.2.3.3]. Volition (cetanā) underlies these unwholesome thoughts, but is the deeply-rooted condition behind the action as well as the action itself.16 Here, in the Sutta, the emphasis is on the action itself, not just its psychological quality. After all, volition underlies all the other links of the diversity chains presented in the Sutta, but it aims at presenting an “external” view of things, of the way wrong perception leads to searching for more of the unwholesome object.

2.2.5 Sammā saṅkappa as practice

2.2.5.1 The term saṅkappa, “thought” or technically “intentional thoughts” [2.2.3.4] is basically used in terms of the path training, that is, as the 2nd limb of the noble eightfold path. It denotes our deliberate awareness of the workings of the unwholesome roots of greed, hate, delusion, and the wholesome roots of non-greed, non-hate, non-delusion.

16 Comy says that “thought regarding form” (rūpa,saṅkappa) refers to the thought associated with 3 mind moments (citta), namely, the receiving, (investigating, and determining) mind moments (SA 2:132).
The unwholesome roots are weakened and diminished by the application of the 1st 2 right efforts. When there is neither greed nor hate in our mind, we keep it that way, basically through the restraint of the physical senses (indriya, saṅvara): this is the effort to restrain (saṅvara, padhāna, the 1st right effort).\textsuperscript{17}

When a state occasioned by greed or hatred does arise at any of the sense-doors (seeing, hearing, etc), we should make an effort to abandon it: this is the effort to abandon (padhāna, padhāna, the 2nd right effort). This is also a practice or renunciation (nekkhamma), of letting go of negative thoughts.

The last 2 right efforts work with the cultivation of non-greed (charity) and non-hate (lovingkindness and compassion). This is the effort to cultivate (bhāvanā, padhāna). On a deeper level, it includes mental cultivation (also called bhāvanā, but translated as “meditation”), that is, the arising of charity, compassion, and at least some wisdom.

The 4th right effort is that of guarding the wholesome states that have become our habit. This is the effort to guard (anurakkha, padhāna). This is properly done through mindfulness and meditation, by way of the 7 awakening-factors (satta bojjhaṅga): mindfulness, investigation of states, effort, zest, tranquility, concentration and equanimity.\textsuperscript{18} Even practising just the 1st awakening-factor is a good start in our efforts to move closer to the path.\textsuperscript{19}

2.2.5.2 Note that only the first 2 of the 3 unwholesome roots—greed and hate—are mentioned above. This is because the 3rd root, delusion, is profoundly difficult to detect, and even when we do detect it, we may not be strong enough to reject it. The assurance against the insidious effects of delusion is the constant perception of impermanence\textsuperscript{20} towards any state, whether unwholesome or wholesome, that arises in us.

It is for this reason, too, that wrong thought (micchā, saṅkappa) is defined as sensual thought (kāma-vitakka),\textsuperscript{21} hating thought (vyāpāda, vitakka) and cruel thought (vihimsā, vitakka), which are all karmically unwholesome. Note that hating thought and cruel (or violent) thought are the 2 darkest aspects of the unwholesome root of hate (dosa). There is no mention of delusion (moha) at this stage, for the reason we have just mentioned.

Right thought (sammā, saṅkappa) comprises those countering the 3 wrong thoughts, that is, the thought of renunciation, of hatelessness, and of not harming (non-violence) [2.2.3.1]. This is the spirit of the spiritual life: we begin by renouncing the unwholesome, cultivating the wholesome, and purifying the mind (Dh 183). Basically, renouncing the unwholesome is our moral training of restraining our body and speech, by renouncing unwholesome bodily conduct.

The thought of hatelessness is the renunciation of any negative view about ourself or others, wishing good for both parties, beginning with the cultivation of lovingkindness. The thought of not harming begins with living a life that harms neither oneself nor others nor the environment. This entails the cultivation of wisdom and a well-cultivated mind to understand why, how this is done, and the ability to withstand, even transform for the better, the worldly currents that counter the spiritual life.

\textsuperscript{17} In terms of mindfulness, we apply this practice to keeping away any of the 5 mental hindrances: SD 10.16 (6.3.1).

\textsuperscript{18} See (Bojjhaṅga) Sila S (54.6), SD 10.15; Mahā Sakuʿudāyi S (M 77,20) + SD 6.18 (7); Aggaṇṇa S (D 27,30), SD 2.19.

\textsuperscript{19} See SD 10.16 (6.3).

\textsuperscript{20} See Mahā Rāhuḷʿovāda S (M 62,22) SD 3.11; def at (Anicca) Cakkhu S (S 25.1) & SD 16.7 (5).

\textsuperscript{21} Sensual thoughts are unwholesome in that they drive us to seek solutions externally to problems that are rooted within our minds, and to seek satisfaction from outside on account of identifying and trying to own our sense-based experiences, and of measuring ourself against others. See Mine: The nature of craving, SD 19.3 and Me: The nature of conceit, SD 19.2a.
3 The methods of unity and of diversity

3.1 THE METHOD OF UNITY

According to early Buddhism, impermanence and continuum can be properly understood by way of these two complementary methods of investigation. The method of unity (ekatta, naya) discloses the coherence of the succession of discrete conscious moments or “conscious particles” making up the continuum (santana). It shows them as connected in a single series, “participants in a process of transmission and development, interconnected members unified through a law of conditional dependence.”

3.2 THE METHOD OF DIVERSITY

3.2.1 The method of diversity (nānatta, naya) balances this approach by pointing out the difference. Though unified, the flow of conscious moments is still a chain or waves of discrete links, some of which function as causes, others as effects, or working as effects, and then as causes. Sometimes, the continuum is interrupted: the death-moment and the rebirth-linking break it up into separate life-terms which show marked differences despite being part of the same series. They are the same yet not the same.

3.2.2 When the method of unity is misunderstood or misapplied, it generally leads to the view of an abiding identical self, based on a view of eternalism. A wrong understanding of the method of diversity misleads one into viewing the apparently discontinuous process of existence as being absolute in each moment or process, and so leads to annihilationism.

A proper understanding of both methods will reveal only the continuum to be a connected momentary series of causes and effects, which continues so long as the cause is present, and ceases when the cause ceases. In either case, there is (there can be) no persisting core or abiding essence present that is to be grasped as a personal self or “soul.” This is the middle way which avoids the two extremes.

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22 A “continuum” (santāna) means a single beginningless series of life-processes extending into the indefinite future, and contains within itself a number of individual life-terms. The word “continuity” (santati) is used here for this individual life-term, with its distinct birth, life and death. Each continuity, in turn, comprises of a rapid succession of dharmas or momentary mental and physical factors, held together by laws of causal relationship. How the methods of diversity and of unity, when misapplied, gives rise to the wrong view of annihilation is explained in Bodhi 1978: 20. (Summarized from Bodhi 1978:192 n1.)


24 There is the sandy beach simile: Seen from afar a sandy beach appears to be smooth and flat, but on careful examination (especially with a magnifying glass), the beach is seen as made of discrete particles of sand, which on a microscopic level actually do not touch each other.

25 For further details, see Bodhi, The All-embracing New of Views, Kandy, 1978:19 f.
Saññā Nānatta Sutta
The Discourse on the Diversity of Perception
S 14.7

1 At Sāvatthī.

Summary

2 “Bhikshus, dependent on the diversity of elements, there arises the diversity of perceptions; dependent on the diversity of perceptions, there arises the diversity of thoughts; dependent on the diversity of thoughts, there arises the diversity of desires; dependent on the diversity of desires, there arises the diversity of passions; dependent on the diversity of passions, there arises the diversity of searching.

Analysis of perception

3 And what bhikshus is the diversity of elements (dhātu nānatta)?
   The form element. rūpa,dhātu
   The sound element. sadda,dhātu
   The smell element. gandha,dhātu
   The taste element. rasa,dhātu
   The touch element. phoṭṭhabba,dhātu
   The mind-object element. dhamma,dhātu
   This, bhikshus, is called the diversity of elements. [144]

4 And how, bhikshus, is it that dependent on the diversity of elements, there arises the diversity of perceptions: saññā nānatta dependent on the diversity of perceptions, there arises the diversity of thoughts: saṅkappa nānatta dependent on the diversity of thoughts, there arises the diversity of desires: chanda nānatta dependent on the diversity of desires, there arises the diversity of passions: parilāha nānatta dependent on the diversity of passions, there arises the diversity of searching: pariyesanā nānatta

The sense-perception cycles

5 (1) Dependent on the form element, there arises the perception of form; dependent on the perception of form, there arises the thought regarding form; dependent on the thought regarding form, there arises the desire for form; dependent on the desire for form, there arises the passion for form; dependent on the passion for form, there arises the search for form.

26 Comy uses form to explain the psychological process here: see (2.2) above.
6  (2) Dependent on the sound element, there arises the perception of sound; dependent on the thought regarding sound, there arises the desire for sound; dependent on the desire for sound, there arises the passion for sound; dependent on the passion for sound, there arises the search for sound.

7  (3) Dependent on the smell element, there arises the perception of smell; dependent on the thought regarding smell, there arises the desire for smell; dependent on the desire for smell, there arises the passion for smell; dependent on the passion for smell, there arises the search for smell.

8  (4) Dependent on the taste element, there arises the perception of taste; dependent on the thought regarding taste, there arises the desire for taste; dependent on the desire for taste, there arises the passion for taste; dependent on the passion for taste, there arises the search for taste.

9  (5) Dependent on the touch element, there arises the perception of touch; dependent on the thought regarding touch, there arises the desire for touch; dependent on the desire for touch, there arises the passion for touch; dependent on the passion for touch, there arises the search for touch.

10 (6) Dependent on the mind-object element, there arises the perception of mind-object; dependent on the thought regarding mind-object, there arises the desire for mind-object; dependent on the desire for mind-object, there arises the passion for mind-object; dependent on the passion for mind-object, there arises the search for mind-object.

Closing refrain

11 In this way, bhikshus, dependent on the diversity of elements, there arises the diversity of perceptions, thoughts, desires, passions, mind-object; dependent on the diversity of perceptions, there arises the diversity of thoughts; dependent on the diversity of desires, there arises the diversity of passions; dependent on the diversity of passions, there arises the diversity of searching."

— evam —