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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

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 Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18).<sup>1</sup> 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 organ and the sense-object. Perception is regarded a process of thought that begins as a simple sensation and ends up with the complete apprehension of the object.

**The canonical theory of the perceptual process** comprises six stages:<sup>2</sup>

1. The first stage is sense-consciousness, for example, visual consciousness (*cakkhu,viññāṇa*), 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).

2. The second stage is the process of sensory impression or sense-contact, for example, eye impression or eye contact (*cakkhu,samphassa* or *-phassa*), defined as the coordination amongst the sense-organ, the sense-object and sense-consciousness (*tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso*, M 18.16/1:111).

3. The third stage is feeling (*vedanā*), which refers to the hedonic tone or emotional value of the resultant experience.

4. The fourth stage is perception or apperception (*saññā*). The fact that *viññāṇa* (bare sensation) occurs before *saññā* [bare reaction] shows that *saññā* represents a more complex form of awareness. While *viññāṇa* 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. The fifth stage is thinking (*vitakka*, often translated as “initial application (of thought)”), suggesting a stage where the perceived object is *interpreted*.

6. The sixth and last stage is called 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.<sup>3</sup> The last stage of this process is clearly detailed in the short **Cetanā Sutta 1** (S 12.38):

<sup>1</sup> M 18,15-18/1:111 f + SD 6.14 (4).

<sup>2</sup> Discussed in greater detail in **Saññā** = SD 17.4. See also Analayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The direct path to realization*, 2003:222-226.

<sup>3</sup> Karunadasa argues that in this sixfold process, the final stage of perception is not “mental proliferation” (as proposed by Sarathchandra, 1958 & Ñāṇananda 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 Ñāṇananda (1971:5 ff, 41 ff) explain the stages subsequent to *saññā* as a process of interpretation and judgement.” (2001:212).

Monks, what one wills, and what one plans, and what lies latent—this is a support<sup>4</sup> 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 viññāṇassa ṭhitiyā. Ārammaṇe sati patitṭhitā viññāṇassa hoti. Tasmim̐ patitṭhite viññāṇe viruḷhe āyatim̐ puna-b, bhavâbhinibbatti hoti. Āyatim̐ puna-b, bhavâbhinibbattiyā sati āyatim̐ jarā, -maraṇam̐ soka, parideva, dukkha, domanass'upāyāsā sambhavanti. Evam etass kevalassa dukkha-k, khandhassa samudayo hoti.* (S 12.38/2:65 f)<sup>5</sup>

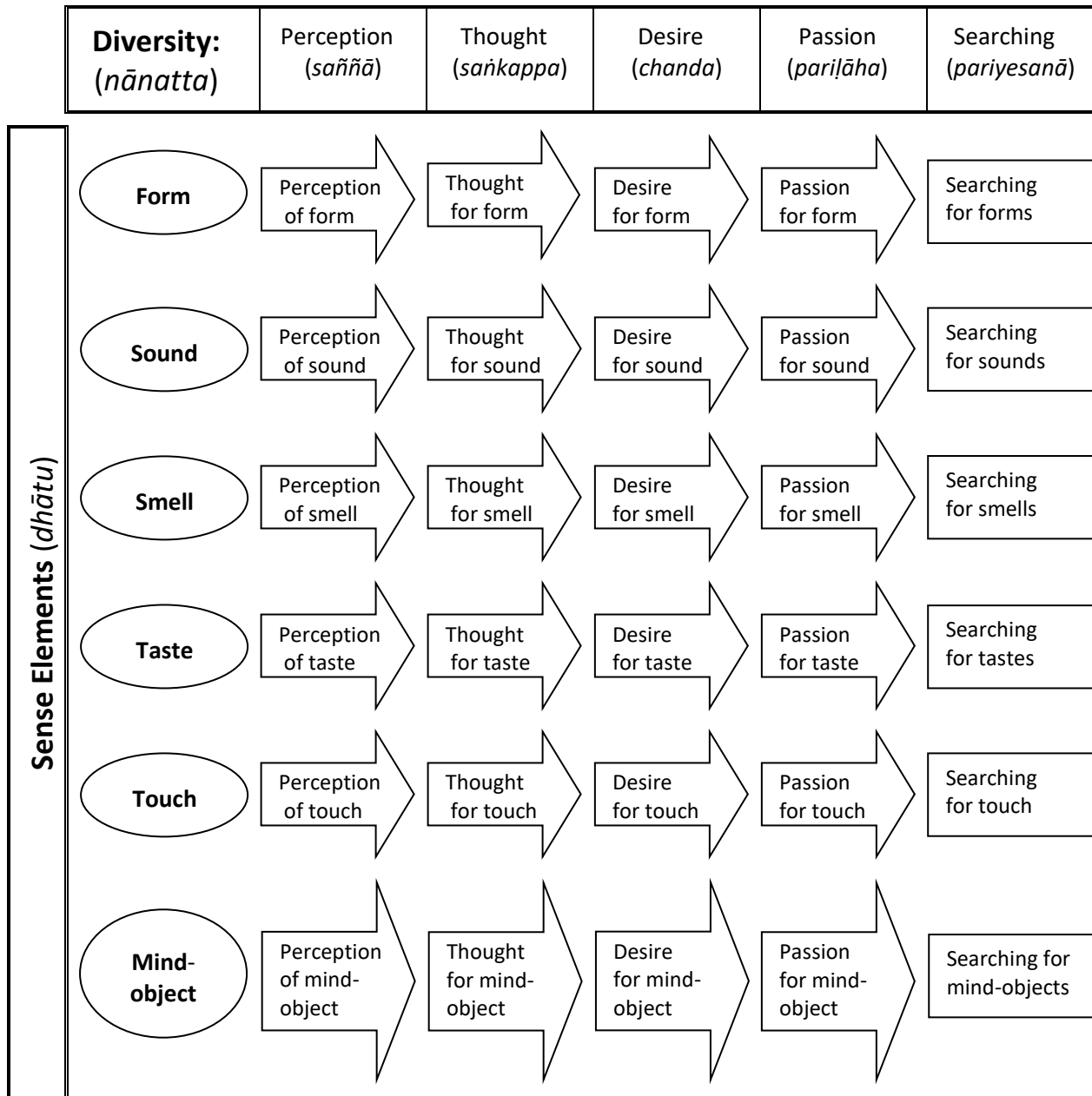
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<sup>4</sup> “Support,” *ārammaṇa*, also tr “object,” that is, one of the 6 sense-objects, forming the external support for sense-perception, and without them there is no sense-perception.

<sup>5</sup> See S:B 757 n112.

## 2 The dependent arising of perception

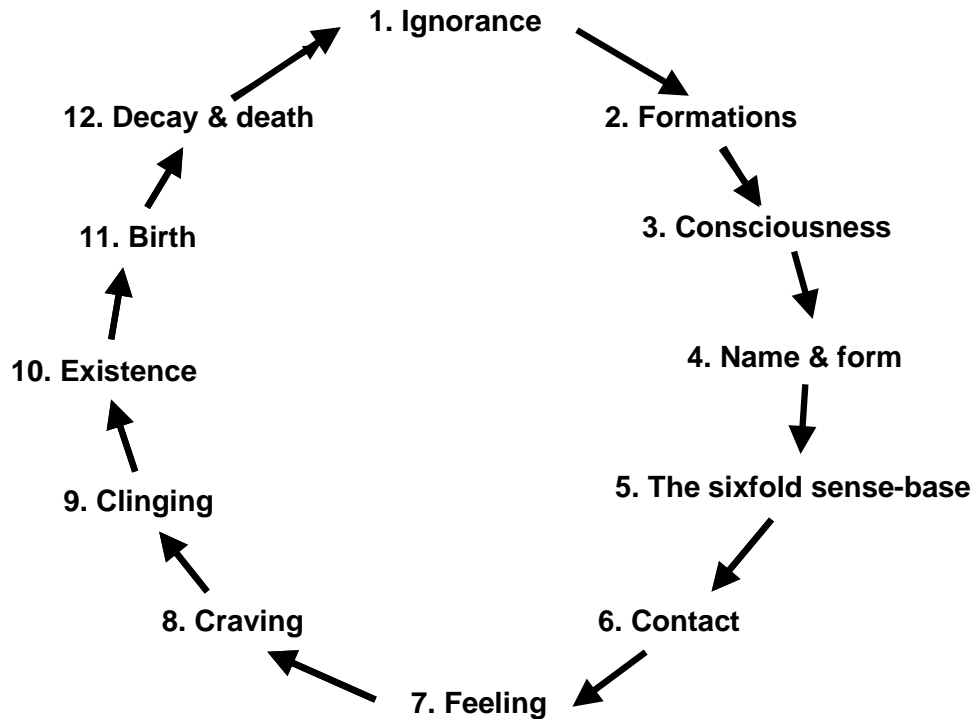
2.1 The perceptual processes given in the Saññā Nānatta Sutta is here tabulated for easy reference:



The Saññā Nānatta Sutta is found in **the Nānatta Vagga** (the chapter on diversity), the first section of 14<sup>th</sup> saṃyutta, the Dhātu Saṃyutta (the connected discourses on the sense elements). The Nānatta Vagga is divided into two pentads (*pañcaka*): an “internal pentad” (*ajjhata pañcaka*), dealing with the sense-faculties, and “external pentad” (*bāhira pañcaka*), dealing with the sense-objects.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See S:B 527 f.

The first sutta of the Nānatta Vagga is **the Dhātu Nānatta Sutta** (S 14.1) of the internal pentad, and the Saññā Nānatta Sutta comes seventh. The latter shows how each of the six sense-objects, wrongly perceived, leads to further thoughts (*sañkappa*) for it, which in turn turns into desire (*chanda*) that is reinforced itself into passion or “fever” (*pariāha*), resulting in the searching or “quest” (*pariyesanā*) for the sense-object.<sup>7</sup>



**The 12-link dependent arising**

## 2.2 EXPLANATION OF TERMS

**2.2.1** This sequence effectively constitutes an equivalent to links 3 to 9 of the better known twelve-link dependent arising formula, seen from the sense-object (“internal”) perspective. In **the Mahā Nidāna Sutta** (D 15) has a ninefold sequence,<sup>8</sup> and a secondary sequence that gives another variation of the Saññā Nānatta Sutta sequence, namely:

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

<sup>7</sup> Taking form as an example, Comy explains, “having grasp the sight (ie sign, *nimitta*) of one’s companions, when the passion arises, one searches in order to obtain that form” (*pariāhe uppanne sandiṭṭha, sambhatte gahetvā tassa rūpassa paṭilābh’atthāya pariyesanā*) (SA 2:133).

<sup>8</sup> Consciousness → name-and-form (→ *consciousness* → *name-and-form*) → contact → feeling → craving → clinging → existence → birth → decay-and-death. See SD 5.17.

**2.2.2** In an email to the Buddha-L website, **L S Cousins** 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 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 the other five 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, 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb 2006)

**2.2.3** The term “thought” (*vitakka*), too, needs some explanation. Bodhi translates it here as “intention,” but this is normally reserved for *cetanā*. Let us first examine the meanings of these two important terms. The Buddhist Dictionary defines **vitakka** as follows:

“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: sensuous thought (*kāma, vitakka*), hating thought (*vyāpāda, vitakka*), and cruel thought (*vihiṃsā, vitakka*). There are 3 karmically wholesome (*kusala*) thoughts: thought of renunciation (*nekkhamma, saṅkappa*), of hatelessness (*avyāpāda, vitakka*), of not harming (*avihiṃsā, vitakka*).” [A 6.109/3:446]

The latter three constitute “Right Thought,” the 2<sup>nd</sup> link of the eightfold path (see *magga* 2).  
 (Buddhist Dictionary: *vitakka*)

**2.2.4** 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*)

**2.2.5** Clearly, “thought” (*vitakka*) in the Saññā Nānatta Sutta refers to the three karmically unwholesome thoughts (*akusala, vitakka*). Volition (*cetanā*) underlies these unwholesome thoughts, but it is the

condition behind the action as well as the action itself.<sup>9</sup> 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 how wrong perception leads to searching for more of the unwholesome object.

### 3 The methods of unity and of diversity

**3.1** According to 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 making up the continuum (*santana*).<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup>

**3.2 The method of diversity** (*nānatta,naya*) balances this approach by pointing out the difference. Though unified, the current of conscious moments is still a chain of discrete links, some of which function as causes, other 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.<sup>12</sup>

**3.3** When the method of unity is misunderstood or misapplied, it generally leads to the view of an identical self, leading on to 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, and so leads to annihilationism. A proper understanding of both methods will reveal

the continuum to be a causally connected succession of momentary processes, which continues so long as the causes retain their efficacy, and ceases when the causes are deactivated, in either case without harbouring a persisting core to be grasped as a personal self. This is the middle way which avoids the two extremes. (Bodhi 1978:20)

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<sup>9</sup> Comy says that “thought regarding form” (*rūpa,sañkappa*) refers to the thought associated with three mind moments (*citta*), namely, the receiving, (investigating, and determining) mind moments (SA 2:132).

<sup>10</sup> 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.)

<sup>11</sup> Bodhi 1978:20.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

## Saññā Nānatta Sutta

### The Discourse on the Diversity of Perception

S 14.7

1 At Sāvattthī.

#### Summary

2 “Bhikshus,  
 dependent on the diversity of elements, there arises the diversity of perceptions; *saññā*  
 dependent on the diversity of perceptions, there arises the diversity of thoughts; *saṅkappa*  
 dependent on the diversity of thoughts, there arises the diversity of desires; *chanda*  
 dependent on the diversity of desires, there arises the diversity of passions [fevers]; *pariāha*  
 dependent on the diversity of passions, there arises the diversity of searching. *pariyesanā*”

#### Analysis of perception

3 And what bhikshus is the diversity of elements (*dhātu nānatta*)?

The form element.	<i>rūpa, dhātu</i>
The sound element.	<i>sadda, dhātu</i>
The smell element.	<i>gandha, dhātu</i>
The taste element.	<i>rasa, dhātu</i>
The touch element.	<i>phoṭṭhabba, dhātu</i>
The mind-object element.	<i>dhamma, dhātu</i>

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: *pariāha nānatta*  
 dependent on the diversity of passions, there arises the diversity of searching? *pariyesanā*  
*nānatta*

#### The reflection

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 searching for form.<sup>13</sup>

6 (2) Dependent on the sound element, there arises the perception of sound;  
 dependent on the perception of sound, there arises the thought regarding sound;

<sup>13</sup> Comy uses form here to explain the psychological process here: see (2.2) above.

dependent on the thought regarding sound,  
dependent on the desire for sound,  
dependent on the passion for sound,

there arises the desire for sound;  
there arises the passion for sound;  
there arises the searching for sound.

**7** (3) Dependent on the smell element,  
dependent on the perception of smell,  
dependent on the thought regarding smell,  
dependent on the desire for smell,  
dependent on the passion for smell,

there arises the perception of smell;  
there arises the thought regarding smell;  
there arises the desire for smell;  
there arises the passion for smell;  
there arises the searching for smell.

**8** (4) Dependent on the taste element,  
dependent on the perception of taste,  
dependent on the thought regarding taste,  
dependent on the desire for taste,  
dependent on the passion for taste,

there arises the perception of taste;  
there arises the thought regarding taste;  
there arises the desire for taste;  
there arises the passion for taste;  
there arises the searching for taste.

**9** (5) Dependent on the touch element,  
dependent on the perception of touch,  
dependent on the thought regarding touch,  
dependent on the desire for touch,  
dependent on the passion for touch,

there arises the perception of touch;  
there arises the thought regarding touch;  
there arises the desire for touch;  
there arises the passion for touch;  
there arises the searching for touch.

**10** (6) Dependent on the mind-object element,  
dependent on the perception of mind-object,  
dependent on the thought regarding mind-object,  
dependent on the desire for mind-object,  
dependent on the passion for mind-object,

there arises the perception of mind-object;  
there arises the thought regarding mind-object;  
there arises the desire for mind-object;  
there arises the passion for mind-object;  
there arises the searching for mind-object.

### Closing refrain

**11** In this way, bhikkhus,

dependent on the diversity of elements,  
dependent on the diversity of perceptions,  
dependent on the diversity of thoughts,  
dependent on the diversity of desires,  
dependent on the diversity of passions,

there arises the diversity of perceptions,  
there arises the diversity of thoughts;  
there arises the diversity of desires;  
there arises the diversity of passions;  
there arises the diversity of searching.”

— evaṃ —

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