

# 22

## Early Buddhist Psychology as Experience<sup>1</sup>

A brief comparative study of somatics, affection, perception, conation and cognition  
in Buddhist meditation and modern psychology  
by Piya Tan ©2020

### 0 Introduction

#### 0.1 KEY TERMS

**0.1.1** In this brief study, we will examine the Buddha’s teachings on **the 5 aggregates** (*pañca-khandha*)—form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness—in the comparative light of the psychological terms, **somatic**, **affective**, **perceptual**, **conative** and **cognitive**, respectively, and show how they factor in meditation experiences.

**0.1.2** My purpose is thus twofold [0.2.1]:

- (1) to examine how we can helpfully use **the English terms** properly and conveniently, as we become more familiar with this vital teaching-set (the 5 aggregates) in early Buddhism; and
- (2) to briefly document and explain our experiences of these aggregates in **meditation** based on early Buddhism.

the 5 aggregates	Pāli	ch	psychological cognates	layman terms	ch
(1) form	<i>rūpa</i>	1	somatic	the body	6
(2) feeling	<i>vedanā</i>	2	affective	feeling (liking, disliking)	7
(3) perception	<i>saññā</i>	3	perceptual	recognizing	8
(4) formations	<i>saṅkhārā</i>	4	conative	the will, motivation	9
(5) consciousness	<i>viññāṇa</i>	5	cognitive	sensing + minding	10

**Table 0.1. The 5 aggregates and their psychological cognates**

#### 0.2 THE NATURE OF THIS STUDY

**0.2.1** This is not a historical comparison of early Buddhist psychology and secular psychology. Perhaps, in our study, we may notice some remarkable coincidence of ideas in these terms, and perhaps such overlapping may help us better understand **the 5 aggregates** in modern terms without watering their meaning and purpose in the early Buddhist texts. Indeed, we hope this experimental, even heuristic,<sup>2</sup> quest for a faithful or reflective terminology in English will facilitate for a better understanding of the 5 aggregates as living experience. [Part I]

<sup>1</sup> Previously, SD 56.17.

<sup>2</sup> “Heuristic” refers to an interesting but complex method of problem solving involving simple strategies (incl mental processes) used by humans, animals, organizations and machines as quick and convenient shortcuts, for immediate or practical purposes; hence, it may have flaws but are generally workable.

**0.2.2** We will explain how the 5 aggregates are experienced by us especially during meditation. We will show how they interrelate with one another, and the benefits of understanding this interrelation. In studying this interrelationship of the 5 aggregates, we will also be able to briefly examine how we exist as a body-mind continuum (ontology), how we know things (epistemology), the nature of non-self (metaphysics), and how we gain spiritual freedom on account of such understanding (soteriology).

### 0.3 Terms for “meditation”

**0.3.1** The early Buddhist texts (EBT) use a range of terms for what we today call **meditation**. The key terms and their nuances are as follows:

<b><i>bhāvana</i></b>	“cultivation”; the broadest term for meditation, especially when it is used to <u>know</u> , to <u>tame</u> and to <u>free</u> our mind. (See SD 15.1)
<b><i>samādhi</i></b>	“(mental) concentration”; basically, it refers to any mental concentration, especially when it leads up to dhyana ( <i>jhāna</i> ) [see following], especially as <u>the 2<sup>nd</sup> training</u> ( <i>samā-dhi,sikkhā</i> ); <sup>3</sup> post-canonically, it broadly refers to the practice of <u>meditation</u> . (See SD 33.1a)
<b><i>jhāna</i></b>	“burning (of defilements),” so called since it is the mental “absorption” (dhyana) that arises when the 5 hindrances <sup>4</sup> have been at least temporarily removed; in non-Buddhist systems, it usually simply means “meditation,” <sup>5</sup> and this is the sense it has in post-canonical terms such as Chan (Chinese, <i>chán</i> 禪, simplified as 禅) and Zen (Japanese). (See <b>Dhyana</b> , SD 8.4)
<b><i>kammaṭṭhāna</i></b>	“basis for action,” originally meaning “occupation, work,” as in <b>the (Brahma,vihāra) Subha Sutta</b> (M 99), SD 38.6; in post-canonical works, it broadly refers to meditation, almost a synonym of <i>bhāvanā</i> ; however, <i>kammaṭṭhāna</i> can refer to either the meditation or its objects (the 40 types). (DEB Appendix 2)

**0.3.2** In the suttas, the dvandva, ***samatha,vipassana***, refers to the twin practice (*yuganaddha*), where meditative calm (*samatha*) is used as the basis for insight (*vipassana*) as insight wisdom, or insight (theoretical Dharma understanding) is used as the meditative basis for calm (often leading up to dhyana), and is again used as the basis for further calm (higher dhyana) and so on until breakthrough or awakening<sup>6</sup> is attained.<sup>7</sup>

In modern usage, the dvandva is broken up into 2 discrete practices, that is, as “**calmness cultivation**” (*samatha bhāvanā*) whose goal is dhyana, and “**insight meditation**” (*vipassanā bhāvanā*), centred on analytical or discerning meditative states to gain liberating insight. Strictly speaking, in real practice, there is no meditation that *purely* cultivates only calm or only insight. Calm and insight are the integral twin aspects of meditation that must be cultivated into a complete and harmonious balance. An experienced teacher would, as a rule, teach both aspects—the difference is purely in emphasis and branding.<sup>8</sup> (See SD 41.1).

<sup>3</sup> On *samādhi,sikkhā*, see SD 21.6; Sd 33.1a.

<sup>4</sup> The 5 mental hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇa*) are: (1) sensual desire, (2) ill will, (3) restless and worry, (4) sloth and torpor, and (5) doubt. See **Nīvaraṇa**, SD 32.1.

<sup>5</sup> On *jhāna* as simply meaning “meditation”: see SD 33.1b (4.4.3).

<sup>6</sup> “Breakthrough” (*abhisamaya*) usually refers to streamwinning, but may also incl once-returning and non-returning. “Awakening” (*bodhi*) refers to the attainment of arhathood.

<sup>7</sup> On the twin practice of *samatha,vipassana*, see SD 41.1 (2.2.1).

<sup>8</sup> See ***Samatha and vipassana***, SD 41.1 (3).

### 0.3.3 Key terms of meditation

**0.3.3.1** In early Buddhist teachings, **meditation** is broadly defined as a morality-based training (*sīla*, *sikkhā*), where we use the conscious body [1.1.2] to *know* the mind. Based on this understanding, we cultivate wholesome (*kusala*) mental qualities to *tame* the mind by gradually removing hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) to mental focus (*samādhi*). We thus gain growing levels of inner calm (*samatha*) and clarity (*vipassanā*) for the sake of wisdom (*paññā*) that is the path (*magga*) to spiritual *freedom* (*vimutti*) and awakening (*bodhi*).

Broadly speaking, terms related to “meditation” [0.3.3.1], often have an *active* element. Basically, this is the *doing* aspect of meditation. As a “training,” it is that of *cultivating* samadhi or mental concentration (*samādhi*, *sikkhā*), and embodies both “right mindfulness” (*sammā*, *sati*) [0.3.3.2] and “right concentration” (*sammā*, *samādhi*) [0.3.3.3]. As factors or limbs of mental training, this duo help each other to *pari passu* calm and clear the mind.

Hence, meditation is *purposive* or *goal-oriented*, in the sense of attaining the path ending with awakening. However, in practice, we do are “goal” driven: the goal is the *future*. We are “now” anchored to muster the calm and clarity to free our mind of hindrances [1.2.2]. Then, the mind is free and naturally moves on.

**0.3.3.2 Mindfulness** (*sati*)<sup>9</sup> is an important term in early Buddhism that is polysemic. One of its well known senses is that of *being fully present in the moment*. It functions in 2 ways: first, as mindfulness (*sati*), it rightly and carefully examines or attends to (*yoniso manasikāra*) whatever that occurs before or in the mind; and second, as full knowing (*sampajañña*), it apprehends and remembers rightly the nature and application of what it has minded or learned.

Hence, it is fully called “**mindfulness and clear knowing**” (*sati*, *sampajañña*).<sup>10</sup> In simple terms, mindfulness is *fully minding and well re-minding*; basically, full attention and good memory.

**0.3.3.3 Attention** (*manasikāra*)<sup>11</sup> refers to where (the sense-object) and how we direct our mind. This may be wrong (*ayoniso*), when we fail to see the true nature of things therein, or right (*yoniso*) when we see the true nature of things therein.

“**Wrong attention**” (*ayoniso manasikāra*) is not mindfulness at all, but a projective reactivity in taking the impermanence to be permanent, the suffering to be pleasurable, the non-self to be self, and the impure (immoral or wrong) to be pure—these are **the 4 perversions** (*vipallāsa*).<sup>12</sup> We then fail to see or accept true reality.

“**Right attention**” (*yoniso manasikāra*) is wholesome mindfulness, that is, to see, as they are, *the impermanent, the suffering, the non-self and the pure*, according to our ability and wisdom. When properly cultivated, this becomes right mindfulness (*sammā*, *sati*), that is, the fourfold satipatthana (*satipaṭṭhāna*), the 4 focuses or foundations of mindfulness [see below].

Here, “**mindfulness**” refers to the contemplation (*anupassanā*) of the meditation-object as well as the awareness (*sati*) arising from it. These are mindful observations based on the body (*kāyānupassanā*), on feelings (*vedanānupassanā*), on thoughts (the mind) (*cittānupassanā*) and on realities (*dhammānupassana*).<sup>13</sup> Most often, we begin with breath meditation, a body-based practice [1.1.2.1], and, progress-

<sup>9</sup> On mindfulness (*sati*), see SD 54.2e (2.3.4); as one of the 5 faculties (*pañc’indriya*), see **Pañc’indriya**, SD 10.4 (2.1) Mindfulness as moderator.

<sup>10</sup> On mindfulness and clear knowing (*sati*, *sampajañña*), see SD 1.3.1 (3.6).

<sup>11</sup> On attention (*manasikāra*), see SD 54.2e (2.3.4.2).

<sup>12</sup> See **Vipallāsa S** (A 4.46) + SD 16.11 (1).

<sup>13</sup> See **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10), SD 13.3.

ively, with the calm and clear mind, observe the nature of *feelings, thoughts* and *realities*, such as the 5 aggregates. Then, we spend time reviewing these observations to directly understand their true nature.

**0.3.3.4 Concentration** (*samādhi*) refers to how focused—free from distractions, especially the mental hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) [1.2.2]—the mind is.<sup>14</sup> When it is properly focused—completely freed from the body (the 5 senses) and thoughts—we cultivate **right concentration** (*sammā,samādhi*), that is, we attain the 1<sup>st</sup> dhyana (*jhāna*). And mastering this, we go on to progressively attain the other 3 dhyanas, or even higher.

At any of these dhyanas, when we sufficiently feel having mastered (*vāsi*)<sup>15</sup> it, we emerge from it, with a mind that is defilement-free (temporarily) to directly see into true reality, beginning with the nature of **impermanence**. Seeing true reality, we will, in this life itself, attain streamwinning, as stated in **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1).<sup>16</sup>

### **0.3.4 Psychology of meditation: key terms**

**0.3.4.1** In **western psychology**,<sup>17</sup> meditation is, understandably, defined in more pragmatic ways, depending on the views and needs of those who use it. Meditation in terms of modern psychology can be defined as “willfully and purposefully regulating one’s own attention, either for the purpose of relaxation, exploring oneself or personal growth and transcendence.”<sup>18</sup>

Meditation can operationally be divided into 2 categories: One is about focusing attention on a changing object such as *physical sensations* in a body scan, progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, or *movements* in yoga, tai chi, qigong, or *mental content* as in guided imagery, or *mindfulness meditation* proper. In time, this method came to be known as “**focused attention**” (FA) meditation.

The other kind of meditation is focused on an unchanging or repetitive object that is constantly held in focus, such as in *mantra meditations* like Transcendental Meditation (TM) or Benson meditation, *breathing meditation* like Zazen, ostinato drumming, rhythmic dancing, jogging/flow, etc.<sup>19</sup> In time, this method came to be called “**open monitoring**” (OM) meditation.<sup>20</sup>

**0.3.4.2** However, in practice, both categories [0.3.4.1] frequently overlap, and normally the ability to keep our attention focused on a steady object is a precondition for a constant attention to moving objects. As a common ground, all techniques are usually conducted with an attitude of intentionally directed or focused concentration and attention, which is called “mindful awareness” or, simply, “**mindfulness**.”

As a consequence, such methods are likely to bring on the so-called “**relaxation response**.”<sup>21</sup> This physiological reaction is the biological or natural antagonist of stress, thus antagonizing the “stress response.” This property is, supposedly, responsible for some of the observed clinical, medical or thera-

<sup>14</sup> See *Samādhi*, SD 33.1a.

<sup>15</sup> On the fivefold mastery (*pañca,vāsi*), see **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,31), SD 49.4; SD 24.3 (2); SD 33.1a (2.1.3).

<sup>16</sup> S 25.1 (SD 16.7).

<sup>17</sup> This section and the foll, see Esch, “The neurobiology of meditation and mindfulness,” 2014:154 f.

<sup>18</sup> See S Schmidt, “Opening up meditation for science: The development of a meditation classification system,” 2014:137-152.

<sup>19</sup> See Benson and Klipper, *The Relaxation response*, 2000; Ott, *Meditation für Skeptiker*, 2010; Petermann & Vaitl, *Entspannungsverfahren: Das Praxishandbuch*, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> See J Gibson, “Mindfulness, interoception, and the body: A contemporary perspective,” 2019:6.

<sup>21</sup> Benson and Klipper, op cit 2000; Esch et al, “The therapeutic use of the relaxation response in stress-related diseases,” 2003.

peutic effects of meditation, particularly in stress-associated diseases like cardiovascular, immune, pro-inflammatory or neurodegenerative diseases, including anxiety and depression.<sup>22</sup>

### **0.3.5 Mindfulness, CBT and waves**

**0.3.5.1 Mindfulness**—which is *sati* in Pali [0.3.3.2]—refers to a specific or formal practice of meditative training and meditation,<sup>23</sup> as well as to the outcome of such a training, the general capacity to be mindful, or being fully present. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who borrowed the principles of mindfulness from Buddhism to Western medicine, describes it as a specific kind of *paying attention* characterized by a non-judgmental, purposeful and continuing awareness of all mental and physical or bodily states and processes, from one moment to the next. It is the awareness that arises from paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and without evaluating or judging what comes to mind.<sup>24</sup>

**0.3.5.2** In recent decades, the term **cognitive behavioural therapy** (CBT) became popular. It is a family of cognitive interventions that are widely recognized as the set of psychological treatments with the most extensive empirical support. CBT is, however, not monolithic, and has been through several distinct eras, generations, or waves.

**The 1<sup>st</sup> generation** or “wave” of this tradition was **behaviour therapy**: the application of learning principles to well-evaluated methods designed to change overt behaviour. By the late 1970s, behaviour therapy had moved into the era of classic CBT. This was **the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave**, where methods and concepts focused on the role of maladaptive thinking patterns in emotion and behaviour, and the use of methods to detect and change those patterns.

The arrival of a “**3<sup>rd</sup> wave**” of CBT was declared in 2004. The claim was that a change was occurring in orienting assumptions within CBT, and that a set of new behavioural and cognitive approaches were emerging based on contextual concepts focused more on the persons’ relationship to thought and emotion than on their content.<sup>25</sup>

In important ways, the term “meditation” was seen as being religious and outmoded, and “**mindfulness**” was a more “neutral” and proactive term that reflected the new developments in contemporary psychology. This was a time when the hardcore Protestant Christian groups were compelled to catch up with this new development and zealously converted it to Christian mindfulness. The theory and methods were all but the same: breath meditation and lovingkindness were put into the service of God.<sup>26</sup>

## **0.4 HOW TO READ THIS PAPER**

For the fullest benefit of this paper, you can read it in either of these ways, or in both ways:

- (1) Read through it just as it is first; then, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading, following the cross-references.

---

<sup>22</sup> For an overview see Esch et al, op cit 2003 or Stefano et al, *The Stress Response*, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Ernst et al, “Die Bedeutung achtsamkeitsbasierter Interventionen in der medizinischen und psychotherapeutischen Versorgung,” 2009.

<sup>24</sup> J Kabat-Zinn, *Catastrophe Living*, 1990.

<sup>25</sup> S C Hayes, “Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Relational Frame Theory, and the Third Wave of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies.” *Behavior Therapy* 35, 2004:639-665.

<sup>26</sup> See eg G Bottaro, “The present moment: A Christian approach to mindfulness,” *Mind & Spirit*, 5 Oct 2015: <http://mindspirit.com/the-present-moment-a-christian-approach-to-mindfulness/>. For Christian concern and reservations on mindfulness overwhelming the Church, see eg “Mindfulness: A Christian approach,” *Focus on the Family*, 2019: <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-ga/mindfulness-a-christian-approach/>.

- (2) Read through it first. The 2<sup>nd</sup> round is “paired reading,” that is, perusing sections 1-6, 2-7, 3-8, 4-9, 5-10; in other words, first reading the aggregate as theory and then as meditation experience.

## I. THE 5 AGGREGATES: A COMPARATIVE SURVEY (THE PALI TERMS AND THEIR PSYCHOLOGICAL COGNATES)

### 1 Form: The conscious body

#### 1.1 EARLY BUDDHIST SOMATICS

##### 1.1.1 Non-duality of body and mind

**1.1.1.1** In psychological lingo, **somatic** (from Greek, σῶμα, σώματ- body) means “pertaining to the physical body (as being distinct from the mind), especially in relation to psychological conditions.” This mind-body connection exists in early Buddhism from the very beginning, often reflected in the role of the body as an object of mindful contemplation.

Further, Buddhist meditation stresses the need to evaluate individual exercises for contemplating the body within their context, as instructed in **the Kāya, gatā, sati Sutta** (M 119), the discourse on mindfulness of the body.<sup>27</sup> Materiality and mentality should thus be understood as working together to *define* our being. When we *refine* our understanding of how this works, we have a clearer and better vision of true reality, so that we go on to enjoy mental peace and freedom<sup>28</sup>

**1.1.1.2** On account of this [1.1.1.1], early Buddhist thought does not subscribe to the Cartesian body-mind dualism, but envisages the continuity of subjective experience as involving a reciprocal conditioning between **minding** or mental activities, including consciousness, subsumed as name (*nāma*), and the **named**, that is, our experience of materiality as form (*rūpa*).<sup>29</sup>

Hence, early Buddhism does not technically divide or define experience into the material and the mental. It draws the line between the process of the cognitive that is receptive knowing, of being conscious, and the *mental* and *material* aspects of experience that serve as the contents of **consciousness**. In this important sense, consciousness is always *conscious* “of” an object, a “name” [2.1.2.1], as we have noted.

**1.1.1.3** In our discussions, we work on the assumption that both modern psychology and early Buddhism accept a *provisional* dichotomy of body (the somatic) and mind (the affective, the perceptual, the conative and the cognitive) [0.1], at least in terminology and taxonomy. We will see that there are numerous overlappings of insights as well as interesting differences in understanding how our psychosomatic being functions.

Underlying all this, we must remind ourselves that, in early Buddhism, the somatic (as a noun) refers to both materiality and mentality, the body and the mind: hence, we have a “**conscious body**” (*sa, viññāṇa-ka kāya*). [1.1.2]

<sup>27</sup> M 119 (SD 12.21).

<sup>28</sup> See Analayo, “Somatics of early Buddhist mindfulness and how to face anxiety,” 2020:1520.

<sup>29</sup> See SD 17.1a (4); SD 17.2a (12). As part of dependent arising, see (**Paṭicca, samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2, 11) n, SD 5.15. See also Analayo, “In the seen just the seen: Mindfulness and the construction of experience,” 2019b.

**1.1.1.4** Early Buddhism has 3 major taxonomies of “states” (*dhamma*): the 5 aggregates (*pañca-k-khandha*), the 6 or 12 sense-bases (*āyatana*), and the 18 elements (*aṭṭhārasa, dhātu*). The last of these is found in the more developed epistemology and psychology of the later canonical suttas, such as **the Dhātu Nānatta Sutta** (S 14.1), on the diversity of the elements of being.

This set of **18 elements** contains an extended taxonomy of the 6 sense-bases (*saḷ-āyatana*) and their corresponding 6 sense-objects (*bahir’āyatana*)—constituting the 12 sense bases (*dvādas’āyatana*)<sup>30</sup>—and their respective 6 sense-consciousnesses. These **18 elements**, both physical and mental, are the conditions or foundations of perceptual process, and consist of the following “diversity of elements”:<sup>31</sup>

- |  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| 1. <b>the eye element</b> (visual organ) ( <i>cakkhu, dhātu</i> )      | 6. the form element (visible object) ( <i>rūpa, dhātu</i> )          | 11. eye-consciousness element ( <i>cakkhu, viññāṇa, dhātu</i> )   |
| 2. <b>the ear element</b> (auditory organ) ( <i>sota, dhātu</i> )      | 7. the sound element (audible object) ( <i>sadda, dhātu</i> )        | 12. ear-consciousness element ( <i>sota, viññāṇa, dhātu</i> )     |
| 3. <b>the nose element</b> (olfactory organ) ( <i>ghāna, dhātu</i> )   | 8. the smell element (olfactive object) ( <i>gandha, dhātu</i> )     | 13. nose-consciousness element ( <i>ghāna, viññāṇa, dhātu</i> )   |
| 4. <b>the tongue element</b> (gustatory organ) ( <i>jivhā, dhātu</i> ) | 9. the taste element (gustative object) ( <i>rasa, dhātu</i> )       | 14. tongue-consciousness element ( <i>jivhā, viññāṇa, dhātu</i> ) |
| 5. <b>the body element</b> (tactile organ) ( <i>kāya, dhātu</i> )      | 10. the touch element (body impression) ( <i>phoṭṭhabba, dhātu</i> ) | 15. body-consciousness element ( <i>kāya, viññāṇa, dhātu</i> )    |
| 16. <b>the mind-element</b> ( <i>mano, dhatu</i> )                     | 17. the mind-object element ( <i>dhamma, dhatu</i> )                 | 18. Mind-consciousness element ( <i>mano, viññāṇa, dhātu</i> )    |

The numbering sequence (1)-(16) shows that these elements, their respective sense-objects and consciousnesses are *separate* states.<sup>32</sup> (16)-(18), on the other hand, for their own set, while (18) underpin all the other consciousnesses (11)-(15), those of the physical sensings.

Elements (1)-(10) are physical; (11)-(16) and (18) are mental; (17) may be either physical (of the senses) or mental. According to the Abhidhamma, (16) performs the function of advertence (*āvajjana*) towards the object at the start of a process of sense-consciousness; further, it performs the function of receiving (*sampaṭicchana*) the sense-object. (18) performs the function of investigation (*santīraṇa*), determining (*voṭṭhapāna*) and registering (*tad-ārammaṇa*).<sup>33</sup>

The fact that the whole of our existential being is seen as a set of 18 elements, both physical and mental, centering on mind-consciousness-element (*mano, viññāṇa, dhātu*), highlights the centrality of our “**conscious body**” (*sa, viññāṇaka kāya*). [1.1.2]

## **1.1.2 The conscious body**

**1.1.2.1 The conscious body** (*sa, viññāṇaka kāya*), in practice, refers to our physical set-up of the human faculties of the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue and the body [1.1.1.4]. This term is often used on its own, without any other analysis of the person, either in terms of bodily or mental faculties. This suggests that the term is used in a broad sense, implying that we should not think in terms of self, of “I,” “me” or “mine.”

<sup>30</sup> On the 12 sense-bases, see **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1; **Salāyatana Vibhaṅga S** (M 137,4+5), SD 29.5; SD 26.1 (3.2).

<sup>31</sup> See S 14.1 (SD 29.9).

<sup>32</sup> On the impossibility of synaesthesia, see SD 29.3 (2).

<sup>33</sup> On the 5-door cognitive process (*pañca, dvāra citta, vīthi*), see SD 19.14 (2). For details, see BDict: viññāṇakicca with Table.

Thus, in the context of the phrase *sa,viññānake kāye bahiddhā ca sabba,nimittesu*, “(this) conscious body and all external signs,”<sup>34</sup> it serves to convey everything in worldly existence as a whole. All this is to be seen with right wisdom, thus: “This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.” It should be free from any idea of self or self-identification.<sup>35</sup>

Hence, it is to our advantage to understand the nature of the conscious body. In fact, the contemplation on our conscious body is the key early Buddhist meditation practice, including the breath meditation, the first meditation that the 7-year-old child Siddhattha mastered,<sup>36</sup> and later, as the recluse Gotama, used to attain buddhahood.<sup>37</sup>

**1.1.2.2** The significance of the contemplation of the conscious body is highlighted by the fact that it is the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 4 satipatthanas, explained in **the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10)<sup>38</sup> and related suttas. **The mindfulness of the body** (*kāyānupassanā*) is elaborated in the most detail, and also frequently mentioned on its own in the suttas as a mindfulness practice, such as **the Kāya,gatā,sati Sutta** (M 119) [1.1.1.1]. Both Suttas cover the following exercises on mindfulness of the body (following the M 10 sequence):<sup>39</sup>

mindfulness of the breath <sup>40</sup>	<i>ānāpāna,sati</i>
mindfulness of the 4 postures	<i>iriyā,patha</i>
mindfulness and clear knowing in daily activities	<i>sati,sampajañña</i>
mindfulness of the 31 (or 32) parts the body	<i>kaya,gatā,sati</i>
mindfulness of the composition of the body (analysis of the 4 elements)	<i>dhatu,vavatthāna</i>
mindfulness of the 9 stages of (charnel-ground) bodily decomposition	<i>sīvathikā</i>
mindfulness of the bodily states and features in the experience of the 4 dhyanas.	<i>jhāna</i>

## 1.2 THE BODY-FREED MIND

### 1.2.1 THE 4 ELEMENTS

**1.2.1.0** Functionally, we are made up of **body and mind**, both comprising the 5 aggregates [Table 0.1]. Our **body** or form (*rūpa*) comprises the 5 physical senses or faculties (*indriya*) of seeing (the eye), hearing (the ear), smelling (the nose), tasting (the tongue) and feeling (the physical body). Dynamically, these 5 physical senses are all made up of the interactivity or interbeing of **the 4 elements** (*dhātu*): earth, water, fire and wind.

**1.2.1.1 The earth element** (*paṭhavī,dhātu*) refers to *solidity, extension* and *resistance*. This includes the solid aspects of our body, such as head hair, body hair, nails, teeth and skin, and those material aspects of our body that “resists.” Hence, when we sit, for example, we feel the seat supporting us—this sensation is the earth element.

In seeing, for example, when **light** (colours, shapes and images) impact on the eye, it is experienced as the *earth* element. Hence, it should be understood that “element” here is not a *thing*, but a material

<sup>34</sup> For nn & refs, see SD 17.8a (12.3.1).

<sup>35</sup> *N’etam mama, n’eso’ham asmi, na m’eso attā*: **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62,3 passim), SD 3.11; **Anatta,lak-kaṇa S** (S 22.59,12-16), SD 1.2; **Pārileyya S** (S 22.81) + SD 6.1(5); **(Dhātu) Rāhula S** (A 4.177), SD 6.16 (5).

<sup>36</sup> See SD 52.1 (5.2).

<sup>37</sup> See eg **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,17.31-44/1:242-249), SD 1.12; MA 2:291.

<sup>38</sup> SD 13.3.

<sup>39</sup> M 10,4-31 (SD 13.3); M 119,3-21 (SD 12.21): note that M 119 include the dhyanas (M 119,18-21).

<sup>40</sup> For details, see **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118), SD 7.13. On how the breath switches from being physical to being mental, see SD 7.13 (4.4.1.5).

*flux*—transformation of matter into energy if you like—through our senses. In this sense, then, **sounds** impacting on the ear-drums and processed in the cochlear is the *earth* element. **Smell** molecules impacting on the olfactory nerves is the *earth* element. So, too, when a piece of food impacts on the **taste** buds in the oral cavity (mostly the tongue) so that we perceive taste, is the *earth* element. And the impact of objects on **the body** (mostly the skin) is the *earth* element.<sup>41</sup>

**1.2.1.2 The water element** (*āpo, dhātu*) refers to all forms of *liquid* (fluidity) and *cohesiveness* (stickiness). This includes water and all forms of body fluids. It also refers to how our body holds itself together: from the very atoms and molecules, to the tissues, the organs and limbs, and the body as a whole.

The blood that circulates, feeds and heals our body, also energizes it to be able to hold it together and function holistically and homoeostatically as our body. Our body waste is transported and drained away as sweat, tears, urine and other fluids to keep our body clean, working and healthy.

**1.2.1.3 The fire element** (*tejo, dhātu*) is basically *heat*, that is, the warmth or burning sensation we feel on the skin, or smell, or see as fire, or hear as crackling, and so on. Internally, the heat element includes digestion, maturation (softness as opposed to the hardness that is earth), oxidation, combustion, and, above all, *decay* (including aging).

The fire element (along with the other elements) are present since our conception and we are born with them. Indeed, from our conception right to the end, death, the *fire* element is the decaying process of our being. This is a vital aspect of our impermanence.

**1.2.1.4 The wind element** (*vāyo, dhātu*) is basically *motion*, which includes bodily movements (the 4 postures of standing, walking, sitting and lying down), internal bodily movements (peristalsis in the alimentary canal bringing food into the belly, and then expelling waste after that), winds coursing through our body as pain, and distension of the belly.

The Abhidhamma tradition has a slightly different theoretical classification of these elements. Here, they are meant to be taken as reflections upon experiencing such sensings as the perception of impermanence. In this way, we live, keeping in touch with true reality.<sup>42</sup>

## **1.2.2 Overcoming the mental hindrances**

**1.2.2.0** As we begin to understand the 4 elements [1.2.1] in this manner, we begin to understand what our body really is (basically conditioned and impermanent) and how it functions. This knowledge is wholesomely practical in reminding us to treat our body with respect so that it functions properly and we enjoy good physical health. In this way, the body, far from hindering our spiritual effort and progress, instead becomes a bridge for higher states of mind.

Once we understand how our body comprises the 5 physical senses, and how these senses work, we learn to more effectively and happily restrain them. It is helpful at this point to reflect on how the 5 mental hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) arise through the body, as its senses demand the attention of *the mind*.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> The Abhidhamma tradition has a slightly different theoretical classification of these, which are to be taken as reflections upon experiencing such sensings as the perception of impermanence.

<sup>42</sup> On the 4 elements, see **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 11,8-11, with §12 on “space”), SD 3.11; **Mahā Hatthi, pādōpama S** (M 28,6) + SD 6.16 (3.1); SD 44.17 (2).

<sup>43</sup> **Nīvaraṇa**, SD 32.1, esp (2.1) The nature of the mental hindrances.

**1.2.2.1** When all these sense-experiences are understood as **dependent conditions**, arising and passing away, impermanent, we no more see them as being “pleasurable.” With this understanding, we see them, on the contrary, of being “unpleasurable.” These are the two sides of the same *feeling* coin.

**Sensual lust** begins with the body, when we see it as a desirable possession, as a source of pride and pleasure. Of course, it is the mind that brings about this reaction, and decides the strength and duration of such feelings; it is basically *a body-based reaction*. The desire is not only in our own body, but also in what we see as pleasurable in the bodies of others: this is **covetousness**.

When we understand both these interactive nature of lust, we rejoice at their absence as being “neither pleasurable nor unpleasurable,” and that this, too, is *impermanent*. This is how we overcome the 1<sup>st</sup> mental hindrance of **sensual lust** (*kāma-c, chanda*), also called covetousness (*abhijjhā*).<sup>44</sup>

**1.2.2.2** When there is sensual lust, there is also its opposite, ill will. As a hindrance to deep meditation, **ill will** (*vyāpāda*), works in tandem with the 1<sup>st</sup> hindrance, sensual lust [6.1.3.1]. Hence, when sensual lust is abandoned, even temporarily, ill will, too disappears likewise. However, a vestige of ill will by way of a strong disapproval of others often remains as anger (*padosa*). For this reason, the dvandva, twin compound, **ill will and anger** (*vyāpāda, padosa*) is also used. We should work not to let anger overcome us, too.

Anger is, of course, easily prevented by the practice of lovingkindness, or by the perception of impermanence. When we understand that mistakes and differences that others make are all part of a process of change, we know that we are only angry about something that has passed. The situation changes, and what comes next is uncertain. We can, in fact, influence such possible changes in a wholesome way by the radiation of *lovingkindness*.<sup>45</sup>

**1.2.2.3** When we are assailed by sensual lust or ill will, often, anger, too, will plague us: they are closely related negative emotions. Their negativity drains our physical energy by disrupting the calmness in our body: we are likely to fidget and feel uncomfortable. We end up feeling physically tired, which also affects our interest and focus in meditation: our mind, too, is negatively affected. This is **sloth and torpor** (*thīna, middha*).<sup>46</sup>

When *sensual lust* is overcome, and we are joyful or just feel peaceful; then, sloth and torpor, too, are overcome. However, this twin hindrance may arise, as it were, by themselves, especially when our meditation object is unsuitable or we have been sitting too long. If we can, we should note what the cause or occasion for this disruption is.

If we are not sure what to do, we try an alternative method. As beginners, we normally would be taught breath meditation and the cultivation of lovingkindness. So, if one method is difficult, we gently move on to the other, using it to gain some calm and focus. This way, we are using one method as the basis for strengthening the other, more difficult one.

On the other hand, we may simply be feeling tired because we have reached the maximum of our comfort duration. Then, we need to stop, and perhaps do some walking meditation, or just take a rest.<sup>47</sup>

**1.2.2.4** When sloth and torpor [6.1.3.3] persist, they often lead to **restlessness and worry** (*uddhacca, kukkucā*). We may become *restless and worried* about the lack in progress of our practice. In other words, troubling thoughts invade our mind. During these distracted moments, our mind may worry about

<sup>44</sup> See SD 32.1 (2.1); SD 32.2.

<sup>45</sup> See SD 32.1 (3.1.2); SD 32.5.

<sup>46</sup> See SD 32.1 (3.1.3, 3.2.3); SD 32.6.

<sup>47</sup> See SD 32.6.

*the past* and trying to recall what we have done or undone. Or, we may jump into *the future* wondering what to do next, wishing to end our sitting: we become restless.

A remedy here is to simply *acknowledge* what is really going on: “Restless! Restless!” or “Worrying! Worrying!” Observe their nature; smile mentally at them. We are in charge again; then, go back to focusing the mind.

An alternative strategy is to take a couple of deep slow breaths (conscious deep breathing), and “breathe out” the restlessness, “breathe out” the worrying. Do this no more than 2-3 times, and then take normal relaxed breaths, and see if we can get back into our meditation.<sup>48</sup>

**1.2.2.5** When we have been distracted up to this point: our mind swinging between wishful thoughts and thoughts of ill will or anger; tiring from all this, we then become restless and worried—we end up feeling **doubt** (*vicikicchā*)<sup>49</sup> about our practice, even about ourselves. Here again, we should not fight these thoughts when they persist. Carefully observe them so that we remember what they are like, and resolve them accordingly after the practice, especially by consulting an experienced teacher.<sup>50</sup>

### 1.3 FREEING THE MIND FROM THE BODY

**1.3.1** What we have done thus far [1.2.2] is to see how the hindrances—especially the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> hindrances—arise on account of our body and its senses. The 5<sup>th</sup> hindrance, doubt, of course, arises in the mind itself, that is, a mind preoccupied in some way with the physical body (the senses). In other words, our mind (attention) has been drawn and quartered, so to speak, by thoughts about our physical sensing: sights, sounds, tastes, smells and touches. They perform their dance of distraction in our mind.<sup>51</sup>

**1.3.2** To begin with, we should understand our meditation as **a practice of true renunciation** (*nekkhamma*). This is just the contrary of being “goal-oriented,” a will-driven thought-process that will only invite the hindrances! [1.2.2]. If there is any *goal* in our meditation, it is to renounce our physical senses so that the mind is free from any encumbrance.

The senses are like 5 guests who have arrived at our house party, and we, the host, standing at the door (the sense-doors), welcome each of them as they arrive. Having welcomed them, we let them move on: we do not follow them all over the place. We let all the guests settle in; then, we close the sense-doors.

**1.3.3** When the mind is free of the physical senses, it is able, as it were, to *see* itself fully, like two cheval-glasses or full-length standing mirrors facing each other. They reflect infinity: we know it is so even when no one sees it. We experience this sense of infinity as a boundless spaciousness: we are everywhere at the same time, as if one with everything. This is a profoundly joyful state. Cosmologically, this **joy** is reflected in the nature of being in the heavens of the form world (*rūpa,loka*), or in the boundlessness in the heavens of the formless world (*arūpa,loka*), into which such meditators are reborn.

---

<sup>48</sup> See SD 32.7.

<sup>49</sup> These are not doubts seeking answers, but persistent doubts regarding the Buddha, the Dharma, the sangha, the threefold training (moral virtue, mental cultivation, wisdom), the past, the future, both past and future, and states arising through specific conditionality and dependent arising (Vbh 914/365).

<sup>50</sup> See SD 32.8.

<sup>51</sup> See SD 32.1 (4) Overcoming the mental hindrances.

The devas of **the sense-world**,<sup>52</sup> however, being sense-bound (having the 5 senses, but more refined in nature), enjoy only the “cords of the 5 sense-pleasures” (*pañca,kāma.guṇa*). As a rule, they do not experience the profound joy of dhyana (*jhāna*) like the devas beyond their world, that is, the devas of the form world and the formless world.<sup>53</sup>

**Form** (*rūpa*), as we know it, ceases to exist in the form heavens, whose beings are all “*mind-made*,” thus free from the encumbrance of physicality of the 4 elements [1.2.1] as we experience them in the sense world (*kāma,loka*). It may be said that the beings of *the form heavens* comprise light; hence, they are profoundly radiant: they shine, hence, they are **devas** (*dibbantīti devā*).<sup>54</sup>

The beings of **the formless world** (*arūpa,loka*) are free of form. In fact, they are not visible to other beings, since they have transcended both the sense-world and the form-world. On account of their mental state of profound bliss, they are said, in modern terms, to comprise pure energy. This means that they can, if they wish, manifest themselves as radiant beings, like the devas. On this account, they are, like the form-world devas, called **brahmas** (*brahmā*), “supreme ones.”

Since such beings are not perceptible to us like other humans or beings (such as the great variety of animals or microscopic life), we can, if we like, see them as aliens inhabiting the distant quadrants of outer space, or as beings from a different dimension, like some kind of multiverse. Whichever way we view them, we do not and should not worship them. They should be like distant neighbours in the same universe that we have yet to meet.

**1.3.4 The devas and the brahmas**—depending on how free their minds are from sensuality and physicality, to that extent, enjoy transomatic pleasures and powers. The more their minds are free from the physical body, the more refined and powerful their being is. Basically, it can be said that these divine beings enjoy their states of bliss not only because their minds are free of the body, but because they have abandoned the 5 mental hindrances. [1.2.2]

Thus far, we have, albeit briefly but sufficiently, discussed how early Buddhism sees **form**, our physical being, the “conscious body” [1.2.1], comprising the 4 elements [1.2.1] and the mental hindrances and the capabilities of the free mind [1.3.3]. Now, we will go on to examine what happens when this conscious body experiences the world, or more exactly, how we “**feel**.” [2]

## 2 Feeling: Affective reactions

### 2.1 THE CONSCIOUS BODY FEELS

**2.1.1 The conscious body** (*sa,viññāṇaka kāya*) [6.1.1] comprises the 5 physical senses, whose “sensings” feed the mind, which does not merely “make sense” of these experiences; as a rule, the mind *projects* back into these sensings: thus, it *defines* (limits, distorts, enhances, selects) how we experience them. Our physical senses *sense* the physical world out there by way of light (shapes, colours, forms), sound (noises, vibrations, voices), smells, tastes and touches (softness, hardness, temperature).

<sup>52</sup> There are 7 of these sense-sphere (*kāmāvacara*) heavens: *cātum,mahā,rājika, tāvatimsa, yāma, tusita, nim-māṇa,ratī, para,nimmita,vasavatti*. See SD 54.3a esp Diag 3.5; (3.8.3) Bodies of light.

<sup>53</sup> Cpm: *dibbantīti devā pañcahi kāma,guṇehi kīlanti attano cā siriya jotanti attho*, “They shine [amuse themselves], thus they are devas [gods]; meaning, they sport with the 5 cords of sensual pleasures (cf M 13), or they shine in their own splendour” (KhpA 123,9);

<sup>54</sup> Comy defs: *dibbantīti attano iddhānubhāvena kīlanti jotanti cāti devā*, “They are devas since they shine [amuse themselves], they sport and give forth radiance through their powers and majesty” (UA 140,19); *dibbati ... jotati obhāsati ākāse vimānena ca gacchatīti devī*, “She is a female deva [a devi] since she shines [amuses herself] ... shines, radiates light, goes through the air in her mansion” (VvA 18,11). Cf MA 33,20-22.

The mind decides and defines *how* we “make sense” of such experiences. In other words, the mind creates the virtual world in which we exist.<sup>55</sup> The early Buddhist texts call this not-seeing the real world “out there” to be **ignorance** (*avijjā*). Our mind creates this veil of virtual reality, a life-long loop of sense-surround sights, sounds, smells, taste and touches, produced and directed by the mind: this is called *samsāra* (*saṃsāra*), the eternal cycle of life and death.

## 2.1.2 The grammar of knowing

**2.1.2.1** We now come to an interesting aspect of early Buddhist psychology: **How do we know?** Notice that the question seems incomplete. We should rather ask: *How do we know things?* In other words, “knowing” implies an object. We will see a similar functional structure with consciousness (*viññāṇa*): it does not arise or exist in itself. We are always conscious of something [1.1.1.2]. Both knowing and being conscious implies a subject-object interaction: the nexus between our *internal* sensing and the *external* sensed. More on this later [5].

**2.1.2.2** This “**grammar of knowing**” is also found in **Pali**, the language of the suttas. The simplest Pali verb for “**to know**” is **vedeti**, from the root VVID, to know. However, *knowing* is only the beginning of experience. Yet, knowing itself arises from our senses, or, more correctly, arises through sensing (*phassa*). This term is usually translated as “**contact**” or sense-stimulation, that is, when *the eye* senses a visual object, *the ear* senses a sound, *the nose* senses a smell, *the tongue* senses a taste, *the body* senses (feels) a touch, *the mind* senses a mind-object (a thought, an idea, an image, a dream).<sup>56</sup> This simple but vital meeting between sense and object is called “contact.” [2.1.3]

**2.1.3** Hence, in the **Dvaya Sutta 2** (S 35.93), it is said: “**Contacted, one feels; contacted, one intends; contacted, one perceives**” (*phuṭṭho vedeti, phuṭṭho ceteti, phuṭṭho sañjānāti*).<sup>57</sup> “Contacted” (*phuṭṭho*) is a Paliism (a Pali idiom) meaning “When there is a sense-stimulus ... ,” that is, when a sense-base (*āyatana*) or sense-faculty meets a sense-object. This refers to the operation of the 3 aggregates of feeling (*vedanā*), formations (*saṅkhārā*) and perception (*saññā*), respectively.

Hence, each sense-base (the eye, ear, etc), manifests all the 5 aggregates. The sense-base and its object belong to the aggregate of form; their corresponding consciousnesses to the aggregate of consciousness, each working with *attention*, its *sense-object* and its *sense-contact*, constituting **the cognitive process**. [5]

The other three aggregates—those of feeling, formations and perception—arise from contact (*phassa*) or sense-stimulus, as stated in **the Dvaya Sutta 2** above. In the case of the mind-base (the mental faculty), the mind’s physical base (*vatthu, rūpa*)<sup>58</sup> or the mind-object is the form aggregate. Simply, this refers to ideas and images in the mind. Once our attention is directed to an idea or image, we “name” it, thus completing the process of “name-and-form” (*nāma, rūpa*).<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> On these 6 types of sense-experiences, further see SD 17.3 (2.1.1).

<sup>56</sup> The last sensing is a class by itself, which we will discuss under (5), and as “Consciousness: The cognitive processes in meditation” [10].

<sup>57</sup> S 35.93/4:68,15 f (SD 110.11)

<sup>58</sup> According to Abhidhamma, while the “heart-base” (*hadaya, vatthu*) is the physical support (*nissaya*) for the mind, the “base-form” or “mental-datum base” (*vatthu, rūpa*) is the condition (*paccaya*) for it (SA 3:62); apparently, while the former is passive, the latter is active. See also Vism 17.201/561, 17.217/564, 18.33\*/596 (Vism:Ñ “mental-datum base”); VbhA 22.8, 172,30.

<sup>59</sup> Further on *nāma, rūpa*, see SD 5.16 (1.4.1) (4); for their location in the dependent arising cycle, see (4.1).

## 2.2 A TRILOGY OF THE MIND

**2.2.1 The Dvaya Sutta 2** (S 35.93), we have noted, says: “Contacted, one feels; contacted, one intends; contacted, one perceives” [7.1.1.3]. When there is “sense-contact,” we sense things, we “**know**” it (*vedeti*); we “**act** on it (we will it)” (*ceteti*); we “**perceive**” it (*sañjānāti*). Psychologically, these are the 3 basic categories of mentation or mental processing: *knowing* (the cognitive) [5], acting or, better, *the will to act* (the conative) [4], and *perceiving* (the perceptual). [3]

### 2.2.2 Western psychology

**2.2.2.1** In Western psychology, there is generally an agreement that there is a **trilogy of the mind**: cognition, affection and conation. These basic mental processes are an ancient, rough-and-ready, but useful classification of “parts of the mind” or “aspects of consciousness.”<sup>60</sup> Philosophers, psychologists and mind scientists would generally accept these categories of *consciousness*, *feelings* and *the will*, but there is no consensus on the full nature of any of this triad, and their usage depends very much on the understanding and goals of these academics.<sup>61</sup>

**Cognition** includes knowing, believing, the acquisition of beliefs, learning, and reasoning. In popular lingo, these are “mind-based processes.”

**Affection** includes feeling of all kinds (not just what we usually call “affection”), but in English, “to feel” and its various forms have many meanings which can be confusing [2.3].

**Conation** or volition includes intending, willing, striving, effort, endeavour, motivation, and so on.

**2.2.2.2** The adjectival forms of these words [2.2.2.1] are “cognitive,” “affective” (not “affectionate”), “conative,” “volitional.” **Cognition**, though technical, is a useful word, not merely as a “learned” term for “knowledge,” but in early Buddhist psychology, they have important differences [5.2.4].

Furthermore, epistemology is sometimes called “theory of knowledge,” but “**theory of cognition**” would be more apt. While *theory of knowledge* is a purely philosophical pursuit, the latter is either psychological, or both a philosophical and a psychological examination. This last is, in fact, what **an early theory of cognition** is about, since we examine cognition and use this understanding both on a theoretical level but, more importantly, on a practical or experiential level to understand the nature of meditation and the mind.

**2.2.3** Interestingly, this psychological trilogy has the category of **the affective**, which deals with functions that include *feelings and emotions*. In early Buddhist psychology, however, feelings (the affective) and emotions (the conative) for separate categories, as evident from **the Dvaya Sutta 2** quote [2.1.3].

## 2.3 DEFINITIONS OF “FEEL,” “FEELING”

**2.3.1 The Oxford English Dictionary** (OED) lists some 55 definitions and usages of “**feel**” both as a noun and as a verb. This just shows how polysemous, hence contextual, the word can be. In other words, it will never work usefully as a technical term to clearly express what we feel, or what the feel of things are.

<sup>60</sup> A W Sparkes, *Talking Philosophy: A wordbook*, 1991:8.14A.

<sup>61</sup> This triad of terms was highlighted by Ernest R Hilgard, “The trilogy of mind: Cognition, affection, and conation,” *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences* 16, 1980” 107-117.

**The Merriam-Webster Dictionary** (online)<sup>62</sup> gives a list of these more practical meanings and usages of “feel” (n, vb):

**feel** verb

*transitive verb*

- 1 a** : to handle or touch in order to examine, test, or explore some quality  
 || She *felt* the fabric to see if it was wool  
**b** : to perceive by a physical sensation coming from discrete end organs (as of the skin or muscles)  
 || He *felt* a sudden pain in his leg
- 2 a** : to undergo passive experience of  
 || continually *felt* the resentment of his competitors  
**b** : to have one's sensibilities markedly affected or deeply *felt* by the insult
- 3** : to ascertain by cautious trial—usually used with *out*  
 || *feeling* out the sentiments of their neighbors on the subject of school improvements.
- 4 a** : to be aware of by instinct or inference feel trouble brewing  
**b** : believe, think say what you really *feel*.
- 5 US slang**: to understand (someone): to know how (someone) feels  
 || Yeah, I *feel* you on that. I fall asleep every time I'm in the car as well.—Scott Sugarman  
 || When you buckle up your chinstrap up, it's with a purpose, dog! Do you *feel* me?—Eric Berry

*intransitive verb*

- 1 a** : to receive or be able to receive a tactile sensation  
 || lost the ability to *feel* in his fingertips  
**b** : to search for something by using the sense of touch  
 || She *felt* in her purse for her keys.
- 2 a** : to be conscious of an inward impression, state of mind, or physical condition  
 || I *feel* sick  
**b** : to have a marked sentiment or opinion  
 || *feels* strongly about it
- 3** : SEEM  
 || it *feels* like spring today
- 4** : to have sympathy or pity  
 || I *feel* for you  
**feel like**  
 : to have an inclination for  
 || *feel like* a walk?

**feel** noun

- 1** : SENSATION, FEELING
- 2** : the sense of touch
- 3 a** : the quality of a thing as imparted through or as if through touch  
**b** : typical or peculiar quality or atmosphere  
*also* : an awareness of such a quality or atmosphere
- 4** : intuitive knowledge or ability

---

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feel>; accessed 25 May 2020.

**2.3.2** We can summarize the definitions and usages of “**feel**” by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary in these main categories: emotion, expression, perception, sensation. These categories show how diverse a familiar word like *feel* can be. This means that it is a very well used word, especially in our daily parlance. Its polysemy, near-synonymy and overlapping of senses show that we rarely speak in a technical manner: we tend to speak with *the heart*—in metaphors and poetic nuances—rather than with carefully mind-crafted words.<sup>63</sup>

In our best moments, we often speak the language of poets and story-tellers, of truth and beauty that addresses both the heart and the mind, but more so the heart. We see a very similar trend in **Pali expression**: it is the language of the spirit and of meditative calm, clarity and joy. The nature of Pali polysemy and imagery arises from its expression of and reference to the profoundest of human experiences, the subtlest of divine bliss, and the liberating peace of nirvana.

## 2.4 THE PERVASIVENESS OF “FEELING”

### 2.4.1 “Contact”

**2.4.1.1** Let us look at the **Dvaya Sutta 2** quote [7.1.1.3] again. Notice that **feeling** (the affective) seems to be excluded from the statement, which only refers to knowing, willing and perceiving. There seems to be no mention of the affective (feeling). This is, in fact, not the case at all. **Affection** (the process of feeling) is embedded in the operative term that applies to all the 3 mental processes, that is, the verb “contacted” (*phuṭṭho*), which is the past participle of *phusati*, “to touch, to be affected (by).” It is better known by its noun, “contact,” *phassa* (that is, sense-contact).

**2.4.1.2** In the dependent arising (*paṭicca,samuppāda*) formula, **contact** (*phassa*) is the 6<sup>th</sup> link which is the proximate condition for the arising of **feeling** (*vedanā*): “With contact as condition, there is feeling” (*phassa,paccayā vedanā*).<sup>64</sup> This is famously elaborated in the “triangle of experience” or “the feeling triangle” such as in the **Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18), thus:<sup>65</sup>

Avuso, dependent on the eye and form, eye-consciousness arises.

**The meeting of the three is contact.**<sup>66</sup>

With contact as condition, there is feeling.

What one feels, one perceives.

<sup>63</sup> On the philosophical difficulties with the word “feel,” see J Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, 1953, 1967:ch 2.7(1) (124-128)

<sup>64</sup> See SD 5.16 (1.4.1) (4).

<sup>65</sup> *Cakkhuñ ca āvuso paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhu,viññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso, phassa,paccayā vedanā, yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakketi, yaṃ vitakketi taṃ papañceti, yaṃ papañceti tato,nidānaṃ purisaṃ papañca,saññā,saṅkhā samudācaranti atītānagata,paccuppannesu cakkhu,viññeyyesu rūpesu*. A similar passage is found in **Pariññā S** (S 35.60) where, however, the learned noble disciple becomes disillusioned (*nibbindati*) with the contact arising from sense-organ, sense-object and sense-consciousness (also using the sentence, *tinnaṃ saṅgati phasso* [SD 6.14 (16)]), and as such “becomes dispassionate (*virajjati*); through dispassion, he is freed (*vimuccati*); through liberation, he understands, ‘Clinging has been fully understood by me.’” (S 35.60/4:32 f). **Mahā Hatthi,padōpama S** (M 28) closes in a similar manner, beginning with the statement: “If, avuso, internally the eye is unimpaired [intact] but no external forms come into its range, and there is no appropriate conscious engagement [appropriate act of attention] (*tajjo samannāhāro hoti*), then there is no appearance of that class of consciousness” (M 28,27-38/1:190 f). On Nāṇananda’s notion of the 3 phases of mental proliferation, see SD 6.14 (2).

<sup>66</sup> *Tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso*. In **Cha Chakka S** (M 148), this phrase is part of the sequence on any sense-based reflection (M 148,7-9/3:281 f + 28-39/3:284 f), SD 26.6. For a discussion on this phrase and passage, see Bucknell 1999:318 ff. See prec n.

What one perceives, one thinks about.<sup>67</sup>

What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates.<sup>68</sup>

From that as source, proliferation of conception and perception<sup>69</sup>

assails a person regarding past, future and present forms cognizable through **the eye**.<sup>70</sup>

M 18,16 (SD 6.14); M 28,27-38 (SD 6.16)<sup>71</sup>

The same cycle then occurs for the ear and sound, the nose and smell, the tongue and taste, the body and touch, the mind and thought (mind-object). [5.2.6.2]

### 2.4.2 Vedeti and various forms

**2.4.2.1** This is not to say that **Pali** is not exact in its expression. Far from that, Pali often uses words and idioms that describe states and awakening beyond the range and depth, beyond the power, of normal language. Pali is indeed the language of awakening, but this power arises not in itself. It transports us like coursing a path, crossing a bridge, by way of our practice of moral virtue, concentration, wisdom, and the freedom that is the path.

Let us start with the word **vediyati**, “to feel”—coming from the same √VID, to know, *vedeti* [7.1.2.1]—it is commonly used to express feeling at the nascent level of **our affective process**: “he feels or experiences a feeling,” *vedanaṃ vediyati*.<sup>72</sup> Note that the almost tautologous repetition of both the noun and the verb from the √VID ascertains that the “feeling” refers to affective quality with the potential of being liked, disliked or unfelt.

**2.4.2.2** The verb **paṭisaṃvedeti** (*paṭi* + *sam* + √VID, to know + *vedeti*),<sup>73</sup> “he feels, experiences, undergoes, perceives” is common in the suttas, and has a number of usages, such as:

expressing a **direct experience**,<sup>74</sup>

it takes a **bodily feeling** as subject:

*sukhañ ca kāyena paṭisaṃvedeti*,<sup>75</sup> or

*dukkhaṃ domanassaṃ paṭisaṃvedeti*,<sup>76</sup>

it takes **karmic fruit** as subject:

*kammānaṃ vipākaṃ paṭisaṃvedeti*.<sup>77</sup>

It also has a by-form, *paṭisaṃvediyati*.<sup>78</sup> Its opposite is *appaṭisaṃvedeti*, “not to feel or experience.”<sup>79</sup>

<sup>67</sup> “One thinks about,” *vitakketi*. When thinking stops, desires do not arise: **Sakka,pañha S** (D 21,2.2), SD 54.8.

<sup>68</sup> This verse up to here is also found in (**Samuday’atthaṅgama**) **Loka S** (S 12.44/2:71-73 @ SD 7.5) and (**Sabb’upādāna**) **Pariññā S** (S 35.60/4:32 f @ SD 6.17) in different contexts.

<sup>69</sup> *Papañca,saññā,saṅkhā*, see SD 6.14 (3).

<sup>70</sup> This important passage is the earliest statement on the Buddhist theory of perception. See SD 6.14 (4).

<sup>71</sup> **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18,16), SD 6.14; **Mahā Hatthi,padōpama S** (M 28,27-38), SD 6.16.

<sup>72</sup> Sometimes spelt *vedayati*: M 1:59, 2:70; S 2:82, 3:86 f, 4:207; A 1:41, 2:198.

<sup>73</sup> *Vedeti*, “to know” (lit, “to be known”), is caus of √VID. On the senses of √VID, *Kaccāyana Dhātvā’vali*: *vida*: see Thitzana, *Kaccāyana Pāli Grammar*, vol 2 2016:878. On *paṭisaṃvedeti*, see SD 51.14 (2.2.2.5); SD 55.1 (2.1.3.2).

<sup>74</sup> SD 7.13 (3.1.3), also in meditation: **Sañcetanika S** (A 10.206) SD 3.9 (5).

<sup>75</sup> “He feels bodily joy” (D 1:37, 2:313, 3:222; M 1:62,347).

<sup>76</sup> “He feels physical pain, mental pain” (M 1:86, 308 passim, 313-315 passim).

<sup>77</sup> “He feels (experiences) the fruit of karma (pl)” (M 1:18); also SD 17.3 (1.2.2).

<sup>78</sup> S 2:18, 75, 256; It 38.

<sup>79</sup> See SD 3.9 (5); SD 3.9 (5.1).

## 2.5 EMOTION

### 2.5.1 Feeling or affect

**2.5.1.1** In psychological writings, the word “feeling” is very rarely used, especially since it is not helpful as a technical term [7.1.1.1]. In place of *feeling*, we will see the term **affect**, which simply means an “emotional tone,”<sup>80</sup> or **emotion**. Affective changes (variations in feelings) refer to changes in the type, frequency or intensity of emotions.<sup>81</sup>

**2.5.1.2** “Historically, this term [emotion] has proven utterly refractory to definitional efforts; probably no other term in psychology shares its non-definability with its frequency of use,” laments the Penguin Dictionary of Psychology. The term is very well used but without any useful agreement on its definition.

### 2.5.2 Early Buddhist terms: feeling and formations

**2.5.2.1** Modern translations of Pali suttas, especially into English, as a rule, use **feeling** and **emotion** in quite distinct and helpful ways—unlike their situation in psychology since its birth in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to this day. Feeling is a common and convenient translation for *vedanā*, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 5 aggregates, and emotion is often used for *saṅkhāra*, which is, however, usually translated as “formations” [4].

These convenient translations well reflect the numerous usages and descriptions of *vedanā* and *saṅkhāra* as key early Buddhist concepts found in the suttas. Basically, while “feeling” (*vedanā*) refers to affective tones—liking, disliking, neither [1.2.2.1]—“formations” (*saṅkhāra*, note the plural) refers to our psychological actions and reactions (or “reactivity”) that have karmic or moral consequences [4].

**2.5.2.2** Hence, the early Buddhist definition and usage of **feeling** is more distinct and exact than the broader senses that **affect** has in psychology [7.1.1]. Despite this difference in definition and taxonomy (classification of details), an informed Buddhist, especially one with a good understanding of the aggregates, will have almost no difficulty with the terminology and language of psychological writings, except perhaps when these writings use very technical language and numbers for measuring and expressing their ideas and researches meant for a specialized elite. [4.2.5.2]

## 3 Perception: Recognizing the past

### 3.1 THE NATURE OF PERCEPTION

#### 3.1.1 Definitions

**3.1.1.1** *Saññā*—from *saṃ*, “together” + *√JÑĀ*, to know—is usually translated as “**perception**,” with both positive and negative connotations. It *perceives* an object in such a way that the object is readily recognized and categorized conceptually [3.2]. *Saññā* functions to “perceive” (*sañjānāti*), that is, to know (*jānāti*) by putting together (*saṃ-*) what is sensed by “naming” it.

<sup>80</sup> Stuart Sutherland, *The Macmillan Dictionary of Psychology* [1989], Basingstoke, Hants: Macmillan Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 1995: Affect.

<sup>81</sup> On the feeling of pleasure and pain, see (3.1.2.1).

**3.1.1.2** In **dependent arising** (*paṭicca samuppāda*), we see *saññā* as being conditioned by consciousness (*viññāna*) [5], as “name-and-form” (*nāma,rūpa*), and, in turn, conditioning the 6 sense-bases (*saḷ-āyatana*).<sup>82</sup> In effect, we see a kind of interaction amongst these 3 links: consciousness (basic awareness at the sense-faculty level) cognizing sense-objects, and then re-cognizing them, as they are conceived (“named” in the mind)—which, in turn, **loops back and forth**. This is, in fact, how we learn: a psychology of learning at its most fundamental level!<sup>83</sup> [5.2.4]

**3.1.1.3** In the context of **perception**, there are 6 kinds of *saññā*, each derived from one of *the 6 sense-faculties* (*saḷ-āyatana*). Thus, we have perception of visual objects (*rūpa,saññā*), of auditory objects (*sadda,saññā*), of gustatory objects (*jivhā,saññā*), of olfactory objects (*ghāna,saññā*), and of mental objects (*dhamma,saññā*). Technically, only the *saññā* that occur with the physical senses are “**perceptions**,” but those arising in the mind are “conceptions” (*maññana*). However, for convenience, the latter is subsumed under the former. But this fact should be borne in mind, especially when we need to specifically address the mental processes.

**3.1.1.4** Further, *saññā* serves in another important way as “meditation-object”—as a perception—in which we *perceive* some key aspects of true reality. The suttas teach several such meditative objects, the best known of which is the perception of impermanence (*anicca,saññā*).<sup>84</sup>

This is, in fact, only one of the 7 kinds of meditative perceptions, that is, those of foulness (*asubha,-saññā*), of death (*maraṇa,saññā*), of the loathsomeness of food (*āhāre paṭikkūla,saññā*), of not delighting in all the world (*sabba,loke anabhirata,saññā*), of impermanence, (*anicca,saññā*), of suffering in the impermanent (*anicce dukkha,saññā*), and of the non-self in what is suffering (*dukkha anatta,saññā*), as listed in **the Satta Saññā Sutta** (A 7.46).<sup>85</sup>

In these perception practices, we simply recognize the nature of true reality that is before us. In doing so, we “connect” (*saṃ-*) with reality by truly understanding (*jānāti*) it. In recognizing true reality so, we become *it*; we are “real and true”: we are *really* freed as *true* individuals, as streamwinners and so on.<sup>86</sup>

### **3.1.2 *Saññā* as an aggregate (*khandha*)**

**3.1.2.1** As the 3<sup>rd</sup> of **the 5 aggregates** (*khandha*), *saññā* occurs in the sense of **perception**, particularly as the factor that perceives pleasant or unpleasant tones (physically and mentally) or neither,<sup>87</sup> as being such, giving rise to attraction, aversion, or boredom, respectively. Such reactions to feelings (*vedanā*) [2], in turn, bring on other afflictions (*kilesa*) through morally potent action (*kamma*).

**3.1.2.2** *Saññā* as **perception**, then, can be either bad or good, depending on whether we react by seeing sense-objects (our experiences) as being more than what they are, as being permanent and desir-

<sup>82</sup> See SD 52.16 (1.4.1) stages (3)-(5).

<sup>83</sup> On the looped cycle, see SD 5.26 (5.1). For a broader picture of this process, see SD17.4 (8) + Table 8.1.

<sup>84</sup> See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16,7,

<sup>85</sup> A 7.46/4:46-53 (SD 15.4); see also SD 17.4 (7.1.6). For a set of 10—with perceptions of danger (*ādīnava,saññā*), of letting go (*pahāna~*), of dispassion (*virāga~*), of cessation (*nirodha~*): **Giri-m-ānanda S** (A 10.60), SD 19.16. In post-canonical works, also applied to false views: *nicca,saññā*, *subha,saññā*, etc. See PED: *saññā*.

<sup>86</sup> On training for true reality, see SD 26.9 (1.5.2.4). On the creation of meaning and purpose in life, see SD 26.9 (2.2).

<sup>87</sup> There are only 5 such feeling tones: physically pleasant or unpleasant, mentally pleasant or unpleasant, and neutral (the same for both): **Vedanā**, SD 17.3 (4.9.1 n at “neutral feeling”). It is also said that only the sense of touch is accompanied by pain or pleasure, while feelings arising at the other 4 sense-doors are invariably neutral (Dhs 139-145; Abhd 2). On neutral feeling, see SD 55.4 (2.1.3).

able; hence, we are caught in measuring what we are to become what we *have*. When we see ourselves as what we have, and we lose what we have, then, we are nothing.

Positively, then, we respond by *recognizing* all our experiences, what we are as just that: being and changing. For, to be is to change. When we accept the true reality of change and impermanence, then we truly live, we are. If we are reading this, we *are*: this is what it means to speak of *living in the present*.

### 3.2 COGNITION AND RECOGNITION

**3.2.1 Perception**, one of the 7 mental factors (*cetasika*)<sup>88</sup> [5.2.4.2], always work together with consciousness [5]. Consciousness *cognizes* (*viñānāti*); perception *recognizes* (*saññānāti*).<sup>89</sup> It recognizes an object's distinctive marks: "It perceives blue, ... yellow, ... red, ... white."<sup>90</sup> When a sense-experience is perceived often enough, it is *remembered*: this is **mindfulness** and *memory* (*sati*).<sup>91</sup>

**3.2.2** Hence, in the name for the highest of the formless realms—"the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception" (*n'eva,saññā,nāsaññāyatana*)—*saññā*, which appears twice, actually means "consciousness," which, ironically, does not seem to perceive, since consciousness here is so refined that it can neither be said to exist nor not exist.

Then, there is the realm of the "non-percipient beings" (*asaññā,satta*), one of the lower formless realms. *Saññā* here again refers to "consciousness" but which is non-existent therein!

## 4 Formations: Will and motivation

### 4.1 CHANDA AS WILL

#### 4.1.1 The arising of the will

**4.1.1.1** Let us begin by broadly and provisionally defining **the will** (*chanda*) as the willingness and ability to act independently whether for oneself or for others. The early Buddhist conception of the will assumes 2 important premises:

(1) we have the power to *consciously* act on our own; and

(2) when we do act, we must consider others in an unconditional manner as we do ourself.

To be able **to act on our own**, we must have a sense of selfhood or personality (*atta,bhāva*). From the moment we are born, our 5 physical senses equip to us survive and exist by sensing whatever that is not conducive or that endangers our life (such as pain, discomfort, extremes of temperature, answering nature's call): when we need to, we cry loudly, which is our survival mechanism.

Our parents, carers and others are often in our presence (we see them) or nearby, they talk with us (we hear them), they smell (we can smell them), they feed us (we chew, taste and eat things), they touch, carry and hug us. Every one of these processes is vital in **humanizing** us as an infant. Even the colourful toys, making all kinds of loud pleasant musical noises, of different shapes and sizes, soft and hard, toys that hang in the air, that jump or move, and so on, serve to develop and enhance our human faculties.

<sup>88</sup> The set of 7 mental factors, called "universals" (*sabba,citta,sādhāraṇa*), comprising all conscious moments are: sense-impression (*phassa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), volition (*cetanā*), concentration (*samādhi*), vitality (*jīvita*), and advertence (*manasikāra*). See BDict Table II, III; Abhs:BRS §2 esp Table 2.1.

<sup>89</sup> See 17.8a (8.2).

<sup>90</sup> **Khajjanīya S** (S 22.79,7), SD 17.9.

<sup>91</sup> See Nyanaponika, *Abhidhamma Studies*, 2010:68-70.

As an infant, by touching our own face and body, by kicking and grabbing things, we start to enjoy the influence of our actions on the world, on others. But it is not until we approach our 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday that we start to develop **a sense of self**. We are then able to reflect on ourself from the perspective of somebody else. We begin to have a sense of *self and other*: this is the beginning of **selfhood**. We now have the power to act on our own; at first, mostly instinctively, and then in a more self-conscious way: this is the infant's "power to will." [4.2.4]

**4.1.1.2 The infant's power to will** is summarized in the teaching of **the 4 bases of success** (*iddhi,-pāda*): the will or zeal (*chanda*), energy or effort (*virīya*), the mind (*citta*), and investigation (*vīmaṃsā*). This teaching set is, as a rule, applied by us as practitioners so that we succeed in reaching the path.

However, it also applies to child development. As the infant develops his sense of selfhood, his **will** or zeal develops, too. On account of his will, the infant exerts his **energy** or effort as he wishes or whenever he feels necessary to do so.

Through such actions, he learns more about himself, others and the environment, and so develops his own **mind**. As he develops mentally, he is able to **investigate** more of his relationship with others and with the world.<sup>92</sup>

## 4.2 SAṄKHĀRĀ

### 4.2.0 Usages of saṅkhārā

**4.2.0.1 Saṅkhārā** is one of the Pali terms like *dhamma*<sup>93</sup>—which has such a breadth of usages (polysemic) that it can be difficult to at once read its meaning in a passage. Yet, **polysemy** is the penchant of Pali by its very nature as the language of awakening, of spiritual truth and beauty, of true freedom. In this connection, we can speak of the essence of Buddhist training as being that of **the 3 freedoms**:

- (1) first, we must as fully as possible understand the words of Dhamma, so that we are truly *free* of them;
- (2) secondly, we must understand how all views (especially ours) are provisional, so that we are really *free* of them;
- (3) thirdly, we are then ready to work on our *mental* afflictions and defilements so that we are fully *free* to awaken to true reality.

Scholars, often for their own mundane profit, turn the clear and simple into something unnecessarily difficult. Notice how, after reading a book or a journal article, once we know its essence, we don't really need the words, or not do much of them. Our understanding of the Dhamma is like that: it seems we are journeying through a forest that is Dhamma, but when we see that lone tree of awakening and sit under it, we see the open sky of joyful wisdom and freedom.

**4.2.0.2 Saṅkhārā**—from *saṃ-*, "together" (like in *saññā*) + *√KR*, to make (P *√KAR*, to do)—has generally been translated as "formations." They are formed through our 3 karmic doors of *body, speech and mind*, and, in turn, make them what they are. We then form views on their account. They also refer to all that we view of the world "out there," the world of formations (*saṅkhārā, loka*).<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> On the 4 bases of success, see **Cattāro Iddhi,pāda** SD 10.3 .

<sup>93</sup> On the polysemy of *dhamma*, see SD 51.25 (2.2.2.5).

<sup>94</sup> The 3 worlds (*loka*) are the worlds: (1) of space (*okāsa, loka*); of beings (*satta, loka*); and of formations (*saṅkhāra, loka*): SD 15.7 (3.5.2(2)).

Early Buddhism accepts the fact that there is “the world” out there, our environment, Nature. The world does not make us bad or good. It is how we view the world that defines us and our destinies.<sup>95</sup>

The thought of lust is a person’s desire:

there are no sensual pleasures in the diversely beautiful in the world.

The thought of lust is a person’s desire.

The diversely beautiful in the world remains just as they are.

So here the wise remove desire (for them). (A 6.63,3.4 ≈ S 1.34 (S 103)), SD 6.11

There is the real world out there, but **the virtual world** that we create (*abhisankharoti*, to form) for ourself is more real. This is *saṅkhāra*. As such, we need to understand its role as a defining **characteristic** (*lakkhaṇa*) of the world (all existence) [4.2.1]; how it creates our virtual world through **dependent arising** [4.2.2]; and how it functions as that part of our **being** (the 5 aggregates) that makes us what we are and what we will become [4.2.3].

#### **4.2.1 Saṅkhārā as one of the *ti,lakkhaṇā***

**4.2.1.1 The 3 characteristics** (*ti,lakkhaṇa*) of impermanence, suffering and non-self are not only a universal truth but a fundamental liberating truth. Hence, it is appropriate to begin our brief survey of *saṅkhārā* with this triad of truth. This vital triad and its difficulties will be discussed next [4.2.1.2]: we will summarize the key points here.

In a number of places in the suttas—the best known of which is **Dh 277-279**—it is stated that (all) conditioned phenomena (that is, everything excepting nirvana)<sup>96</sup> are *impermanent* and *suffering*, and that all dharmas (*dhammā*, that is, states, things, conditions) are *non-self*.<sup>97</sup> This is “the fixedness of things” (*dhamma-ṭṭhitatā*), “the order of things” (*dhamma niyāmatā*), a universal natural truth, a reality that we should reflect on constantly, one that will bring us to the path of awakening.<sup>98</sup>

In terms of spiritual practice—whether we keep up mindfulness or do meditation—it is, as a rule, easier to reflect on or observe impermanence than either suffering or non-self (the last is, in fact, the most difficult of the triad to observe). There are, in fact, at least a set of 10 closely related suttas, all teaching **the perception of impermanence** (*anicca,saññā*), that is, in the Okkanta Saṃyutta (S 25).<sup>99</sup>

**4.2.1.2** In the phrase *sabbe dhammā anattā’ti* (**Dh 279**), the plural **dhamma** refers to *all* states, conditioned (*saṅkhata*) or unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*), where the conditioned refers to the 5 aggregates, and the unconditioned (as a rule) to nirvana.<sup>100</sup> Now, of the 5 aggregates, form (*rūpa*) is made up of the 4 elements, and the other 4 aggregates are *mind-made* (*mano,mayā*): they are “constructed” or *conditioned* (*saṅkhata*). Hence, they are impermanent, suffering and non-self.

<sup>95</sup> On how we create our own world, see SD 7.1 (4.5); SD 17.8a (8.2.6); SD 40a.10 (2.2.6.3; 82.4); SD 53.12 (1.2.3).

<sup>96</sup> Traditionally, space is also regarded as “permanent.”

<sup>97</sup> These 3 key lines—*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe saṅkhārā dukkha, sabbe dhamma anattā’ti*—famously occur in Dh 277-279 respectively; qu at Tha 676-678 (*Aññā Koṇḍañña*); they recur in A 3.134/1:286 (SD 26.8); Nm 2:327,-26 f; Pm 1:37x2. These lines are qu separately, thus: *sabbe saṅkhāra aniccā, sabbe dhammā anattā* at M 1:228, 230, 3:132x2; *aniccā ... anattā* with aggregates at M 1:132-134 x4, 228, 230, S 3:132, 133, 134 x2; *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā dukkha ...* at S 3:43; *saṅkhārā aniccā* at D 2:157, M 1:336; *sabbe saṅkhārā dukkha* at Kvu 209; *sabbe dhamma anatta* at S 4:401, A 1:286. Cf *sabbe te saṅkhāra ... aniccā*, M 3:146. See SD 17.6 (6.1.3).

<sup>98</sup> See **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.134), SD 26.8.

<sup>99</sup> See eg (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), esp SD 16.7 (1.0).

<sup>100</sup> Such as **Bahu,dhātuka S** (M 115,9), SD 29.1a, where *saṅkhata* refers to the 5 aggregates, and *asaṅkhata* refers to nirvana. (MA 4:106:11-13).

Compared to the 5 aggregates, nirvana must be described in just the opposite way: it is “unconstructed” or *unconditioned* (*asaṅkhata*). This is only a description, not a definition. On account of the unique nature of nirvana, we can only describe it; we cannot *define*. We definitely cannot *define* it into existence. We may describe, draw pictures or create colourful animated 3-D graphics of, say, a unicorn, but it still does not exist! Nirvana exists, but we are merely using words and language to talk about it. The word is *not* the thing.<sup>101</sup>

Nirvana can only be experienced. It’s like a journey or a meal. We can have all the maps or guide-books of the journey and even the destination, but the map is not the place. We can have a complete collection of the best recipes, or even discuss with the best chefs about certain dishes, but they are not *it* until we actually eat the meal! The name is *not* the thing named.<sup>102</sup> The statement is *not* the state.<sup>103</sup>

In this sense, nirvana is neither *saṅkhāra* nor *dharmā*.<sup>104</sup> It is without any attribute. It can only be experienced personally.<sup>105</sup> However, we can, if we like, speak of nirvana as being “non-conditioned,” but then we are still simply only describing it, not defining it.<sup>106</sup>

**4.2.1.3** When we have studied the suttas very well, whether as academic scholars or as Dhamma seekers, we may have the hubris that we have somehow understood nirvana, at least in theory. This is, of course a *delusion*, since we are still rigged with defilements, certainly arrogance (*māna*), hoping for a tenure or title, which means that we are not even an arhat yet.

Theoretically, when we aspire for streamwinning, we are actually having “**nirvana as object.**” It’s like we are archers, and we can see the goal in the distance, and we aim for that goal. There is a hint of such a vision in **the Udakūpama Sutta** (A 7.15), which describes the streamwinner as a shipwreck survivor “who, having emerged (from the waters), observes, looks around” (*ummujjitvā vipassati viloketi*). The other saints—the once-returned and the non-returned—too, are described in similar tone as being able to see dry land (nirvana) in the safe distance and are all heading there somehow.<sup>107</sup>

In **the (Musilā Nārada) Kosambī Sutta** (S 12.68), the streamwinner is described as a lost traveller in a wilderness who comes to a well in an oasis. Looking down into the well, he is able to see water, but does not have the means of drawing it out.<sup>108</sup> We, the unawakened “outsider” (*bāhira*)—one not on the path yet<sup>109</sup>—can well imagine, more or less, what nirvana is like. The streamwinner and the other unawakened saints, being already *on the path*, has a clearer and truer vision of nirvana from the path itself.

In fact, the last of **the 10 recollections** (*anussati*) of the 40 meditation methods<sup>110</sup> is the “recollection of peace” (*upasamānussati*).<sup>111</sup> In fact, this rare meditation method has nirvana as object.<sup>112</sup> Of course, since “the name is *not* the thing named,”<sup>113</sup> this is not really nirvana (as unconditioned awakening). It is only an *idea* of nirvana, but a helpful one that can help our meditation and cultivation of wisdom.

<sup>101</sup> See SD 26.3 (5.1.2.5); SD 44.1 (5.4).

<sup>102</sup> SD 17.4 (4); SD 26.3 (5.1.2.5).

<sup>103</sup> SD 49.5b (4.6.4.2).

<sup>104</sup> See **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.134), SD 26.8; SD 17.6 (6.1.3).

<sup>105</sup> See **Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta S 1** (U 8.1) + SD 50.1 (1.1.0).

<sup>106</sup> SD 50.1 (3.3.2).

<sup>107</sup> **Udakūpama Sutta** (A 7.15,6/4:12), SD 28.6.

<sup>108</sup> **(Musilā Nārada) Sutta** (S 12.68,60/1:118), SD 70.11.

<sup>109</sup> **Cūḷa Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 27,25.4) n + SD 40a.5 (1.1.2); **Dakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga S** (M 142,5(11)) + nn, SD 1.9; SD 47.1 (1.1.2).

<sup>110</sup> On the 40 meditation methods, see **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (Fig 8.1).

<sup>111</sup> Seems to occur only at A 1.295/1:30, 1.494/1:42; Vism 7.1/197, 8.245-251/293 f, whose explanation is very much that of the perceptions of dispassion and of cessation (A 10.60,6 f/5:110 f), SD 19.16.

<sup>112</sup> See **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (Fig 8.1) (32).

<sup>113</sup> SD 17.4 (4); SD 26.3 (5.1.2.5).

### 4.2.2 *Saṅkhārā* as a link in dependent arising

**4.2.2.1 *Saṅkhārā*** (plural) form the 2<sup>nd</sup> link in the cycle of **dependent arising**.<sup>114</sup> They arise conditioned by ignorance, and, in turn, condition consciousness. In other words, we are primordially rooted in the *not-knowing* of true reality, and make us what we are. *Ignorance* is blind and works with craving to create *saṅkhārā* (formations): we are prodded like cattle in our pen of *body, speech and mind*, brought out to pasture to seek what we view as *lacking* in us.

Basically, we accumulate formations in the form of virtual realities of the 6 senses that we feed by way of our consciousness. We feed ourselves *consciously* by appropriating, that is, “naming” external things or “forms” so that we can “have” or “own” them. This is how we build our sense of **self**.<sup>115</sup> [1.1.1.2]

Our “self” is a mish-mash of we think we own and with hollows reserved for what we want. We fancy that we are what we have. To have is never to have enough; hence, our purpose in life is to keep *wanting* so that we are always *wanting*. We only exist to have; we do not know how to live, to be happy.

**4.2.2.2** Our past continues to haunt us by speaking in myriad voices: this is called **mental proliferation** (*papañca*).<sup>116</sup> These countless, endless, inner voices of our past conditionings are rooted in ignorance [4.2.2.1]. Our **ignorance** moves our craving through these voices: we are motivated by greed (seeking what we see as pleasurable), by hate (rejecting what we see as unpleasurable or unprofitable), and by delusion (confused or numbed by what we are unable to process): We see Dhamma as dauntingly “difficult” but fancy money and manyness as desirably “easy.”

*Saṅkhārā* shape us in its image, darkly, dastardly, in at least 3 ways. Firstly, they arise as projective views; secondly, keep us busy with “formative” speech and actions; thirdly, since these do not bring us wisdom, they often drive us into speculative doubts.

**4.2.2.3 *Saṅkhārā* in projective mode** prods us to construct a sense of **self** by measuring ourself against others—in terms of being *better* than, or *inferior* to, or as *good* as them. We are defined by others, by the crowd, without which we are empty, without direction, without life. We are but the shadows of our self-conceit that, through habituation, feed our **self-identity view**. This is the first of the 3 fetters (*samyojana*) that imprison us to a cyclic life of self-feeding habits and rituals.<sup>117</sup>

Secondly, these *saṅkhārā* are the **views** that we hold, cling to and impose on others. Our views are our habitual ways of thinking and doing—“This is what I am!”—driven by the fixated habits of self-fulfilling prophecies. We keep on thinking, saying and doing things in predictable routines that keep us in a self-centred loop—like proud chickens in our proud coops, our scratching-ground; we routinely return to roost. This is how the fetter of **attachment to rituals and vows** holds us in a predictable loop of *saṅkhārā*.<sup>118</sup>

Our self-identity view keeps us in a self-centred, even narcissistic, rut: the world turns around us. We are but a mighty stolid frog in our well of self-views. We **doubt** that there is a world outside our well; so we remain stolidly stuck therein. Even as the volcanic fires from below boils us, we are oblivious to the rising heat until it’s too late.

**4.2.2.4** Our meditation training is to help us truly see ourself for *what we really are*, as taught by the Buddha to the elder Māluṅkya,putta leading to his awakening, thus, that:

<sup>114</sup> The fullest version has 12 links: see **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16.

<sup>115</sup> See link (1)-(5) of dependent arising: SD 5.16 (1.4.1).

<sup>116</sup> See **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18) SD 6.14 (2).

<sup>117</sup> See SD 40a.8 (3).

<sup>118</sup> See SD 40a.8 (5).

in the seen	there will only be the seen;
in the heard	there will only be the heard;
in the sense	there will only be the sensed;
in the known	there will only be the known.

(Arahatta) Maluṅkya,putta Sutta (S 35.95,12), SD 5.9

This terse quatrain is the crux of the Sutta, the essence of *satipaṭṭhāna* (the focuses of mindfulness). In experiential or phenomenological terms, our experiences should not be seen as “This is mine” (*etam mama*) (which arises through craving, *taṇhā*), or as “This I am” (*eso’ham asmi*) (due to conceit, *māna*), or as “This is my self” (*eso me attā*) (due to wrong view, *diṭṭhi*). This is the teaching of **the Anattā Lakḥaṇa Sutta** (S 3:68), SD 1.2.

In short, such experiences are not “beliefs” but direct experiences of reality.<sup>119</sup> In simple Abhidhamma terms, such a process *should be left at the sense-doors*, and not be allowed to reach the mind-door. So long as the experience of sensing is mindfully seen for what it really is, that is, an experience of “ultimate reality” (*param’attha*).

After it has reached **the mind-door** and evaluated, it becomes conventional (*paññatti*) reality, that can potentially bring us suffering due to *greed, hate or delusion*. When such sense-experiences are mindfully left on the reality level, we would, in due course, see the 3 characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self, the most universally natural way of reality.<sup>120</sup>

**4.2.2.5** When we fail to see our sense-experiences and thoughts just as they really are [4.2.2.3], we will project them to be *more than what they are*—this is **delusion** (*moha*). This delusion makes us want to hold on to what is already past. Our self-view compels us to *identify* with our experiences, and to *own* them. We try to collect experiences to fill the emptiness of our **being** by trying to *have* them. [4.2.2.1]

We deludedly believe that by *repeating* certain acts of **acquisition** (*upadhi*),<sup>121</sup> of seeking and accumulating, we can *be* permanent, *have* pleasure, *project* our selfhood over others. But we cannot hold on to any of these passing realities. We may only, in the moment, embrace their presence, then, let them go: we can never have or own them. Only in understanding this—that we cannot *own* what is not ours—are we really free of the delusion of having and being what passes away even in the moment. This is the teaching **non-identification** (*atammayatā*).<sup>122</sup>

This is the true wisdom behind all our meditation practice, when it is said that we should always be in **the present moment**, the presence, of things. This is the way to the dependent ending of our *greed, hate and delusion*, the 3 unwholesome roots of motivation.

### **4.2.3 Saṅkhārā as a khandha**

**4.2.3.1** Most of the Buddhist approach to explaining true reality is that of **analysis**: examining how all phenomena are comprised of interrelated parts that rise, stay the moment, then pass away. This is the essence of the reflection of impermanence. The rare use of **synthesis**—how the parts flow together interactively for phenomena to arise—is found in dependent arising.

This brings us to the 3<sup>rd</sup> way of examining *saṅkhārā*, that is, as an “**aggregate**” (*khandha*), one of the 5 aggregates [Table 0.1]. *Saṅkhārā* may be understood as “**formations**” that pervade all that exists, as

<sup>119</sup> See Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995:32 f.

<sup>120</sup> See Mahasi Sayadaw, *A Discourse on Malukyaputta Sutta*, tr U Htin Fatt, Rangoon, 1981.

<sup>121</sup> SD 28.11 (3.2); SD 53.7 (2.3.1); **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16), SD 9.15; **Ariya Pariyesanā** (M 26,6), SD 1.11; **The unconscious**, SD 17.8b (4.4); **S 503\*** (S 4.24,8), SD 36.5; SD 51.24 (2.5.2.3 (3) n) acquisitions.

<sup>122</sup> On non-identifying with sense-objects, see **Atammayatā**, SD 19.13.

well as function along with the other 4 aggregates. From form, the conscious body [1.1.2], *saṅkhārā* arise and interact with feeling, perception and consciousness. In fact, working together, the 5 aggregates form our **interbeing**: these aggregates work to create our **personality**, interactively with other beings, other sets of 5 aggregates, to create and influence one another, as it were, as persons and as a crowd (humanly or otherwise).<sup>123</sup>

As we read this, for example, our minds are interacting; we are learning and changing in some way. A number of other sense-experiences are also occurring, and we are dealing with them. But our own main activity now is a mental one: we are, should be, cultivating wisdom.

**4.2.3.2** *Saṅkhārā* as an aggregate is defined as the 6 groups of volitional activities (*abhisāṅkhārā*), that is, the **intentionality** (*cetanā*) of the 3 karmic doors of body, speech and mind. As a link in dependent arising, *saṅkhārā* become “**karma-formations**.” In meditative terms, we examine *saṅkhārā* as closely functioning with feelings (*vedanā*) [2].

**Feelings**, by themselves, are simply our responses to the quality of what we experience as *physical* beauty (pleasant feelings of the physical senses). Even the Buddha and the arhats have feelings, pleasant and painful, but not *saṅkhārā* as negative emotions (as we shall see).

In **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), for example, the Buddha delights in the beauty of Vesālī from afar.<sup>124</sup> The arhats, like Mahā Kassapa, often sing of nature’s beauty in **the Thera,gāthā**; and like Subhā in **the Therī,gāthā**.<sup>125</sup>

The Buddha and the arhats are free from *saṅkhārā* (plural): theirs are only the beautiful (*sobha*) states. Hence, we speak of their *saṅkhāra* in the singular. Their mind is calm and clear even as they *feel* these feelings, like a good doctor observing a sick patient or seeing him as a recovered healthy person.

#### **4.2.4 Saṅkhārā and the will**

**4.2.4.1** As an aggregate, *saṅkhārā* are related to the Western notion of **the will** (but which is varied in its own way) [9.1]. Philosophically, the will, generally, is the faculty of the mind that selects, at the moment of decision, a desire among the various desires present. It itself does not refer to any particular desire, but rather to the mechanism responsible for choosing from among our desires. Within philosophy, will is important as one of the parts of the mind, along with reason and understanding. It is considered central to the field of ethics because of its role in enabling deliberate action.

**4.2.4.2** In **early Buddhism**, *saṅkhārā* have various functions, and their versatility help us discuss their meanings, usages and significance in terms of self-understanding and self-awakening. **Psychologically**, it helps to think of *saṅkhārā* in 2 ways: as our habits and as their effects on us [4.2.2.2]. Hence, we can render it here as “**habitual tendencies**.” Essentially, these refer to the way we think, speak and act, which we do in 2 ways: through past conditioning as “unconscious” tendencies (such as social or religious conditioning),<sup>126</sup> and by way of “willful” or deliberate acts—both are regarded as having karmic consequences, since **intentionality** (*cetanā*),<sup>127</sup> the deliberating mind of greed, hate or delusion, colours such actions, both unconscious and conscious.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>123</sup> On human and subhuman states, see SD 2.22 (1.7).

<sup>124</sup> “Ānanda, delightful is Vesālī ... and the various tree-shrines” (D 16,3.2/2:102), SD 16.

<sup>125</sup> Tha 1051-1090 (SD 54.21 (1.2.3.2)); Thī 366-399 (SD 20.7).

<sup>126</sup> The roots of such unconscious tendencies lie in **the latent tendencies** (*anusaya*): SD 31.3.

<sup>127</sup> On *cetanā*, see **Sañcetanika S** (A 10.206), SD 3.9. See also W S Karunaratna in Ency Bsm: *cetanā*.

<sup>128</sup> Karma may be unconsciously done, see (**Kamma,vāda**) **Bhūmija S** (S 12.25), SD 31.2.

**4.2.4.3** The suttas often exhort us to be **diligent** [heedful] (*appamāda*), literally, “not to be negligent” (*na appamāda*). For, it is “the path of death”; the heedless are as good as dead; and that “heedfulness [diligence] is the path to the deathfree (nirvana)” (*appamādo amata, padarū*, Dh 21). To be *heedfully diligent* is to train oneself in keeping to the moral precepts, so that our moral virtue forms the wholesome basis for our mental training, both of which fruit in insight wisdom, bringing us to the path of awakening in this life itself.

If we see moral virtue (*not killing, not stealing, not committing sexual misconduct, not lying, not getting intoxicated*) as an apophatic, a “negative,” morality of *omission* (of not acting in the 5 unwholesome ways), then **meditation** (cultivating the mind) is significantly a cataphatic [kataphatic]<sup>129</sup> or wholesomely “positive” *commission* of thinking, speaking, doing and being, that is, good karma.

**4.2.4.4** On a mental level, there are the wholesome habits of mindfulness and meditation. **Mindfulness** (*sati*) refers to the on-going awareness of wholesome thinking (intentionality) before any kind of acting, that our every thought, speech and action is rooted in wholesome karma. Mindfulness also includes “reviewing” (*paccavekkhaṇa*) how we have acted, and where we have acted *negatively*, we work to end them or to correct them, and where we have acted *positively*, we maintain or cultivate them further. These are the 4 right efforts (*sammā vāyāma*).<sup>130</sup>

In **meditation** [0.3.1], we work, firstly, to rid our mind of negative emotions that are mental hindrances or impurities (*cetaso upakkilesa*) that weaken wisdom (*paññāya dubbalī, karaṇe*),<sup>131</sup> [1.2.2.3]. A mind cleared of hindrances settles down and clears up to attain dhyana (*jhāna*), an inner state of profound joy and peaceful focus. Upon emerging from such a dhyana, we then direct our profoundly calm and clear mind to the reflection of impermanence, and so on.

**4.2.4.5** The healing effect of meditation is that it is the best tool we have to reach down deep into our **unconscious** to discover the kind of latent tendencies—forms of greed, hate and delusion—and **to bring them out into the conscious light of our mindfulness** to resolve them accordingly. Such latent tendencies have conditioned and controlled us since birth, and even many lives before that; they will continue to control us if left to their own vices and devices.

Hence, we need constant meditation, applying the diligence and skilful means taught by the Buddha in the suttas. One key text to start with in this endeavour is **the Vitakka Saṅghāna Sutta** (M 20).<sup>132</sup> When we are ready, we should then take our time to study (over our life-time) **the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10), or the 4 focuses of mindfulness, and, in due course, **the Ānāpāna, sati Sutta** (M 118), on the breath meditation.<sup>133</sup>

A proper study of these Suttas means that we should carefully examine them with a helpful modern commentary, which is, in fact, the purpose of the Sutta Discovery (SD) series, as evident from the notes quoted. At any time, when we are able to follow the good teachings of an experienced Vinaya-keeping, Dharma-hearted teacher, we will further better and deepen our understanding and practice.

**4.2.4.6** Even without dhyana, when we learn to do some simple meditation—especially those of breath meditation and lovingkindness cultivation—we learn to be calm for short durations. The best benefits come from doing so habitually, or learning, whenever the need arises, to calm the mind when

<sup>129</sup> This is used in a non-theological early Buddhist sense as a convenient opp to “apophatic.”

<sup>130</sup> On the 4 right efforts, see SD 10.16 (6).

<sup>131</sup> **D 12,30/1:246, 25.16/3:49 f; M 39,15/1:276; S 46.37/5:94, 46.38/5:96** (cf Sn 66); **A 5.51,3/3:63, 6.57,7/3:386; Vbh 244 f.** See *Nīvaraṇa*, SD 32.1.

<sup>132</sup> **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10), SD 13.3.

<sup>133</sup> **Ānāpāna, sati S** (M 118), SD 7.13.

confronted with difficult emotions or mental challenges. Then, we learn to be in the “presence” of such issues and resolve them most effectively with compassion and wisdom.

#### 4.2.5 Translating *saṅkhārā*

**4.2.5.1** Scholars often struggle with the translations of certain difficult Pali terms. Interestingly, the translations of *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhārā* and *viññāṇa* as, respectively, form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness, have worked quite well with most readers who often know the Pali terms and are satisfied with their understanding of how these words are used. Most of us, like it or not, find the “**Humpty Dumpty rule**”: *when we use a word, we choose to define it ourselves*.<sup>134</sup> Of course, we should do this responsibly and helpfully.

Earlier translators, for example, have rendered *saṅkhārā* as the 4<sup>th</sup> aggregate as “habitual tendencies”;<sup>135</sup> as the 2<sup>nd</sup> link of dependent arising, as “karma-formations,” and also as “activities” or “formations.”<sup>136</sup> Such differentiations would only be helpful to the specialist, but often confusing to the beginner or non-specialist. It is easier to begin by remembering that *saṅkhārā* are simply “**formations**.” In due course, as we begin to understand the different contexts of *saṅkhārā*, we will be ready to remember such differentiations as its “usages.”

**4.2.5.2** At this point, we should consider the role of *saṅkhārā* as the early sense of **emotions**: love, lust, hate, anger, ill will, jealousy, arrogance, worry, kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, and so on [2.5]. Early Buddhism defines **feelings** (*vedanā*) as what we understand as “**affective tones**” (pleasant or pleasurable, unpleasant or painful, and neither) [2.5.2].

In important ways, feelings are neutral since they are simply our natural responses towards the nature of things, physical (such as temperature), mental (ideas or views) and emotions (morally laden activities). Only when any such pleasure or delight, or dislike or disgust, or unfeeling towards any of these states are reacted with **a karmic or moral tone** of greed, hate or delusion that they become emotions or *saṅkhārā*. [2.5]

## 5 Consciousness: How the senses work

### 5.1 VIÑÑĀṆA

#### 5.1.1 Consciousness in daily life

**5.1.1.1 Consciousness** (*viññāṇa*) is the 5<sup>th</sup> and last of the 5 aggregates, and also the last of the 4 “formless aggregates” (*arūpa-khandha*), so called because they are aspects of the mind: feeling (the affective), perception (the perceptual), formations (the conative) and consciousness (the cognitive). Indeed, consciousness is the bedrock of the meditating mind, and is the cognitive basis for the existence of all the realms except for two of them, from which it is absent or too refined to be noticed, that is, in the realm of the “non-conscious beings” (*asañña, sattā*) and the “base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception” (*n’eva, saññā, nāsaññāyatana*), the latter is the highest of the formless dhyanas.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>134</sup> On the Humpty Dumpty rule, see SD 17.4 (2.3); SD 50.2 (1.1.1.3).

<sup>135</sup> On this term and the next 2, see I B Horner, M:H 1 1954:xxiv.

<sup>136</sup> Horner M:H 1 1954:67 f, 90, 317.

<sup>137</sup> See SD 55.19 (1.1.3.2).

**5.1.1.2** Even in “normal” meditation—concentration without attaining dhyana (*jhāna*)—we are still able to experience deep states of calm and clarity, although not as profound as those during dhyana. In either case, such calm and clarity are invariably characterized by a strong sense of joy (*pīti*). Such joy arises when the 5 mental hindrances [1.2.2] have been overcome. Another way of putting this is that the mind or, specifically, consciousness has freed itself from the 5 physical senses [5.1.1.3] and the thought-processes [5.1.1.4].

**5.1.1.3** What does it mean to be **free** from the 5 physical senses? Right now, as we read these words (or write them); our eyes are looking at the pixels on the screen (for example); our ear can hear the clicks of the keyboard and birds outside; our nose smells coffee or books; maybe we are still chewing a bit of something in our mouth and can still taste a bit of it; and we can feel that the weather is warm or cool or just right; and so on. There is a lot of sensing going on all the time—right now—when we are awake.

All this demands our **attention** (*manasikāra*), which is where we have directed our mind and which takes its time and energy. However, when, for a moment, we decide to simply close our eyes, just sit comfortably still, just let the sounds touch our ears and leave, and try to fully focus on our breath, we will notice something remarkable.

Not only do we notice more of our breathing-process, we also notice that the thoughts of the sense-experiences also receding into the background of our mind! In concentrating our mind, then, we do not really shut off the sensings (we cannot really). Rather, we gently, happily, give ever less attention to them; then, no attention to them. They then bow out of the mind’s stage, as it were. We are left with the minding of the breath, which is a very significant step nearer to freeing the mind from all thoughts. [5.1.3]

**5.1.1.4** Even when we are **asleep**, our mind is still working: then, it reviews its own recordings of past events. Sometimes, when we are asleep, the mind wonders about things: it imagines about possible states, the future. We are usually not aware of this, or we quickly forget them because such thoughts are volatile: they rise and cease very quickly.

Now, there are occasions when we do have, we think, some clear idea of what the mind is thinking about while we are asleep. We call this **dreaming** [5.1.1.4]. Notice that we tend to remember some dreams as soon as we wake up, but we quickly forget them as we go on with the day’s work. Here, again, this shows how volatile our thoughts are.

Depending on our culture, our conditioning by family and others, our schooling or lack of it, our beliefs, level of education or intelligence, and so on, we believe in such dreams in different ways. In imperial China, for example, some monks believed that the Buddha spoke to them in their dreams!<sup>138</sup> But the Buddha is in nirvana and would never visit us in our dream.

In fact, we today know that dreams can be some kind of “wish-fulfilling” mental activity or even a troubled mind, and would not take such mind-made visions any more seriously than we take the movies. Anyway, if we dream of the Buddha, surely, we have been, in some way, thinking about him or the idea of the Buddha. This is clearly better than a nightmare about Māra.

## **5.1.2 Attention, mindfulness, memory**

**5.1.2.1** Our mind, by nature, is always alert whenever we are awake or awake enough. Our mind is active with learning what is going on in our waking moments. The activity of this learning process is called **thinking** (*vitakka*). What we learn or remember is called **thought** (*citta*). Simply, a “thought” is a mental movie that the mind takes or makes of whatever it remembers or imagines (projects) as happen-

---

<sup>138</sup> See SD 40b.4 (3.4.4.3; 4.3.3.6).

ing at the “**sense-doors**” (*dvāra*), that is, the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body—these are the 5 physical sense-faculties (*pañc'indriya*).

**5.1.2.2** Early Buddhism also regards the mind as a “sense-faculty” (*āyatana*) or “sense-base,” and is the most important of them. This is because **the mind** decides where our attention should be, what we should attend to or examine, how we should remember it, what we should remember, what we should forget, how we should remember *this*, and so on. This is called our **mindfulness** (*sati*), and an important part of this is our memory.

When we understand and use our *memories* in keeping with moral virtue (the precepts) and with lovingkindness, we become wise and good. This means that we know that *greed, hate and delusion*, bring us pain and sorrow. Their opposite—**charity, love and wisdom**—are good because they bring **happiness** (*sukha*), which is, in fact, the immediate goal of mindfulness practice and meditation. This is the kind of happiness caused by good thoughts.

But meditation can bring us to a higher kind of happiness, a joy that arises when the mind is thought-free. This is what we will now turn to. [51.3]

### **5.1.3 The thought-free mind**

**5.1.3.1** What does it mean to be **free from thoughts**? Let us first examine why we are *not* free from thoughts. In our daily life, outside of meditation, when we are awake, our senses are always working so long as there is a faculty (such as an eye) (*āyatana*), a sense-object (*dhamma*) and sense-consciousness (*viññāṇa*), there will be contact (*phassa*), that is, the sense-process occurs instantly. In other words, we are preoccupied with sensing: we are “preoccupied,” distracted in some “important” way, distracted all the same.

The mind, then, is very active, like a monkey swinging from tree to tree: one hand holds on to the branch, while the free hand moves to catch the next one and so on.<sup>139</sup> Because of discomfort and pressure of such a preoccupation, stress builds up. [2.4.1.2]

However, when our mind is free from such sensings, it begins to stop seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching for a while. It is less and less preoccupied, and then, when there is no more physical sensing, it is “unoccupied,” so to speak. We usually cannot last long “unoccupied.” What happens then?

**5.1.3.2** It is difficult for the mind to at once focus. We need some “medium” or means of holding the mind still, like strong leashes (wise attention) to hold **6 kinds of animals** (our 6 senses) to a strong pole (mindfulness of the body)<sup>140</sup> so that they all settle quietly down.<sup>141</sup> This means that our mind is fully free from the distractions of the 5 physical senses [5.1.1.3].

The mind is now more on its own. In this context, “**sense-consciousness**” functions as attention, which basically means being actively *present* at the moment bringing about *a mental event*. Our mind thinks up something. On the other hand, we can now, through mindfulness or meditation, direct the attention *away* from its “external” object to *itself*; then, the mind is no more distracted. When the attention is directed *to* the mind itself, it becomes more focused.

<sup>139</sup> **Assutava S 1** (S 12.61,8), SD 20.2; SD 19.15 (2) the monkey.

<sup>140</sup> “Mindfulness of the body” (*kāya,gata,sati*): [1.1.3.1]. On the 10n benefits of mindfulness of the body, see SD 19.15 (3).

<sup>141</sup> On this parable of the 6 animals—a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a jackal and a monkey—see **Cha,pāṇā S** (S 35.247), SD 19.15.

**5.1.3.2** We have noted that **the mindfulness of the body** (*kāya,gatā,sati*), also known as “contemplation of the body” (*kāyānupassanā*) [5.1.3.1], can train our mind to free itself of the body, from an “external” object, by observing the body just as it is. The most popular and effective of these methods is **the breath meditation** (*ānāpānā,sati*), “the mindfulness of breath.”

The breath is easily and safely observed since it is very gentle and steady. Through breath meditation, we direct our attention to the breath itself, which starts off as a physical or bodily state. As we watch it rising and falling, it becomes more relaxed, calmer and steadier, and peaceful spaces grow in between the breaths. The breath gently slows down significantly.

The breath then seems to stop, but the reality is that it is no more observable as a *physical* state: it has become a subtle mental state. This is usually marked by some kind of mental sign, usually a bright light [8.2.3]. We should smile at this beautiful bright breath and just let it be. We’re simply happy it is there. In due course, we attain dhyana (*jhāna*), a profound state of calm and clarity that is helpful into the cultivation of wisdom.<sup>142</sup>

## 5.2 CONSCIOUSNESS AS AN AGGREGATE

### 5.2.1 Consciousness is conditioned (impermanent)

**5.2.1.1** When we are in **dhyana** (*jhāna*) [5.1.3.2], our consciousness is free from the senses, even from our normal thinking processes. Hence, this consciousness is said to be the “**pure bright mind**” [8.2.4.4]. Despite its radiant and joyful beauty, this consciousness is still conditioned: we brought together the right conditions and consciousness arises. [5.2.1.2]

On account of the physical limitations of our physical body, we are able to sit continuously in meditation for only a week at best. We need to answer nature’s call and replenish it with food. This is the nature of our *earthly* body; but in the form realms and the formless realms, their refined bodies are respectively of *light* and of *energy* last for astronomically longer durations, over thousands of world-cycles. Even then, it must come to an end at some point.<sup>143</sup>

**5.2.1.2** What does it mean to say that consciousness is “**conditioned**”? **The Upāya Sutta** (S 22.53), the discourse on the “engaged,” gives this interesting explanation, showing how consciousness takes each of the other 4 aggregates as a “station of consciousness” (*viññāṇa-ṭṭhiti*), upon which consciousness gains a footing, thus:<sup>144</sup>

(1) “Bhikshus, **consciousness**, while active [standing], would be actively engaged with **form**, based on *form*, established on *form*, with a sprinkling<sup>145</sup> of delight, it (consciousness) would come to grow, to increase, to being abundant.

(2) Bhikshus, **consciousness**, while active [standing], would be actively engaged with **feeling**, based on *feeling*, established on *feeling*, with a sprinkling of delight, it (consciousness) would come to grow, to increase, to being abundant.

(3) Bhikshus, **consciousness**, while active [standing], would be actively engaged with **perception**, based on *perception*, established on *perception*, with a sprinkling of delight, it (consciousness) would come to grow, to increase, to being abundant.

<sup>142</sup> On the 4 dhyanas, see **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (5).

<sup>143</sup> For the life-spans of the 31 planes of existence, see SD 1.7 (App).

<sup>144</sup> On how this works in terms of visual cognition, see SD 7.1 (4.4).

<sup>145</sup> *Upasecana*, see Upāya S (S 22,53,4) n (SD 29.4).

(4) Bhikkhus, **consciousness**, while active [standing], would be actively engaged with **formations**, based on formations, established on formations, with a sprinkling of delight, it (consciousness) would come to grow, to increase, to being abundant.

(S 22.53,4-5/3:53), SD 29.4

**Why is consciousness not “engaged” with itself?** The Commentary to **the Hālidakāni Sutta 1** (S 22.-3)<sup>146</sup> explains as follows. An earlier karmic consciousness is a condition for both a later karmic consciousness and a resultant consciousness, and a resultant consciousness for both a (later) resultant consciousness and a (later) karmic consciousness.

Therefore, the confusion may arise, “Which [what kind of] consciousness is meant here?” To avoid this, consciousness is not included, and the teaching expressed without breach. Furthermore, the other four aggregates, as objects (*ārammaṇa, vasena*), are said to be “stations for the karmically generative consciousness” (*abhisankhāra, viññāṇa-ṭṭhitiyo*). As such, consciousness is not (or need not be) mentioned here. (SA 2:259)

## 5.2.2 Viññāṇa as “consciousness of”

**5.2.2.1** Note that in **the Upāya Sutta** (S 22.53) excerpt [5.2.1.2], consciousness underpins all the other 4 aggregates. Look at the first instance: “consciousness is actively engaged with form (rūpa)”: consciousness is active as corporeality. Here, “form”<sup>147</sup> refers to each of the sense-object that arises at the eye-door.<sup>148</sup>

In every physical sense-experience, consciousness is always one that is conscious **of** a form, a sound, a smell, a taste or a touch. Although we speak of this in the *possessive case*, “of,” consciousness is neither the same as nor different from its object (in a manner of speaking). We can say that it is conscious *of* object, or we can say that it *is* the object (since we are conscious of it). The point is that both the consciousness and the object are moving so instantaneously that there is no way of seeing either as an entity, except as passing moments.

Suffice it to say that this is the most fundamental function of consciousness, that of **cognizing** sense-stimuli and sense-activity of seeing, hearing etc.<sup>149</sup> Technically, this is all part of the “5-door cognitive process.”<sup>150</sup> [5.2.3]

**5.2.2.2** We have only mentioned how **the mind (mano)** cognizes occasions of **physical sensing**, that is, when we see, hear, smell, taste or touch. What about when the mind cognizes *itself*: when the mind *knows* itself, that is, when it **experiences itself as a mind-object**?<sup>151</sup> The Buddha explains just this process in **the Mahā Hatthi, padōpama Sutta** (M 28).

<sup>146</sup> See S 22.34.7/3:10 = SD 10.12.

<sup>147</sup> Here, form (rūpa) has 2 senses: (1) as the object of the eye-faculty; (2) as the 1<sup>st</sup> aggregate which includes (1). “Corporeality” ( )

<sup>148</sup> See BDict: Khandha, Summary of the Five Groups, I B: Derived (*upāda*).

<sup>149</sup> For a scholarly discussion, see Hamilton, *Identity and Experience*, 1996a:87-91.

<sup>150</sup> On the 5-door cognitive process, see 1.1.1.4 n at *tad-ārammaṇa*.

<sup>151</sup> The mind-base (*man’āyatana*) is the mind as a sense-organ, as a whole; its object is called *dhmma*. In the list of 18 elements (atthārasa, dhātu) [1.1.1.4]. The mind-object element (dhmma, dhātu) refers the object of mind-consciousness, as well as all feeling, perception and formations: SD 29.9 (1+2). The mind-element (mano, dhātu) and the mind-consciousness element (mano, viññāṇa, dhātu) is one of the 18 elements, generally used for a consciousness-element that performs the functions of investigation (*santīraṇa*), determining (*voṭṭhapāna*), registering (*tad-ārammaṇa*), etc [BDict: manoviññāṇa-dhātu].

First, he explains how the mind cognizes each of the physical sense-objects—visible object, sound, smell, taste, touch. Finally, in the same way, he explains how this happens with the mind, thus:

If, avuso, internally, **the mind** is intact [unimpaired] and external mind-objects come into its range, and there is an appropriate conscious engagement, then there *is* the appearance of that class of consciousness. (M 28,27.3), SD 6.16

The Commentary explains the phrase “**internally, the mind**” (*ajjhatiko mano*) to be the life-continuum consciousness (*bhav’āṅga,citta*) (MA 2:230), that is, a part of the subconscious [5.3.4]. This is a post-canonical term but it gives us a good idea of what is going on.

**5.2.2.3** Another important term here is “**an appropriate conscious engagement**” or “corresponding mental engagement” (*tajjo samannāhāro*), that is, the mind-consciousness (*mano,viññāṇa*), which takes non-sensuous objects as its sphere of cognition, meaning that it takes *only* a mind-object (thought) as object. Simply, it refers to appropriate attention.<sup>152</sup>

When we look closely at the process described as a whole, we can see that “**conscious engagement**” (*samannāhāra*, literally, “a coming together”) is the same as “contact” (*phassa*) [2.4.1.1], that is, the meeting of the 3 conditions for sensing. This familiar description is, in fact, what we can call **the “triangle of experience.”** This describes **the “appearance of that class of consciousness”**: this is how consciousness arises.

### **5.2.3 Consciousness’ role in cognition**

**5.2.3.1** Consciousness (*viññāṇa*), having arisen, only cognizes a sense-object; hence, we see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think. Consciousness, however, does *not discriminate* any sense-object; it does not react in terms of *how* to experience. This is done by **perception** (*saññā*) [3.1.1.1], which decides whether it is *pleasant, unpleasant or neither (neutral)*.

The mindful mind, or the mind during meditation, is likely to notice how this happens. We see an object and we think of some past occurrence of it. The existential reality is that there are *no* “same” situations: we cannot step into the same river twice. Anyway, we still *imagine* some “similar” past experience or what we *perceive* as the “same” situation. Depending on this perception, we decide it to be “pleasant” or “unpleasant.”

However, when we are unable to connect this present experience to any memory of it, then, we show no interest in it: we ignore it or we are *bored* with it. To us, it seems, there are only friends or enemies, no strangers or neutral party.

In our meditation training, we are often instructed to **stop** here. For example, we are taught to perceive impermanence: we see it as it is, rising and falling, changing, becoming other. We should not think, thus: *I like* this or I do *not like* this, or I *don’t care* about this. To react thus is to *miss* the whole experience of impermanence. It’s like breathing: we don’t say I like, or don’t like it, or don’t care about it—we simply breathe *joyfully*.

**5.2.3.2** This next stage of cognition is a crucial one. After we have recognized an experience, we at once note its impermanence, how it arises and passes away, again and again. This is not as simply as stated here because we are easily distracted. Often enough, we *will* like something we see, or hear, or smell, or taste, or touch. Even as a thought; we may even lust after it, feel jealousy about it, and so on. Just as often, we may not like it, even hate it, feel anger, and so on.

---

<sup>152</sup> See M 28,27.1 n.

Or, we see no connection with it and ignore it, if it stays, we feel bored towards it. Then, other emotions take over. All this is the working of what comes after *saññā*, that is, *saṅkhārā* or mental formations. They are also called **karma-formations** or karmic formations because these emotions (all rooted in greed, hate and delusion) are *formed* by the subtle but powerful influence of our past karma. We are but help-less puppets whose strings are pulled by the master puppeteer called **latent tendencies** (*anusaya*), that is, lust, repulsion and ignorance, darker and deeper forms of the 3 unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion.

**5.2.3.3** Hence, it is at the stage of **perception** (*saññā*)—well before it becomes *formations*—that we can and must use our mindfulness or meditation to nip any negative mental state in the bud. In fact, we have a set of meditations called **perceptions**, especially those of *impermanence*,<sup>153</sup> of *suffering* and of *non-self* that we can use to remove or negate the greed, hate or delusion that arise in us.<sup>154</sup>

A key task of meditation should be for us to learn how to master this stage of our being, that is, **the perceptual process**. We should understand how it works, and to use it to our advantage [5.2.3.4]. Anyway, we should at least prevent our mind from falling further into the negative conative cycle, when negative emotions will arise, and feed our bad habits and create bad karma.

### **5.2.4 Early Buddhist psychology of learning**

**5.2.4.1** It is vital that we master the perceptual process because it is also the most common and effective way that we learn things [3.1.1.2]. The early Buddhist **psychology of learning** is rooted in the idea of “naming” (*namana*), since learning occurs with the 4 formless aggregates—feeling, perception, formations and consciousness—which are aptly, as a set, called “**name**” (*nāma*) in contrast to “**form**” (*rūpa*), that is, our physical being. [5.2.4.2]

“Form” has a broader sense just like **matter** in English. It refers to whatever is the *physical* basis of the external world, that is, of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches. Our **knowledge**, then, is structured on our sense-faculties and their respective sense-objects. In Buddhist psychological language, these are respectively called the internal sense-bases (*ajjhattik’āyatana*) and the external sense-bases (*bāhir’āyatana*) [1.1.1.4]. **The Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23) calls these “the all” (*sabba*): the “external sense-bases” are *all* that there is to be known and the “internal sense-bases” are *all* that can be known.

**5.2.4.2** This interesting Sabba Sutta (S 35.23) teaching is developed in the Abhidhamma into a Buddhist **theory of knowledge** (epistemology) based on the “analysis of concepts” (*paññatti, bheda*), as explained in **the Abhidham’attha, saṅgaha** and its Commentary. Therein, it is said that the 4 formless or immaterial aggregates [5.2.3.4] and nirvana are called “name” (*nāma*). Nirvana (*nibbāna*) is called *nāma* only in the sense of *causing to bend*. This means that nirvana, as it were, causes faultless states—the supramundane consciousnesses (*citta*, anglicized as *cittas*) and mental concomitants (*cetasika*)—to *bend* on to itself by acting as an objective predominance condition.<sup>155</sup>

What remains are **concepts** (*paññatti*), which are the means and tools of ideating and knowing. There are 2 kinds of concepts: meaning (*attha, paññatti*, “concept as meaning”) and names (*nāma, paññatti*, “concept as name”). The former includes the meanings conveyed by the concepts, and the latter are the names or designations which convey that meaning: the signifier and the signified, respectively.

<sup>153</sup> The simplest, yet most important to begin with, of these perceptions is that of impermanence [3.1.1.4].

<sup>154</sup> It is said that hate is the easiest to remove; then, greed. The hardest to remove, even to identify, is delusion, esp when we cannot notice it so easily. See (**Akusala Mūla**) **Añña Titthiyā S** (A 3.68) + SD 16.4 (1.1).

<sup>155</sup> DhsA 392,22-27; DhsA:P 501. There is a wordplay here that is difficult to translate: the word *nāma*, “name” or “mind,” is derived from a verbal root *√NAM*, to bend or bow (in respect). Basically, this means that to speak of nirvana is to see it as empowering us to bend or turn towards goodness and awakening.

**5.2.4.3** For example, we can define a “human” as “one belonging to or bearing the characteristics of mankind, distinguished from animals, by a generally upright posture, power of articulate speech, superior moral and mental development, and capable of higher qualities.” Human is the **name** (*nāma,paññatti*) and the rest is its **meaning** (*attha,paññatti*).

Such a concept, however, is to be understood only in a “conventional” sense, not in the ultimate sense of true reality. For example, we often enough see a human who is bent with age, or dumb, or unintelligent, or immoral, or not awakened. But this is a convenient category which makes human communication and development possible. This is a concept that “**is made known**” (*paññāpiyattā*).

**5.2.4.4** Then, there is concept that “**makes known**” (*paññāpanato*), and it is sixfold, as follows (summarized):

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| (1) a direct concept of <u>the real</u> :                          | “matter,” “feeling,” and so on;              |
| (2) a direct concept of the unreal:                                | “person,” “mountain,” and so on;             |
| (3) a concept of <u>the unreal</u> by means of <i>the real</i> :   | “the possessor of <i>the 6 knowledges</i> ”; |
| (4) a concept of <u>the real</u> by means of <i>the unreal</i> :   | “the voice of <i>a woman</i> ”;              |
| (5) a concept of <u>the unreal</u> by means of <i>the unreal</i> : | “the king’s son”;                            |
| (6) a concept of <u>the real</u> by means of <i>the real</i> ”:    | “eye-consciousness.” <sup>156</sup>          |

This is merely an excerpt from late scholastic teachings that help us with some idea of how **knowing and knowledge** are constructed, and how we can distinguish them for the sake of seeing true reality, and ultimately conceiving the real *as* the real. Meantime, these are still **concepts** that we use as signs and bridges to be free of language itself when we have understood what all this really means.

## **5.2.5 Consciousness as the continuity of being**

**5.2.5.1** Philosophers often speak of the problem of “identity”: how do I know I am the same person I was decades back, or even a while ago, and will be the same person tomorrow, or in the years to come? The simple answer is our **memory**: we remember, more or less, what we did, what we were, what we had years ago, or recently; we remember what we have to do, and so on.<sup>157</sup>

Following the cognitive process just described [5.2.3], we have our memory working right *now* as the **name-form** (*nāma,rūpa*) interactivity [2.1.3]. As we perceive through our experiences, we are *nam*ing “things”—states and events, physical (sensual) and mental—as they arise. This knowing process of “naming forms” [5.2.3], feeds our sense-bases, physically and mentally.

**Physically**, this makes us see better: we *recognize* more people and things; we hear better: we remember more voices and music; we smell a greater variety of smells and refine others; we taste better; we feel a greater variety of touches and learn to adjust more to the environment; and so on. On a **mental** level, we think and feel better; we become more creative in activity and ideas; we are able to better manage our emotions; we are able to create *beautiful* objects; we feel a deeper sense of peace; we can meditate better; we are wiser; we feel more assured to attaining streamwinning in this life itself; and so on. In short, our learning or “naming” activity enhances the powers of our senses.

**5.2.5.2** Now that we understand how our senses—the 5 physical senses and the mind—work, we are better able to distinguish between negative “**contacts**” (*phassa*) and positive ones. Sense-impressions

<sup>156</sup> Abhs §§29-32 (with its Guide): Abhs:BRS 325-328. Nos (5)+(6) have been switched around.

<sup>157</sup> See **Self & selves**, SD 26.9 esp (1.6).

and mental activities (thinking and feeling) that are *negative* arouse unwholesome reactions of negative emotions, while positive contacts inspire wholesome responses of love, kindness, joy and peace. [2.1.2.2]

**5.2.5.3** We have learned to avoid negative sense-impressions, or to significantly lessen their impact on our life by avoiding, or at least lessening, **feelings** (*vedanā*) that feed desire, hate or delusion by not *craving* after the pleasant, *hating* the unpleasant, or being *bored* with the unfamiliar or neutral. In doing so, we are better at identifying the mental hindrances [1.2.2] and overcoming them, which significantly improves our meditation and mental health.

### **5.2.6 Consciousness as evolving**

**5.2.6.1** Now that we understand better how our **perceptual process** works [5.2.5]—the workings of the physical senses and their effects on the mind—and we have a better grasp of meditation, we are ready to examine more closely how to fine-tune our **conceptual process**, how the mind works in connection with the world, that is, our external realities.

We need to revise our understanding of **the triangle of experience** and see how it works for concept-building: how we **conceive** things [5.2.2]: the mind comes into contact with an external mind-object (a sight, sound, smell, taste or touch), and that class of sense-consciousness arises: we see, hear, smell, taste or touch, and form ideas, emotions and memories [5.2.1.2].

**5.2.6.2** We will take a step back, as it were, and examine what happens when we let our **feelings** run havoc. **The feeling triangle** (the triangle of experience found in **the Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18)) [2.4.1.2] explains that when we *see* something, for example, there is feeling for it as being *pleasant* or *unpleasant* or *neutral*. We perceive it as desirable, undesirable or disregard it, respectively. Whichever way, we think about it.

When we **think** about it—whether it is a “perception” (a memory of a sight, sound, smell, taste or touch) or a “conception” (a thought)—from this “source, proliferation of conception and perception assails” us regarding our past, future and present experiences. All our experiences are *coloured* by that conception or perception. We project those experiences and create our own virtual world.

We then **cling** (*upadāna*) to this world; we *become* what we have conceived or perceived. This is our **existence** (*bhava*). This is the turning of our wheel of dependent arising in this life itself.

## **5.3 LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

**5.3.0** This useful quartet of terms—the conscious, the preconscious, the unconscious and the subconscious—are depicted in **the “Eclipse” Mind Diagram** [SD 17.8a (Fig 6.1)]. The following is only a summary with references for readings elsewhere.

**5.3.1 The conscious** refers to “cognitive consciousness,” that is, what is generally referred to as “consciousness” (*viññāṇa*) [5].<sup>158</sup> This is the 5<sup>th</sup> and last of the 5 aggregates which we have discussed in some detail. It refers to the general activity of the 6 sense-bases, that is, the 5 physical senses and the mind. The cognitive activities of the former is technically referred to as **perception** (*saññā*) [3], while those of the latter as **conception** (*maññana*).<sup>159</sup> [5]

<sup>158</sup> See SD 17.8a.

<sup>159</sup> See SD 17.8a (6.1.1).

**5.3.2 The preconscious** is the conscious mind hidden from the public, that is, a private **conative** mind [9] that decides the moral or karmic tone of acts of the body, speech and mind. It can be moved by greed, hate or delusion, or inspired by non-greed, non-hate and non-delusion. Technically, this refers to the aggregate of **formations** (*saṅkhārā*).<sup>160</sup>

**5.3.3 The unconscious** is the darkest depths of our consciousness where lurks **the latent tendencies** (*anusaya*) [5.2.3.2]. This most ancient part of our consciousness is the sum total of all our habits thus far. In a sense, it is the “store” of all our karmic potential. Hence, it is a kind of wound-up kinetic karmic force that is ready to pounce into action at any time, and often does. Only when we neutralize all this store of karma are we awakened to nirvanic freedom.<sup>161</sup>

**5.3.4 The subconscious**, in our daily life, is called “the existential consciousness.” This is, in fact, the same as *viññāṇa*, except that it is dominated by craving (*taṇhā*) and clinging (*upādāna*). Hence, it plays a key role in contributing to the continuation of our life, rather than to reaching the path in this life itself, much less than conducing to awakening. Technically, this is the rebirth-consciousness (*paṭisandhi,citta*), also called the “gandharva” (*gandhabba*) or “being-to-be-born.”<sup>162</sup>

## II THE 5 AGGREGATES AS MEDITATION EXPERIENCE (EARLY BUDDHIST TEACHINGS AND PSYCHOLOGY: A COMPARISON)

### 6 Form: The body and meditation

#### 6.1 THE SOMATIC DOMAIN

##### 6.1.1 Some somatic experiences during meditation

**6.1.1.1** In experimental psychology, **the somatic domain** includes observable changes in bodily functioning or physiological processes during meditation. A **2017** study<sup>163</sup> documented a large number of physiological changes, many of which were reported amongst its 73 subjects. *Dizziness or syncope, gastrointestinal distress, cardiac irregularity, breathing irregularity, fatigue, headaches and sexuality-related changes* were reported by nearly 20 participants.

**6.1.1.2** In the somatic domain [6.1.1], studies by psychological researchers documented a large number of physiological changes, many of which were infrequently reported across subjects. The following somatic difficulties were reported: dizziness, gastrointestinal distress, cardiac irregularity, breathing irregularity, fatigue, headaches and sexuality-related changes.<sup>164</sup> Let us examine these bodily changes or signs in the broader experience of meditation.

---

<sup>160</sup> See SD 17.8b (2.2).

<sup>161</sup> See SD 17.8b.

<sup>162</sup> See SD 17.8a (6.1.2).

<sup>163</sup> This study was inspired by Lindahl et al, “The varieties of contemplative experience,” 2017:19.

<sup>164</sup> Lindahl et al reported that all these conditions are mentioned by fewer than 20 participants:2017: Table 4. See also Cebolla et al 2017:5 & Table 3.

### 6.1.2 Further observations of somatic experiences during meditation

**6.1.2.1 Dizziness** in meditation includes syncope (loss of consciousness), “feeling of falling into a void.” This may be a symptom arising from tightness in the neck or shoulders, or from an inner ear issue, such as an ear infection. The cause for such dizziness may be a sudden drop in blood pressure, a drop in heart-rate, or changes in the amount of blood in certain areas of our body. A slight lowering of the blood-pressure during meditation may give us a temporary sense of “**floating**” or bodily lightness, which may be symptomatic of the hindrance of worry (*kukkucca*), a mild form of *anxiety* [6.1.2.3].<sup>165</sup>

**6.1.2.2 Gastrointestinal distress** or nausea may occur to a few people during meditation. However, this is more likely to occur in those who are already afflicted with it even before they learn to meditate.<sup>166</sup> Other studies suggest that mindfulness-based interventions may provide benefit in functional gastrointestinal disorders, with the use of breath meditation and other relaxation-inducing mindfulness methods (such as body-scan).<sup>167</sup>

**6.1.2.3 Cardiac irregularity** may occur during meditation. Unless the palpitations are caused by arrhythmia, a heart rhythm disorder (which should be medically treated), they tend to be short-lived and harmless during meditation. They are likely to have arisen from *anxiety* [6.1.2.1].

A few slow deep breaths ending with normal breathing, followed by regular easy breathing should help. Or, we could gently scan our body for any tightness, relax that part of the body with each out-breath, subverbalizing, “peace.” This is followed by “just sitting” until we feel ready to resume the practice or do some walking meditation or take a break to rest. Going to the toilet when we need to, clearly helps.

**6.1.2.4 Breathing irregularity** may arise when we have lost focus on the meditation object (eg, the breath). Relaxing the breath and bringing the mind back to the breath should help. If we are beginners, the initial experience of focusing on the breath may make us wonder if we are breathing properly, or we may be forcing our breath. We may even feel as if our heart is “thumping away.” This is more likely to happen in thin people. Consciously relaxing the breath may help, or simply acknowledge it as a “thought” and letting it go.

**6.1.2.5 Fatigue** may occur in meditation for either of 2 reasons. The first is that we have sat too long. As beginners, our sitting-duration may just be 5 minutes, which is a good start. Slowly increase the time as we get used to meditating. Secondly, fatigue may arise because the meditation method may not be suitable to start with. If this is the breath meditation, then we should switch to, say, the cultivation of lovingkindness. A simple cycle of counting the breaths may also help.<sup>168</sup>

**6.1.2.6 Headaches** during meditation may arise from physical tension, aches or pains, and are not necessarily indications of a problem, especially in the early stages. Any of these symptoms may have

---

<sup>165</sup> See SD 32.1 (3.1.4).

<sup>166</sup> See Braden Kuo et al, “Genomic and clinical effects associated with a relaxation response mind-body intervention in patients with irritable bowel syndrome and inflammatory bowel disease.” 2017.

<sup>167</sup> Aucoin et al, “Mindfulness-based therapies in the treatment of functional gastrointestinal disorders: A meta-analysis,” 2014.

<sup>168</sup> On the technique of counting the breaths, see SD 43.1 (6.3.1.4).

arisen from our mind than by any bodily factor. If the pain is brought on by our thoughts, then recognize that thought, smile at it and let it go.<sup>169</sup>

**6.1.2.7** A more commonly reported physiological effect on meditators in the 2017 study [6.1.1.1] was **changes in the need, amount or quality of sleep**. The meditators tended to report needing less sleep, a lack of sleep, or insomnia.<sup>170</sup> Other sleep-related changes included parasomnias, such as night-mares, and vivid or lucid dreams.

These sleep-related changes frequently occurred along with **appetite changes**, especially a decrease in appetite or food intake. It is often a rule in meditation retreats that only breakfast and lunch are provided, which is in keeping with the training “against taking untimely meals” (*vikāla, bhojanā veramaṇī*), the 6<sup>th</sup> of the 8 precepts observed during the full-moon and new-moon “precept” (*uposatha*) days, and retreats.<sup>171</sup>

**6.1.2.8** Experienced meditators have noticed that, as a rule, it is easier to meditate in cool weather when we can be simply dressed and meditate in a safe spot, even in the open air. However, in warmer sunnier regions, it is wise to sit in the constant shade of a tree as the sun moves across the sky. In the colder weather of the temperate regions, meditators should cover themselves with thick blankets, sitting on a meditation mat on a cold floor.

**Thermal changes** included both feeling warmer and colder throughout the body, and more localized sensations of heat and cold. We are likely to notice that as we progress in our meditation, we generate some level of body heat, which may cause us to sweat even in a cool place. Seasoned meditators are known to generate body heat that is able to naturally dry their moist or wet clothes, or even allow some to meditate unclothed in the snow, but this is not practised in the early Buddhist tradition.<sup>172</sup>

**6.1.2.9** Meditators are known to experience major changes in **pressure and tension** in the body. Pain may arise in parts of the body, such as the shoulders, back or legs, often due to unresolved tightness in those areas. The discomfort is dispelled with a mindful shift in posture. Bodily discomfort may also arise when meditators have sat too long. This discomfort is dispelled by carefully rising to do standing meditation or a bit of mindful stretching, followed by walking meditation.

Some meditators during the 2017 study [6.1.1.1] experienced intense **pain**, which may become more acute, or the pain may subside in the course of the practice. The release of pressure or tension is sometimes associated with a positive feeling (such as the joyful effect of lovingkindness meditation) and surges in bodily energy (such as being focused in breath meditation). However, it might also be associated with traumatic memories and other forms of negative affects.<sup>173</sup>

**6.1.2.10** In some cases, the release of tension is associated with reports of electricity-like “voltage” or “currents” of **somatic energy** surging through the body. Sometimes, such somatic energy may be moderated by the meditator. Such surges in energy is the most commonly reported experience in the somatic domain of the 2017 study, but may occur in changes in any of the other 4 domains.

<sup>169</sup> On “trying too hard” during meditation, see also SD 32.1 (4.3)

<sup>170</sup> See Britton et al, “Awakening is not a metaphor,” 2014.

<sup>171</sup> See (**Tad-ādh’**) **Uposatha S** (A 3.70,14) + SD 4.18 (2.2.2).

<sup>172</sup> M Kozhenikov et al. “Neurocognitive and somatic components of temperature increases during g-Tummo meditation: Legend and reality.” 2013.

<sup>173</sup> J Lindström, *Changing the Perception of Pain: An interactive experience using heat and guided meditation*, 2017.

When surges in such somatic energy is strong, it may bring about **involuntary body movements**, often the raising of an arm or both arms, or the body swaying sideways, or back and forth. Once such movements are noticed, they would usually stop, or should be gently stopped. A meditative smile at such movements helps to gently end them. Such movements should not be prolonged as they distract us from focusing on the meditation object or the mental calm.

**6.1.2.11 Sexuality-related changes** may occur through our mind experiencing inner calm and clarity, invariably attended by some level of pervasive joy. Women who benefit from such a practice tend to be more self-accepting and focus better in the present. Hence, they have better sex lives and are more satisfying to their partners.

Men who are able to keep up the cultivation of lovingkindness are likely to have similar benefits. In either case, the perception of impermanence—seeing their own changes and feelings—will help them appreciate that their lust is conditioned, and that sexual fulfilment is more a matter of acceptance of the moment than nursing expectations.<sup>174</sup>

## 7 Feeling: The affective aspects of meditation

### 7.1 FEELING AS AN AFFECTIVE PROCESS

#### 7.1.1 Affect

**7.1.1.1** In psychology, “**affect**” is “a general term used more or less interchangeably with various others such as emotion, emotionality, feeling, mood, etc.”<sup>175</sup> Contemporary usage is, however, very loose and qualifiers are common. In other words, there is neither universal nor enduring definition of *affect*. Recent definitions of **affect** are found in the Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology:<sup>176</sup>

(1) (n) A transient neurophysiological response to a stimulus that excites a coordinated system of bodily and mental responses including facial expressions that inform us about our relationship to the stimulus and prepare us to deal with it in some way. The basic affects are *anger, fear, surprise, happiness, disgust, and contempt*.

(2) (n) The subjective feeling or evaluative component of human experience or thought. Simply, this means how we react *emotionally* to a situation or an idea.

**7.1.1.2** Psychological studies often speak of **affective changes**, that is, variations in the type, frequency or intensity of emotions. Affect, then, simply means an “emotional tone,”<sup>177</sup> which are often used interchangeably in psychological writings, so that their senses can only be decided by the usage or context of those writings [2.5.1]. In other words, where we see *affect* or *emotion* in psychological writings, we may assume to an identical or similar range of mental states, their changes and significance.

<sup>174</sup> Y Efrati & M Gola, “Compulsive sexual behavior,” 2018. See also **Sexuality**, SD 31.7.

<sup>175</sup> Arthur S Reber, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* [1985], 4<sup>th</sup> ed, A S Reber et al, 2009. Penguin Books & Viking, 1985: Affect.

<sup>176</sup> David Matsumoto (ed), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology*, Cambridge: CUP, 2009: affect.

<sup>177</sup> Stuart Sutherland, *The Macmillan Dictionary of Psychology* [1989], Basingstoke, Hants: Macmillan Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 1995: Affect.

### 7.1.2 Affective changes during meditation

**7.1.2.1** The 2017 psychological study [6.1.1.1] of **psychosomatic** (mind-body) changes in meditators during meditation,<sup>178</sup> recorded a wide range of emotional changes, capturing both discrete (primary) experiences and also responses to changes in other domains (secondary). Meditators reported having both increased as well as decreased emotionality (feelings and emotions).

In terms of **increased emotionality**, fear, anxiety, panic or paranoia were the most frequent categories reported by some 82% of the meditators. These reports are not only in the affective domain, but across all domains—the somatic [6], the perceptual [8], the conative [9] and the cognitive [10]. Often *the fear or anxiety* was an additional response from a negative affect that coincided with other unexpected or undesired changes.

In some cases, *fear* was non-referential and was reported as a phenomenological<sup>179</sup> change unto itself. In a Buddhist situation, the meditator would, in fact, be told to accept that **feeling simply** (phenomenologically) for fear is often *just* a feeling; or if there are images, then, it is *just* a thought. This is, in essence, the practice of **labelling**.<sup>180</sup>

**7.1.2.2** Increased emotionality also occurred as **increased affective liability, sensitivity or reactivity** in response either to other people or to the environment. Emotional sensitivity to other people often occurred as empathic and affiliative changes (increased feelings of empathy, or sharing others' emotions) between the meditator and other people. In contrast to increased emotionality, some meditators reported having fewer or less intense emotions or *affective flattening*, sometimes even the complete absence of emotions: they felt no feelings at all.

On a very deep level of meditation, usually after an episode of profound joy, a sense of pervasive peace is felt, the duration of which varies from moments to a few hours, depending on the meditator's ability and supporting conditions. In worldly terms, such a peace is simply equanimity (*upekkhā*), but may be subtly blissful, even healing.

**7.1.2.3** **Positive affects**, including joy and euphoria were also often reported, but sometimes these were followed by *depression or agitation*, either within the context of a practice or in the transition from formal practice to daily life. After experiencing the bliss of meditative states and peaceful solitude, the world suddenly seemed dramatically jarring and meaningless. One way to correct this perception is to spend a normal day in or near the meditation environment to acclimatize, before returning to the routine world.

In some cases, the **depression** became sufficiently severe to result in suicidal ideation. Such symptoms should be examined in proper personal counselling to understand and resolve the underlying causes and conditions.

A rule of thumb is that meditation does not, in itself, cause negative mental states. At certain stages, it may arouse or highlight the meditator's past traumas or negative propensity. A stopgap measure is for the meditator to do some lovingkindness meditation, or just being mindful of lovingkindness, to displace the negative ideas.

<sup>178</sup> Lindahl et al, "The varieties of contemplative experience," 2017:18 f.

<sup>179</sup> "Phenomenological" means referring to experience on its own terms without any reference to any thing or theory which is not part of the experience, as opposed to using an experience as an adjunct to description of objective data.

<sup>180</sup> On meditative labelling, see SD 13.1 (3.9.1) passim; *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1, passim.

**7.1.2.4** In other cases, intense positive affects did not alternate with low arousal states, but instead escalated into destabilizing conditions resembling mania and psychosis, which often required hospitalization. It should be noted that neither “**mania**” nor “**psychosis**” were phenomenological categories in the psychological coding structure, even if practitioners, or more commonly, expert meditators used such terms to describe an experience.

Rather, because the researchers’ categories aimed to capture distinguishable components of experience, what practitioners referred to as “mania” was found to be typically a combination of positive affect and increased processing speed, and, in some cases, delusions. In simple terms, the meditators had yet to resolve some meditation perceptions.

In a proper Buddhist retreat, meditators have periodic, even daily, interviews with an experienced teacher or facilitator so that any meditation-related issues are at once resolved, and then the meditator continues with new insights. In the 2017 meditation study, run and monitored by psychologists, this vital aspect of traditional practice was probably omitted, so that it did not “influence” the research results.

**7.1.2.5 Changes in doubt and faith** as well as self-conscious emotions (guilt, shame, pride, etc) were often secondary responses to other meditation experiences. This typically had an impact in the social domain as well. Although typically, a secondary response, **shame**, was particularly a big contributor to levels of distress. For meditators with a trauma history, it was not uncommon for them to report a *re-experiencing of traumatic memories*.

Even practitioners without a trauma history similarly reported an upwelling of emotionally-charged psychological reactions. In a Buddhist situation, experienced teachers often tell new students that a truly “good meditation” is one where we discover more about ourselves, warts and all, especially the warts. The personal interviews, or even during plenary question-times, such mental encounters or epiphanies may be explained, and instructions given for their proper management or resolution.

**7.1.2.6** Practitioners reported **involuntary crying or laughter** in response to positive affective content such as bliss or joy, or in response to negative affective content like grief or sadness, or, in some cases, without content altogether. Experienced meditators know that a long sitting properly done often brings on profound states of mental calm, which include a pervasive sense of joy.<sup>181</sup>

**7.1.2.7** States of negative affect included **increased agitation or irritability**, which could become intensified to either transient outbursts or long-term expressions of anger and aggression. A possible explanation for this is the vivid recall of some past emotional trauma. Improper or incorrect meditation instruction or feedback may contribute to the meditator’s negative reactions, when it is misconstrued as a personal affront to long-held beliefs or underlying habits.

These are but symptoms whose causes and conditions may be uncovered and dealt with during a meditation-oriented interview or counselling session. In traditional Buddhist retreats, seasoned teachers would give occasional or daily talks related to meditation practice, which include mentioning a wide range of meditation-related experiences that the meditators may connect with. They may then follow up such hints with questions or relate this during the personal interview session.

---

<sup>181</sup> On joy in meditation: SD 8.4 (6.3); (**Sotāpanna**) **Nandiya S** (S 55.40,11 etc), SD 47.1; **Pamāda Vihāri S** (S 35.97,4), SD 47.6.

## 8 PERCEPTION: THE PERCEPTUAL PROCESSES IN MEDITATION

### 8.1 PERCEPTION, RECOGNITION, REACTION

#### 8.1.0 Perception during meditation

**8.1.0.1** The APA<sup>182</sup> 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.”<sup>183</sup>

The **early Buddhist definition** of perception (*saññā*), as we have noted [3.1.1], is that of recognizing whatever arises through the 6 senses. “Observing” would come under cognition or consciousness (*viññāṇa*) [5], and “discriminating” would be classed under “formations” (*saṅkhārā*) [4].

**8.1.0.2** The 2017 psychological study of meditators [6.1.1.1], the **perceptual** domain recorded to any of the 5 senses: vision, hearing, smell, taste and somatosensory processing, especially interoception<sup>184</sup> [8.2.1] and proprioception<sup>185</sup> [8.2.2]. Basically, the former refers to our awareness of inner bodily functioning, and the latter, awareness of our body externally and the environment. Or, simply, as internal sensing and external sensing, respectively.

### 8.2 THE 2 KINDS OF SENSING

#### 8.2.1 Interoception: Internal bodily feelings

**8.2.1.1 Interoception** is the sense of internal functioning, the perception of event within the body. An *interoceptor* is any sense organ or receptor that is activated by stimuli within the body.<sup>186</sup> Simply, these are intrasensory or internal bodily feelings such as hunger, thirst, nausea, visceral sensations and so on.

Mind scientists have identified interoception (body awareness) as one of the 4 connected elements that consistently emerge, that is: (1) attention regulation, (2) bodily awareness, (3) emotion regulation, and (4) change in self-perspective.<sup>187</sup> Proper meditation training, such as in breath meditation and body

---

<sup>182</sup> APA stands for **American Psychological Association**, the largest scientific and professional organization of **psychologists** in the US, with over 121,000 members, including scientists, educators, clinicians, consultants, and students. It has 54 divisions—interest groups for different subspecialties of psychology or topical areas. APA is also a common social sciences formatting style for essays and papers. APA Style has a specific format for in-text and reference list entries. APA 6 refers to the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the Publication Manual of the **American Psychological Association**.

<sup>183</sup> *APA Dictionary of Psychology* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Washington DC, 2015: sv.

<sup>184</sup> Interoception is the sense of internal functioning, the perception of event within the body. An *interoceptor* is any sense organ or receptor that is activated by stimuli within the body, such as hunger, thirst, nausea, visceral sensations and so on. Simply, these are internal bodily feelings.

<sup>185</sup> Proprioception is a general term for all those sensory systems that inform us regarding the position, location, orientation and movement of the body and its parts. The 2 primary groups of *proprioceptors* are those in the vestibular system (semicircular canals and cochlea) of the inner ear, and the kinesthetic system (sense of location and movement) and cutaneous (sensing of the dermis or epidermis) system (sensing chemicals, temperature, pressure and light). Collectively, they are called the somatosenses or, simply, the body’s extrasensory or external sensings.

<sup>186</sup> Reber, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*,

<sup>187</sup> Gibson op cit 2019 eg 2 f.

scan, can, for example, help or train us to be more observant and less reactive (or not at all) towards body sensations.<sup>188</sup>

**8.2.1.2** The essential idea here is that we learn to recognize that we are *experiencing* a feeling rather than “being” the feeling. In his sutta teachings, Piya Tan often teaches that we should “**not own the pain.**” This is a practical application of the early Buddhist teaching of non-self. This is also, albeit indirectly, a lesson in understanding the difference between pain and suffering.<sup>189</sup>

**Pain** arises *naturally* in our body for various reasons, often to warn us to attend to some impending organ or limb failure, or to address some discomfort, or that we are healing after a treatment. Suffering, on the other hand, reflects our own ignorance, anger or fear towards that pain—this is not helpful. Hence, we say that “**pain is natural; suffering is optional.**”<sup>190</sup>

## **8.2.2 Proprioception:**

**8.2.2.1 Proprioception** is a general term for all those sensory systems that inform us regarding the position, location, orientation and movement of the body and its parts. The 2 primary groups of *proprioceptors* are those in the vestibular system (semicircular canals and cochlea) of the inner ear, and the kinesthetic system (sense of location and movement) and cutaneous (sensing of the dermis or epidermis) system (sensing chemicals, temperature, pressure and light). Collectively, they are called the somatosenses or, simply, the body’s extrasensory or external sensings.

Teaching related to **the cultivation of proprioceptive awareness** of one’s bodily postures can be found in **the Bhaya, bherava Sutta** (M 4), thus:

“Why, brahmin, do I dwell expecting nothing but fear and terror?

Suppose that whatever kind of fear or terror comes, **let me dispel that fear or terror just the way I am.**”<sup>191</sup>

Brahmin, when fear and terror came to me while I was walking [pacing up and down]—neither standing nor sitting nor reclining—even as I was walking, I dispelled that fear and terror.

Brahmin, when fear and terror came to me while I was standing—neither walking nor sitting nor reclining—even as I was standing, I dispelled that fear and terror.

Brahmin, when fear and terror came while I was sitting—neither reclining nor standing nor walking—even as I was sitting, I dispelled that fear and terror.

Brahmin, when fear and terror came while I was reclining—neither sitting nor standing nor walking—even as I was reclining, I dispelled that fear and terror.”<sup>192</sup>

When we feel fear or anxiety, we should simply turn to being mindful of our current bodily posture, and let the body relax into *the embodied presence of the mind*. We may also ground the anxious mind by the mindfulness of the breath, which is one of the body-based meditations: this is done without the need for any specific focus, but to simply feel our body as a whole by feeling our postures.<sup>193</sup>

<sup>188</sup> See Price & Hooven, “Interoceptive awareness skills for emotion regulation” (MABT), 2018.

<sup>189</sup> **Amba, Jaṭṭhika Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 61,17), SD 3.10; SD 26.9 (4.1.2).

<sup>190</sup> On this saying, see SD 48.9 (6.2.5); SD 51.14 (3.2.3). See also Gibson op cit 2018:12

<sup>191</sup> *Yam nūnāhaṃ yathā, bhūtaṃ yathā, bhūtaṃ me taṃ bhaya, bheravaṃ āgacchati, tathā, bhūtaṃ tathā, bhūto’va taṃ bhaya, bheravaṃ paṭivineyyan’ti.* That is, he resolves to remain in whatever posture (standing, walking, sitting or reclining) and overcomes his fear or terror right there and then. The 4 postures are detailed in the full para. The 4 postures are alluded to again below [§34.2]: see n under “a pleasant abiding.”

<sup>192</sup> M 4,20/1:21,6-19 (SD 44.3).

<sup>193</sup> For psychological refs, see Analayo op cit, 2020:1525.

**8.2.2.2** One common change in this domain was **hypersensitivity** to light, sound or sensation (bodily feeling). When we do our meditation in a dimly lit or dark place, our eyes will adjust accordingly as we sit in meditation (usually with eyes closed). Hypersensitivity to bright lights may occur when we have meditated for a long period in a darkened room, and then, the light is suddenly switched on. We should not get up at once in such a situation, but just sit with open eyes for them to adjust first.

**8.2.2.3 Visual hypersensitivity** was reported to have often begun with increased colour vividness (hyperchromia). The senses tend to be more *sensitive* as we settle deeper into meditation. One explanation is that the physical senses shut down during deep meditation. For such a habitual meditator, the senses—sight, hearing, smelling, tasting and sensations—tend to be more sensitive. We thus sense things in greater depth and notice fascinating details even in the simplest of things, such as the patterns on the floor. This may be said to be the nascent experience of an “artistic vision.”

Not only are our senses more finely tuned by proper good and regular meditation, our mind, too, cleared of distractions and negative emotions, is likely to be able to feel and think better. This is where we enjoy a richer sense of *artistic, even poetic, “feeling,”* and creative thinking which also helps us to reason and write or speak better in a wholesome way. Hence, when we have the writer’s block or a lapse in artistic inspiration, it helps to do some suitable meditation.

### **8.2.3 Meditation-induced experiences of light**

**8.2.3.1** In 2014, some psychologists researching meditation in the US, reported phenomena of **meditation-induced light experiences**. The report was based on the experiences of 28 American Buddhist meditators who perceived various manifestations of light in their meditation. They reported 2 classes of experiences of light: (1) discrete lightforms, and (2) patterned or diffuse lights. Such phenomena are well documented in the Buddhist texts but not in scientific literature on meditation up to that time.<sup>194</sup>

**8.2.3.2** The reports on class 1, discrete lights (or “lightforms”), described them as appearing as “globes,” “jewels” or “spots.” They were of various colours, described as being “very vivid” or “very distinct.” They were either single or multiple, and were generally small, like “little stars,” or “small radiant bursts.”<sup>195</sup> These are, in fact, *the most common forms* of the manifestation of meditation lights described in the suttas and experienced by meditators following early Buddhist methods. [8.2.3.3]

**8.2.3.3** Class 2, patterned and diffuse lights include such changes to the visual field, most commonly described as shimmering, pixilation or brightening. Unlike the Class 1 lights, these had no clear shape, size, colour or spatial location. They are described as being superimposed on the meditator’s perception of space, and often arise in conjunction with the perception of external objects.

**Shimmering.** These were described as Tantric visions of seeing a mirage, as “shimmering” space and alternately as seeing “ropes” that would emerge from objects in space and cause the space behind it “to shimmer a little bit and move.”

---

<sup>194</sup> Lindahl et al, *A phenomenology of meditation-induced light experiences: traditional Buddhist and neurobiological perspectives*, 2014. There were 28 meditators: 20 (71%) were American Vipassana or Asian Theravada; 7 (25%) Tibetan Buddhist; 7 (25%) Zen Buddhist; some practiced multiple traditions. Nearly half were meditation teachers. Their average years of practice was 10.33.

<sup>195</sup> Lindahl et al 2014:3-6.

**Pixellation.**<sup>196</sup> One meditator described his visual field as “pixellating a little bit and becoming very very vivid.” A similar cluster of phenomena that co-arise with the perception of external objects include reports of “seeing energy instead of seeing solid objects” and “seeing rays of light that go through everything.”

**Brightening.** 6 meditators reported a homogenous brightening of the visual field. 2 reported that the visual field was brighter when the eyes were open, including a report of a “golden light that fills the sky.” 4 meditators characterized the homogenous field of light as a mental image arising behind closed eyes.

For example, one meditator described an “internal curtain of light” that would be most apparent when meditating in a dark room or with eyes closed. On account of this curtain of light, this meditator reported being able to perceive memories and dream-like reveries as clearly as external objects. In fact, such a state reminds us of the meditation-sign (nimitta) appearing in the form of light, or of the “pure bright mind” attending dhyana, as described in the suttas [8.2.4.4].

**The body as light.** 2 meditators reported a proprioceptive [8.2.2.1] dimension to their meditation-induced light experience. In other words, they experienced the light as emanating from their body itself or the body in the form of light. One practitioner explained that “my body was just breaking apart into sparkles and like electrical sparks being sent off everywhere in all directions”; the other “felt like I was radiating, like there were rays of light coming out of me.”

## 8.2.4 Early Buddhist explanations of lights during meditation

**8.2.4.1** The manifestations of light as a natural part of meditation are what, in early Buddhism, is called a *nimitta*, a “sign.” In meditation, there are 2 definitions of *nimitta*, the general and the specific. Generally, it is defined as “what one notes or marks; an object of thought or meditation or concentration; an image.”<sup>197</sup> As a specialized sense of *nimitta* is “an internal appearance or total awareness; a mental impression (appearing as an early stage of *jhāna*, a sign of [meditative] progress).”<sup>198</sup>

**8.2.4.2** The former (general) sense of *nimitta* is more common in the suttas. It is merely an image or mental object where our attention is focused on, that is, a meditation sign, such as the breath. It is helpful to note that such a “meditation sign” is either a feeling or a knowing. When meditating on the breath, for example, we at first notice the breath as a feeling, a gentle touch of air in the nostrils or at the nose-nose. As we become more focused, when the touch is no more detected—in other words, the breath has now transformed from being a *physical* object into a *mental* sign—we can only “know” it to keep a focus on it.

Generally, the manifestations of **lights** during meditation fall under this 1<sup>st</sup> sense of *nimitta*. No matter how fascinating they may be, they are simply like the “window display” of a large store. They are not the real products that we would buy and use. Technically, they are called an “imperfection” (*upakkilesa*).<sup>199</sup> [8.2.5.1]

<sup>196</sup> **Pixellation** (US pixelation) is the term used in computer graphics to describe blurry sections or fuzziness in an image due to visibility of single-colored square display elements or individual pixels. A **pixel** (short for “picture element”) is the smallest unit of a digital image or graphic that can be displayed and represented on a digital display device, one of many which comprise an image.

<sup>197</sup> Dictionary of Pali (Cone): *nimitta* 3 (i). Refs: M 1:19,3 f; S 1:188,18\* = Sn 341 = Tha 1224; S 5:156,3; Pm 1:164, -22; Vbh 193,25.

<sup>198</sup> See ib: *nimitta* 3 (ii). Refs: A 4:418,24 (aa 4:194,19\*); Miln 298,3; Vism 112,11, 114,4, 123,22, 135,32\*, 150,4, 285,5

<sup>199</sup> See SD 5.18 (3).

They are “mental impurities” in the sense that they are merely a reflection of our own personality or mental state. Interesting, psychologists who have observed meditation phenomena, regard such light-forms as being associated with simple hallucinations.<sup>200</sup> [8.2.6]

**8.2.4.3 The inner lights** that arise during meditation manifest themselves in connection with **the 5 kinds of (meditative) joy (*pīti*)**, with their colloquially descriptive names, thus:<sup>201</sup>

(1) “minor zest”	<i>khuddaka, pīti</i>	the firework nimitta
(2) “momentary zest”	<i>khaṇika, pīti</i>	the “shy” nimitta
(3) “flooding zest”	<i>okkantika, pīti</i>	the point nimitta
(4) “uplifting zest”	<i>ubbega or ubberiga, pīti</i>	the floating nimitta
(5) “pervading zest”	<i>pharaṇa, pīti</i>	the full nimitta

What we perceive as **meditative radiance (*obhāsa*)** is really the manifestation of various grades of **zest (*pīti*)**, intense meditative joy or ecstasy.<sup>202</sup> The radiance is a reflection of the pure mind freed from the physical sense and reveals itself as the “pure bright mind” [8.2.4.4].<sup>203</sup>

**8.2.4.4 The “pure bright mind” (*pabhassara, citta*)** refers to the natural state of the mind, especially when it is in dhyana. The “pure bright mind” is naturally pure and radiant, as described by **the Pabhassara Sutta** (A 1.51-52), thus:

Bhikshus, this mind is radiant, and it is freed from adventitious impurities [impurities that arrive through the sense-doors].<sup>204</sup>

The tutored [wise] noble disciple understands things as they really are.

Therefore there is mental development for the instructed noble disciple, I say!

(A 1.6.2/1:10; also 1.5.10/1:10; MA 1:167), SD 8.3(6)

Technically, “the pure bright mind” is the *full* meditation sign or full nimitta (*nimitta*) seen in the form of an inner brilliant but unglaring radiance pervading all of the mind’s visual field. When this is seen in a meditator, it is the sign of nascent stage of **the 1<sup>st</sup> dhyana**: we have entered dhyana.<sup>205</sup>

The later teaching on **the imperfection of insight** [8.2.5] seems to have 2 purposes. The first is to remind practitioners neither to be distracted by the inner lights nor to be attached to them. Secondly, it is a sort of gentle reminder that dhyana attainment is not for gaining such experiences, but for a calm and clear mind to gain **the insight (*vipassanā*)** into impermanence, so that we will gain the path in this life itself.

<sup>200</sup> See Lindahl et al 2014:8 f.

<sup>201</sup> For details of these, see SD 19.7 (4.6.6) the 5 types of nimittas. See also SD 8.4 (6.3); SD 50.26 (3.1.3.1).

<sup>202</sup> If the most intense joy the sensual body can feel is orgasm, then **zest** is the profoundest bliss the mind that is celebrated in spiritual experience, such as artistically represented in Bernini’s sculpture of St Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) is ecstasy, or better, ecstasy: SD 7.13 (4.4.2.2). See also SD 53.18 (2.2.3.3) on Teresa’s mystical writings about her experiences.

<sup>203</sup> See **Nimitta**, SD 19.7 esp (4) From *nimitta* to dhyana; also **Nimitta and anuvyañjana**, SD 19.14.

<sup>204</sup> *Pabhassaram idaṃ bhikkhave cittam tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi vippamuttam.*

<sup>205</sup> SD 54.2e (2.3.5.1).

### 8.2.5 “Imperfections of insight”

**8.2.5.1** According to the Visuddhi, magga, there are **10 “imperfections of insight”**<sup>206</sup> (*vipassan’upakkilesa*) that arise in a meditator as natural concomitants of “insight training” (*vipassana, bhāvanā*). If the meditator should become attached to any of these experiences, which are in themselves simply passing experiences, it becomes a hindrance to further progress towards the path to liberation, or even being stuck on the path—thus they are “defilements of insight.”<sup>207</sup>

The 10 imperfections of insights are those of:<sup>208</sup>

(1) vision of radiance (lightforms)	<i>obhāsa</i>
(2) knowledge (theoretical understanding)	<i>ñāṇa</i>
(3) physical zest	<i>pīti</i>
(4) tranquillity	<i>passaddhi</i>
(5) joy	<i>sukha</i>
(6) determination	<i>adhimokkha</i>
(7) energy	<i>paggaha</i>
(8) heightened awareness	<i>upaṭṭhāna</i>
(9) equanimity	<i>upekkhā</i>
(10) attachment [delight]	<i>nikanti</i>

**8.2.5.2** A lack of proper understanding of any of these imperfections when they appear to us, can lead to the hindrance of restlessness (*uddhacca*).<sup>209</sup> As long as the mind is attached to any of these 10 defilements of insight, it is distracted, and will not be able to comprehend the 3 characteristics of reality (*ti, lakkhaṇa*) of impermanence, suffering and non-self, which leads us to awakening (*bodhi*).

These 10 defilements may cause the meditator to believe that he has already attained awakening as a streamwinner, a once-returned, a non-returned or even an arhat, when, in fact, he has not.<sup>210</sup> Infatuation with these otherwise karmically neutral states, turn them into defilements, that must be overcome by understanding them for what they are, as mere *impermanent* by-products of meditation.

This understanding is developed through perfecting the “purity of knowledge and vision of what is and is not the path” (*maggāmagga, ñāṇa, dassana, visuddhi*), which is the 5<sup>th</sup> of the 7 “purifications” to be cultivated before we can actually reach the path of liberation.

**8.2.5.3** In contemporary Theravada accounts, concentration directed towards the body has been described by some meditators as being similarly associated with seeing “a smoky grey light [that will] become whiter like cotton wool, and then bright white, like clouds, and your body will appear in white form ... it will eventually become translucent like a block of ice or glass.” When the meditation was sustained, the meditator reported seeing the body “will sparkle and emit light.”<sup>211</sup>

It should be noted that such interesting reports were those of individual teachers or meditators, and do not reflect the sutta teachings. This is not to say that they are inauthentic, but that they are circum-

<sup>206</sup> Also tr as “corruptions of insight,” and described as “mental impurities” (*cittassa upakkilesa*), BDict: upakkilesa.

<sup>207</sup> The set of 10 impurities of insight is first mentioned in Pm 2:102, where they are not said to “become defiled” (*kilissati*), an idea prob first expressed by Buddhaghosa in Vism 20.

<sup>208</sup> These imperfections arise only in a beginner to meditation, or one inexperienced, not a saint who has attained the truth. For explanations, see Vism 20.105-130/633-638; also AA 3:143; Pm 2:100.

<sup>209</sup> On how any of these 10 imperfections of insight (*vipassan’upakkilesa*) can lead to restlessness, see SD 32.7 (2.1.3.2); SD 32.10 (2.5.3).

<sup>210</sup> See Mahasi Sayadaw, *The Progress of Insight*, 1994:13 f.

<sup>211</sup> Pa Auk Sayadaw, *Knowing and Seeing*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed, 2010:122 f.

stantial and are *not* experienced by all Theravada meditators. In other words, we may experience such manifestations in our own way, and they should be understood as peculiar to our own personality as our self-understanding mature with our insight.

### **8.2.6 Psychological explanations for the lights during meditation**

**8.2.6.1** Modern psychology gives us interesting insights into these manifestations of lights during meditation. Scientific studies of light-related experiences tend to classify such phenomena as **visual hallucinations**. We shall here highlight key points from scientific findings from sensory deprivation, perceptual isolation, and disorders of the visual system.<sup>212</sup>

**8.2.6.2 Sensory deprivation** includes exposure to environments that present us with minimal sensory input. Through darkness, silence, isolation and bodily stillness, respectively, the subject's visual, auditory, social or kinesthetic experience is reduced to a minimum. Sensory deprivation may include occlusion of individual sense-organs, such as with earplugs or blindfolds, or multiple senses at once, such as through sitting alone in a dark, silent room.<sup>213</sup>

**8.2.6.3 Perceptual isolation** refers to exposure to homogenous, invariant or unstructured stimuli. While sensory input is not technically absent in perceptual isolation, the monotony leads to habituation where input is "filtered out," which can mimic the effects of decreased input of sensory deprivation.<sup>214</sup>

**8.2.6.4** In cases of **visual impairment**, Charles Bonnet Syndrome<sup>215</sup> is classically associated with visual hallucinations and light-related experiences. This Syndrome is most commonly found in elderly patients who have very poor vision or are blind on account of an impairment of their visual system, ranging from eye abnormalities to dysfunctions in the occipital lobe.<sup>216</sup>

These 3 conditions—sensory deprivation, perceptual isolation, and Charles Bonnet Syndrome—are all characterized by impaired sensory input to the visual system, and all result in the rise of involuntary visual hallucinations, where "**hallucinations**" are defined as "percepts, experienced by a waking individual, in the absence of appropriate stimuli from the extracorporeal world."<sup>217</sup> [8.2.6.5]

---

<sup>212</sup> This section is mostly based on Lindahl et al 2014:7-13.

<sup>213</sup> J **Zubek** et al, "Perceptual changes after prolonged sensory isolation (darkness and silence)," 1961; A M **Rossi**, "General methodological considerations," in J P Zubek (ed), *Sensory Deprivation: Fifteen years of research*, 1969; L **Merabet** et al, "Visual hallucinations during prolonged blindfolding in sighted subjects," 2004; A **Kjellgren** et al, "Sensory isolation in flotation tanks," 2008; O **Mason** and F **Brady**, "The psychomimetic effects of short-term sensory deprivation," 2009.

<sup>214</sup> J **Wackermann** et al, "Brain electrical activity and subjective experience during altered states of consciousness: ganzfeld and hypnagogic states," 2002, "Ganzfeld-induced hallucinatory experience, its phenomenology and cerebral electrophysiology," 2008; P **Pütz** et al, "EEG correlates of multimodal ganzfeld induced hallucinatory imagery," 2006; D **Lloyd** et al, "A qualitative analysis of sensory phenomena induced by perceptual deprivation," 2012.

<sup>215</sup> Complex hallucinatory hallucinations without delusions or the loss of insightful cognition, typically seen in older adults who have severe visual impairment. Such hallucinations are usually non-threatening and often pleasant and are not indicative of mental illness or psychological disorder. Also called **Bonnet syndrome**. [Charles **Bonnet** (1720-1793), Swiss naturalist and philosopher.] (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2015.)

<sup>216</sup> M **Vukicevic** & K **Fitzmaurice**, "Butterflies and black lacy patterns " (Charles Bonnet Syndrome), 2008; H **Kazui** et al, "Neuroimaging studies in patients with Charles Bonnet Syndrome," 2009.

<sup>217</sup> J D Blom, "Hallucinations and other sensory deceptions in psychiatric disorders," 2013:44.

**8.2.6.5 Hallucinations** [8.2.6.4] are different both from illusions, which are distortions of actual external stimuli, and from intentionally constructed mental imagery, which remains under volitional control and lacks perceptual vividness.<sup>218</sup> While the sensory loss that occurs at sleep-onset may also result in hallucinations, these “hypnagogic” hallucinations are more similar—both neurologically and phenomenologically—to dreams that occur during REM sleep than to visual hallucinations that occur during waking moments.<sup>219</sup>

Like dreams, hypnagogic hallucinations tend to occur in multiple sensory modalities at once, are panoramic or “full screen” rather than circumscribed, and are associated with lack of insight and strong, often negative affect.<sup>220</sup> Thus, our typologies of visual hallucinations will focus on those that arise when awake, as the phenomenology of waking visual hallucinations is the most congruent with the reports from participants in the study reported by Lindahl et al (2014).<sup>221</sup> [8.2.3.1]

### **8.2.7 A shortcoming in the 2014 psychological report (lights)**

**8.2.7.1** While the psychological report by J R Lindahl et al, “**A phenomenology of meditation-induced light experiences: Traditional Buddhist and neurobiological perspectives**” (2014), is very interesting and informative to read, it has at least one significant shortcoming. “Significant” because with right effort and diligence, it can be easily corrected. This shortcoming is the sections where the researchers attempt a “**textual interpretation**” of the meditation topic at hand.<sup>222</sup>

**8.2.7.2** The researchers, Lindahl et al, are insightful indeed to note that most other psychological reports in meditation have thus far failed to include the effort to integrate the benefits of **Buddhist meditation**, including early Buddhism, into modern psychology—that is, to acknowledge that they are borrowing from an ancient and well-developed system of spiritual psychology that has been taught and practised for over 2500 years in most of Asia, and is now rapidly being taken up by practitioners in the West and the rest of the world.

**8.2.7.3** One positive point is that the researchers have quoted a number of well known but experienced traditional virtuosi in Buddhist meditation, such as Ledi Sayadaw, Mahasi Sayadaw, Pa Auk Sayadaw, and Ñāṇārāma (the first 3 from Myanmar, the last from Sri Lanka). They have also tried to reflect related aspects from other Buddhist traditions. This is no easy task, and they have certainly asserted their due diligence in reading up a selection of related texts and Buddhist teachings.

All this looked impressive to their colleagues in the same field: they were examining Buddhist meditation from a professional viewpoint (not as Buddhists, but as psychologists and scientists). The Buddhist meditator who is told this would also be impressed, and the Buddhist scholar who reads this would also be impressed.

<sup>218</sup> D P Reichert et al, “Charles bonnet syndrome: evidence for a generative model in the cortex?” 2013.

<sup>219</sup> **Wackermann** et al, op cit 2002; **D Collerton & E Perry**, “Dreaming and hallucinations—continuity or discontinuity? Perspectives from dementia with Lewy bodies,” 2011; **G Fenelon**, “Hallucinations associated with neurological disorders and sensory loss,” 2013.

<sup>220</sup> **J A Cheyne** et al, “Relations among hypnagogic and hypnopompic experiences associated with sleep paralysis,” 1999a; “Hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations during sleep paralysis,” 1999b; **M M Ohayon**, “Prevalence of hallucinations and their pathological associations in the general population,” 2000; **Collerton & Perry**, op cit 2011.

<sup>221</sup> For details on the relationship between sensory loss and hallucination in connection with experiencing lights during meditation, see Lindahl et al 2014:8-13. This **2014** Lindahl study on meditative lights should *not* be confused with the **2017** Lindahl broader study on a group of meditators.

<sup>222</sup> See esp Lindahl et al 2014:6 f.

**8.2.7.4** However, a student or scholar of Buddhism who is also a serious meditator who carefully reads this paper (which represents a broader modern scientific effort at examining ancient wisdom) would notice a particular flaw. For example, the quote on “Ledi Sayadaw, 1999” (top left quadrant of 2014:7) which refers to the Sayadaw’s *Manual of Mindfulness of Breathing*, seems to be a non-quote.

There is no passage in Ledi Sayadaw’s work relating to “involuntary light experience” that “then replace(s) the breath or an external object ... ” which is an important and interesting point. Perhaps, this may refer to another work. Similarly, the references to “a brilliant light,” “lamp light in the distance,” etc. in *Ñāṇārāma* (or Nanarama) are not on page 36 (on the 5 hindrances and 3 kinds of concentration), but on 1983:73. Highlighting the keywords perhaps would have helped.

But they quoted from Mahasi’s *Progress of Insight* correctly when he said that “as a result of insight, (the mental vision of) a brilliant light will appear to him. To one it will appear like the light of a lamp, to others like a flash of lightning, or like the radiance of the moon or the sun, and so on.” (1994:13 f). Such experiences may be momentary for some, but last longer for others.<sup>223</sup>

Lindahl et al also mention, even discuss, the meditation light manifestations in relation to some interesting Theravada teachings such as *nimitta* [8.2.4.1-2], *pīti* [8.2.4.3], *pabhassara, citta* [8.2.4.4], “the imperfections of insight” [8.2.5] and “the 7 stages of purification” [8.2.5.2]. While *nimitta*, *pīti* and *pabhassara, citta* are canonical teachings, the researchers did not elaborate on the role of *pīti* in dhyana (*jhāna*), or even dhyana itself (which is, of course, a complex subject), which may well turn the learned paper into a monograph. The last 2 teachings are, however, not canonical teachings but late scholastic theories.

It would have been very beneficial and interesting if the researchers made careful comparative studies of modern psychological insights and the suttas teachings of early Buddhism. This, of course, means that they would have to be practitioners of early Buddhist meditation, which is not an uncommon trend in the academia of our time. Considering their professional interest in Buddhist meditation, this will be the future scenario in just a matter of time.

### 8.3 PERCEPTUAL HYPERSENSITIVITY

**8.3.1** Perceptual hypersensitivity was reported amongst meditators in two common ways. The first kind of perceptual sensitivity was noticed where concentration on the fleeting nature of percepts (whatever “recognized” or noticed) was commonly reported as the dissolution of perceptual objects; in some cases, the cessation of all visual perception was reported.

This perception is common in Buddhist meditation, even regarded as a positive sign of progress. A key teaching common to all Buddhist schools is that of **impermanence** (*anicca*). A common instruction here is to watch “the rise and fall of things.” Even in teachings for lay followers, as recorded in, for example, **the Dīgha, jānu Sutta** (A 8.54), they are advised to gain “accomplishment in wisdom” (*paññā, sampadā*), that is, to be:

wise, possesses wisdom directed<sup>224</sup> to the rising and falling away (of phenomena)<sup>225</sup>  
that is noble and penetrative, leading to the complete destruction of suffering.<sup>226</sup>

(A 8.54,15), SD 5.10

**8.3.2** The second report on perceptual hypersensitivity was commonly associated with increased cognitive processing,<sup>227</sup> often reported as a feeling of distress during transitions from intensive medita-

<sup>223</sup> Lindahl et al 2014:7.

<sup>224</sup> On directed cultivation, see further **Bhikkhuṇī Vāsaka S** (S 47.10/5:154-157), SD 24.2 (1.2).

<sup>225</sup> *Paññavā hoti, uday’attha, gāminiyā paññāya samannāgato*: D 3:237,17; M 1:356,19; S 5:197,19; A 3:2,26; Nm 40,2 etc. On watching the rising and falling of feeling, see **(Aññathatta) Ānanda S 1** (S 22.37/3:37 f), SD 33.11.

<sup>226</sup> For its significance, see **(Sotāpanna) Nandiya S** (S 55.40), esp SD 47.1 (1.1.3.3).

tion practice into “normal” daily life. We have earlier noted that such an experience is common enough, that is, how [7.1.2.3], after experiencing the bliss of meditative states and peaceful solitude, when we return to the “normal” world, it suddenly seemed dramatically jarring and meaningless.

## 8.4 DISTORTIONS, ILLUSIONS, HALLUCINATIONS

### 8.4.1 Distortions, derealization, depersonalization

**8.4.1.1** Other perceptual distortions reported by meditators during the 2014 study [8.2.3.1] included distortions in time and space, and derealization—where phenomena appear dreamlike, unreal, two-dimensional or as if in a fog.<sup>228</sup> In some people who are very new to meditation, sitting alone in a quiet environment “doing nothing,” may trigger some thoughts or feelings of “unreality,” which is simply being aware of a new way to perceiving the environment.

When we find such experiences troubling, then open our eyes and do “just sitting.” In other words, we stop meditating to simply notice whatever we can sense of the environment or our thoughts. Look around to be more familiar with the place (preferably in normal lighting); or simply note objectively any sound as simply “sound,” and our thoughts as simply “thoughts,” noticing how they change over time.

If the symptoms of such distorted perceptions persist, we should stop the meditation and consult an experienced teacher. Sometimes, it may be that the meditation does not work for us, or that we have reached the limit of our sitting, and should take a break. See if it helps to take a relaxed mindful walk in some pleasant open space, or to look out at some natural view. During the night, calmly gaze at the vast starry skies and just feel the peace of the moment. Any of this can be very healing.

**8.4.1.2** Severe stress, anxiety, and depression are common triggers for **derealization** or **depersonalization** [8.4.1.3]. Derealization is a state characterized by a diminished feeling of reality; that is, an alteration in the perception or cognitive characterization of external reality so that it seems strange or unreal (“this can’t be happening”), often due to trauma or stress. It may also occur as a feature of schizophrenia or of dissociative disorders.<sup>229</sup>

In a derealized state, we may feel *unreal*, that we are not part of the world around us. It can occur in depression, after withdrawal from a drug, a drink, or even taking coffee (a stimulant). Often, people with such a disorder or its symptoms, have experienced past trauma, such as being abused as a child, or witnessing a traumatic event as a child or even as an adult.

Moments of feeling derealization during meditation may be just passing. It may be just a strange feeling of being in a new place doing something very different from what we have normally been doing. Only when it persists and distracts us from meditation, should we be concerned with it. In a severe case, however, it may lead to episodes of depersonalization [8.4.1.3].

**8.4.1.3 Depersonalization** is a state of mind in which the self appears unreal, and is more severe in its effects than derealization [8.4.1.2]. We may feel estranged from ourselves and usually from the external world, and thoughts and experiences have a distant, dreamlike character. In its persistent form, de-

---

<sup>227</sup> Note that in psychological lingo, the two terms—perceptual and cognitive—often overlap, whereas in early Buddhist psychology they each form distinct categories of their own: see perception [4] and cognition [5].

<sup>228</sup> D Simeon, “Depersonalization disorder,” in Dell & O’Neill, *Dissociation and the Dissociative Disorders: DSM-V and beyond*, 2009:435-444.

<sup>229</sup> APA Dictionary of Psychology 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 2015: derealization.

personalization is observed in such disorders as depression, hypochondriasis, dissociative states, temporal lobe epilepsy, and early schizophrenia.<sup>230</sup>

Such symptoms often distract our meditation. On the positive side, meditation helps us watch out for underlying symptoms that would otherwise remain undetected. Hence, it is best to consult a psychiatrist to ascertain our condition and receive early treatment if necessary.

### **8.4.2 Illusions and hallucinations**

**8.4.2.1** Unlike hallucinations [8.4.2.3], **a vision** tends to be transient and does not appear outside of a proper religious context, such as meditation. The Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology (2009) defines vision as follows:

- (1) The capacity to detect light and perceive objects reflecting light.
- (2) A spiritual or religious experience involving perceiving religious figures or objects and events invisible to others.
- (3) A visual hallucination.
- (4) A picture in the mind of something not present in the external world.

**8.4.2.2** The early Buddhist idea of “vision” (*dassana*) seems to provisionally fit definition (4). It occurs often in the suttas, such as in these well known phrases:<sup>231</sup>

- “knowledge and vision” (*ñāṇa, dassana*),<sup>232</sup>
- “regarding what was unheard before, there arose in me vision (*cakkhu*), there arose *knowledge* (*ñāṇa*), there arose *wisdom* (*paññā*), there arose *insight* (*vijjā*), there arose *light* (*āloka*)”;<sup>233</sup>
- “vision of the noble truths” (*ariya, saccāna dassana*).<sup>234</sup>

In all these usages, *dassana* has the positive sense of respectively: “understanding,” (awakening) insight,” and “proper perception.” Such attainments would arise in the 2<sup>nd</sup> training—that of “concentration” (*samādhi, sikkhā*) or mental training, that is, meditation—and fruit as “wisdom training” (*paññā. sikkhā*), which entails reaching the path of awakening.

Such meditations, as used in psychological avatars of the Buddhist teachings and methods, would at best only fit into the 2<sup>nd</sup> training of concentration. The 3<sup>rd</sup> training—encompassing both mental health and spiritual awakening—entails understanding of Buddhist teachings and breakthrough into the path of awakening, which, as a rule, is never the vision or goal of psychology, nor can it be.

**8.4.2.3 Illusions** (distortions of perceptual objects) were reported by meditators both in isolation from and in conjunction with delusional beliefs. The Oxford Dictionary of Psychology (2003) defines illusion as follows:

<sup>230</sup> APA Dictionary of Psychology 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 2015: depersonalization..

<sup>231</sup> On *dassana*, svv PED, DPL.

<sup>232</sup> **Dhamma, cakka-p, pavattana S** (S 56,11,13) in “knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones” (*alam-ariya ñāṇa, dassana, vivesa*), SD 56.11: see also (**Anuruddha**) **Upakkilesa S** (M 128,15), SD 5.18; (**Pabbajita**) **Abhiṅha S** (A 10.48,2(10), SD 48.9.

<sup>233</sup> S 56.11,9 (relating to the 4 truths), SD 56.11. All the 5 key terms—“vision” (*cakkhu*), “knowledge” (*ñāṇa*), “wisdom” (*paññā*), “insight” (*vijjā*), “light” (*āloka*)—refer to “liberating knowledge.” “Vision” (*dassana*) is poetically represented by *cakkhu*, which usu means “the eye”; see also **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14,2/19.2), SD 49.8a.

<sup>234</sup> Khp 5:10 = Sn 567..

“According to a narrow definition, [**illusion**<sup>235</sup> is] a misperception or misconception of a stimulus object, image, event, experience, or problem, or a stimulus that generates such a misperception or misconception; more generally, any misleading, deceptive, or puzzling stimulus or the experience that it generates.

Perceptual illusions can arise through any *sensory* modality, but the most prominent are the auditory illusions, tactile illusions, and above all visual illusions. Illusions of conception rather than of perception are called cognitive illusions. ...”

(Oxford Dictionary of Psychology, ed A M Colman, 2003: sv illusion)

These psychological definitions of illusion would helpfully describe the Buddhist ideas regarding **delusion** (*moha*) and the various manifestations of wrong view (*micchā, diṭṭhi*). Basically, according to early Buddhism, as we have noted [0.3.3.3], **wrong view** is characterized by “taking the impermanence to be permanent, the suffering to be pleasurable, the non-self to be self, and the impure (immoral or wrong) to be pure,” or, more simply, a misapprehension or rejection of the 3 universal characteristics of impermanence, suffering and non-self [8.2.5.2].

**8.4.2.4** Some practitioners also reported phenomena that were technically **hallucinations**—in the sense that they were percepts in the absence of an external stimulus<sup>236</sup>—but were interpreted as visions and attributed to an external agent or force.

The Oxford Dictionary of Psychology defines hallucination<sup>237</sup> thus:

“A perceptual experience similar to a true perception but not resulting from stimulation of a sense organ, generally occurring under a hallucinogen or hypnosis, or as a symptom of schizophrenia or a neurological disorder, but excluding dreams occurring while asleep, hypnagogic images experienced while falling asleep, and hypnopompic images experienced while awakening.

To be distinguished in careful usage from an illusion, in which a real object or event is misperceived or misinterpreted ... .”

(Oxford Dictionary of Psychology, op cit. 2003: sv hallucination)

Here again, we can see how psychology, for its purposes, compartmentalizes *illusion* and *hallucination*, which describes aspects of what early Buddhism define as **delusion** [8.4.2.3] and exemplified as cases of wrong views. Yet again, there is an important difference: while psychology works to treat their symptoms, the Buddhist methods of meditation (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*) help us uncover and remove the very roots (*mūla*) of the negative condition, that is, that of greed (*lobha*), hate (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*).<sup>238</sup>

**8.4.2.5** During the **2014** meditation exercise (on lights) conducted by psychologists [8.2.3.1], **somatosensory changes** [changes in bodily sensing] included changes in ideas about the body, by way of heightened interoception [8.2.1] or distorted perceptions of body-parts, which were similar to *illusions* [8.4.2.3].

Such changes perceived by the meditators largely depended on how well-trained they were in interpreting them. Largely, they would understand these bodily changes in terms of their own understanding

<sup>235</sup> Etym: From Latin *illusio*, *illusionis* deceit, from *illudere* to mock or make sport with, from *ludere* to play.

<sup>236</sup> J D Blom, op cit, 2013:45-58.

<sup>237</sup> Etym: From Latin *alucinari* to wander in the mind + *-ation* indicating a process or condition.

<sup>238</sup> On these 3 unwholesome roots (*akusala mūla*), see **Mūla S** (A 3.69), SD 18.2; SD 4.14 (1.5); SD 50.20 (3.1.3).

of the Buddhist teachings they follow or understand. In other words, each respondent should have been gauged in the context of such parameters.

During interviews by psychologists, these meditators could have responded in the context of those questions which might reflect psychological technicality and even expectations, so that the respondents attempted to describe their experiences in those terms. However, since “subjects were interviewed in a semi-structured, open-ended format,”<sup>239</sup> respondents were more likely to express their meditative experiences more freely and in more useful details.

However, even then, often, such reports would use the religious language of the respondents’ respective Buddhist traditions, and in accordance with the respondents’ own understanding of those traditions. In other words, the outcome of such interviews was likely to be highly *subjective*. However, the perspicacity and skills of the researchers would surely interpret these findings in the light of their discipline for their intended purposes.

## 9 CONATION: INTENTIONALITY AND MEDITATION

### 9.1 WORDS FOR SAÑKHĀRĀ

**9.1.0 The will, volition, intentionality or conation**<sup>240</sup>—these terms more or less reflect the early Buddhist term, *sañkhārā* [4.2.4]. Any of them can, in psychological terms, be freely used to refer to the property of an action that is performed deliberately rather than accidentally or without purpose. Each of these words, however, has its historical baggage, each interesting in its own way.

Words, however, are the cut and colour of the clothes we wear to express ourselves to hide our nakedness. Yet, it is uncomfortable to keep wearing the same clothes for too long, and it helps to wear different clothes depending on the occasion and ambience, as we make clear and proper exchanges with others, especially in terms of some wholesome communication.

#### 9.1.1 The will

**9.1.1.1** The earliest systematic Western notion of **the will** [4.1.1.2] arose in Christian God-belief in connection with efforts to impose social control over the masses. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo,<sup>241</sup> thought of the will as “a capacity (or action or product) whereby a person is psychically attracted to some object that is apprehended as good, or is psychically repelled by some object apprehended as evil.”<sup>242</sup> His belief in “free will” was that it was in harmony with the determining, superior will of God; hence, dependent on his grace. This was a view he held in competition with those of other Christian theologians like Luthor in Germany and Erasmus in Rotterdam, the former renowned for his faith, the latter his humanism.<sup>243</sup>

---

<sup>239</sup> Lindahl et al, op cit, 2014:2.

<sup>240</sup> Etym: From Latin *intentus*, aim or intent, from *intendere*, to stretch forth or give one's attention to, from *in-* towards + *tendere*, to stretch.

<sup>241</sup> Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was born of a devout Christian mother and a pagan father, who was converted on his deathbed. Augustine was originally a Manichaeist, who believed in the free will that one has to choose between bad and good. In 382, the Eastern Roman emperor Theodosius I issued a decree of death for all Manichaean monks. In 387, Augustine converted to Christianity, which was shortly before Christianity was declared to be the only legitimate religion for the Roman Empire in 391. See SD 17.6 (9.4) n.

<sup>242</sup> The New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 2002: will.

<sup>243</sup> See The Brill Dictionary of Religion, 2006:1976 Will, Free.

**9.1.1.2 Willing**, as a Western idea, is usually (but not always) distinguished from knowing, in that willing involves some sort of *affective* (emotional)<sup>244</sup> approach to what is *cognitively* present to consciousness. Mental activities such as loving, intending, desiring, consenting, choosing, using, enjoying (and their contraries) are considered as examples of willing.

**9.1.1.3 Free will or freedom**, in the sense of the capacity for self-determination (the ability to “make up one’s mind”), is associated with the meaning of will, but is, as a rule, further coloured by discourse and definition. Of all the world religions, early Buddhism may be said to be the first to champion free will.

In early Buddhism, the idea of “free will” is found in the teaching of “**self-refuge**” (*atta,saraṇa*; or *atta,dīpa*), of which the Buddha declares: “Live with self as an island, self as refuge, with no other refuge; with the Dhamma as an island, the Dhamma as refuge, with no other refuge!”<sup>245</sup> These famous words are preserved in such texts as **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 9).<sup>246</sup>

While the Western idiom of being “an island to oneself” means to live a life isolated from others, hence defined by or against others, the Buddha’s instruction means “to live free in Dharma like an island safe above the floodwaters and away from the madding crowd.” Traditionally, this is a direct reference to **meditation**, to the 4 focuses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), to be exact<sup>247</sup> [0.3.3.3]. The purpose of this is, of course, awakening to mental and spiritual freedom.

## 9.1.2 Volition

**9.1.2.1 Volition**<sup>248</sup> (not much used technically elsewhere) is a convenient translation for Pali *cetanā*, also rendered as “intention”; hence; its abstract noun is intentionality. From its Latin root, volition is synonymous with “will.” **Volition** or **will** is a cognitive process by which an individual decides on and commits to a particular course of action. It is defined as purposive effort and is one of the primary human mental functions. [4.2.4]

The Western conception of volition, however, can be broad, which then includes other functions like **affect** (feeling or emotion), **motivation** (goals and expectations), and **cognition** (thinking). Volitional processes can be applied consciously or they can be automatized as habits over time. Indeed, according to early Buddhism, most of our so called “willful” actions are actually *habitual*, even *unconscious*, actions. In other words, we are so habituated to certain habits and tendencies that we are unlikely or unable to react in any other way! In this sense, Buddhists would often declare that, in reality, we have *no free will*.<sup>249</sup>

Hence, will power and volition are respectively colloquial and scientific terms for the same process. Technically, when we *make up our mind* to do a thing, that state is termed immanent volition. When we put forth any particular act of choice, that act is called an emanant, executive, or imperative volition.

<sup>244</sup> Although “affective” usually means “having to do with feelings,” in this context, it clearly refers to our emotional aspects.

<sup>245</sup> *Atta,dīpā viharatha atta,saraṇā anañña,saraṇā dhamma,dīpa dhamma,saraṇa anañña,saraṇā. Atta,dīpa* and *atta,saraṇa* are synonyms (*vevacana*, DA 3:39,8 = SA 2:236.17; cf DA 2:193,1 = SA 3:302,2, *atta,gatika hotha, mā añña,gatika*)

<sup>246</sup> D 9,2.26/2:100,20 ff (SD 16) ≈ S 3:42,8, 5:154,5; Sn 501; Ap 543,19; also in **Cakka.vatti Sīha,nāda S** (D 26,1-3:58,7 etc), SD 36.10.

<sup>247</sup> See the context of the passages quoted in prec n, eg D 9,2.26; S 5:154,9-14.

<sup>248</sup> Etym: adapted from Mediaeval Latin *volitiōn-*, *volitio* (Diefenbach), noun of action from Lat *volo* I wish, will.

<sup>249</sup> Most modern conceptions of volition see it as a process of conscious action, control of which becomes automatized, see eg J Heckhausen & C Dweck (eds), *Motivation and self-regulation*, 1998; M Boekaerts & L Corno, “Self-regulation in the classroom: A perspective on assessment and intervention,” *Applied Psychology: An international review* 54,2 2005:199-231. doi:10.1111/j.1464-0597.2005.00205.x.

When an immanent or settled state of choice controls or governs a series of actions, that state is termed predominant volition. Specific acts that we take to effect our object defined by the governing or predominant volition are called subordinate volitions. But these are philosophical subtleties. Early Buddhism is more concerned with **moral efficacy**.

**9.1.2.2** According to Gary Kielhofner's "Model of Human Occupation,"<sup>250</sup> **volition** is one of the 3 subsystems that act on human behavior. Within this model, volition refers to a person's values, interests and self-efficacy (personal causation) about personal performance.<sup>251</sup>

Writing about the business world, Ghoshal and Bruch, in their book, *A Bias for Action*, differentiate **willpower** from motivation. They use the term volition as a synonym for will power, and describe briefly the theories of the German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin, who argues that motivation and volition are the same, but Narziss Ach, on the other hand, argues differently.

They quote Ach as claiming that there is a certain threshold of desire that distinguishes motivation from volition: when desire lies below this threshold, it is motivation, and when it crosses over, it becomes volition. Using this model, the book considers individuals' differing levels of commitment with regard to tasks by measuring it on a scale of intent from motivation to volition.

Modern writings on the role of volition, including discussions of impulse control<sup>252</sup> and education,<sup>253</sup> also make this distinction.<sup>254</sup> Corno's model ties volition to the processes of self-regulated learning.<sup>255</sup>

### **9.1.3 Intentionality**

**9.1.3.1 Intentionality** refers to "aboutness" of the conscious body [1.1.3]. Beings having intentionality have *propositional* attitudes, they have beliefs, knowledge, hopes, dreams, desires, etc, *about* things: they are often looking *outwards* in quest of what they see as "happiness." Whenever we come across "**that**" in speech or some writing, we know that we are dealing with something *intentional*.

Notice the intentionality of the previous sentence. When we hear someone exclaim "ouch," "oops," "hey," and so on, these sounds do not really distinguish us as humans apart from the other the animals. Indeed, according to Buddhism, when we commit subhuman acts, we have fallen down into that level of animality, bestiality, inhumanity. Such habits will then define us, shape our minds, dehumanize us, which will burden us so in the next life, even future lives.

The mind behind such habits is intentionality: it sets us apart from the subhuman: the asura, the preta, the animal, the hell-being. Our *wholesome intentionality* is what sets us apart as a singularly human being.<sup>256</sup> This point is so vital that the whole early Buddhist theory of consciousness teaches is not only *what intentionality* is, but also *how* we can and must cultivate it.<sup>257</sup>

<sup>250</sup> Heike Bruch & Sumantra Ghoshal, *A Bias for Action: How effective managers harness their willpower, achieve results, and stop wasting time* Harvard Business Press, 2004.

<sup>251</sup> Gary Kielhofner. *Model of Human Occupation: Theory and application*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Baltimore: Lippencott Williams & Wilkins, 2008:33-50.

<sup>252</sup> Jutta Heckhausen, "The motivation-volition divide and its resolution in action-phase models of developmental regulation." *Research in Human Development* 4,3-4 July 2007:163-180.

<sup>253</sup> Lyn Corno, "The best-laid plans: Modern conceptions of volition and educational research." *Educational Researcher* 22,2 March 1993:14-22. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X022002014>

<sup>254</sup> See also Heinz Heckhausen & Peter M Gollwitzer, "Thought contents and cognitive functioning in motivational versus volitional states of mind." *Motivation and Emotion* 11,2 1987:101-120.

<sup>255</sup> L Corno, "Self-regulated learning: A volitional analysis." In B J Zimmerman & D H Schunk (eds), *Self-Regulated Learning and Academic Achievement*. Springer Series in Cognitive Development. Springer, NY, 1989:111-225. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4612-3618-4\\_5](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4612-3618-4_5).

<sup>256</sup> Univ of Alberta Cognitive Science Dictionary (online), accessed 4 June 2020.

**9.1.3.2** Modern psychologists only started thinking about **will, volition, intentionality or conation** beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920)<sup>258</sup> in Germany and William James (1842-1910)<sup>259</sup> in the US. The first detailed and notable discussion on the subject was probably by the German psychologist and philosopher **Franz Brentano** (1838-1917).

According to Brentano, it was the property of mental experiences whereby they refer to objects or entities outside themselves: it is impossible to hear without hearing a sound, to believe without believing a statement or a proposition, to hope without hoping for something, to strive without striving for a goal, to feel joy without feeling joyful about something, and so on (these examples are all Brentano's).

The concept was introduced by Brentano in 1874 in his book *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* (Book II, Ch I, sect 5, 1874:125 ff) to distinguish psychological from physical phenomena, which lack this property of outward-directedness. It is a key concept of phenomenology.<sup>260</sup>

#### **9.1.4 Conation**<sup>261</sup>

**9.1.4.1** The **conative domain** primarily denotes *changes in motivation* or goal-directed behaviours. This change frequently co-occurred with changes in worldview and changes in the social domain. **The 2017 study** on a group of meditators [6.1.1.1] reported another conative change in the level of **effort or striving** associated with meditation practice.

On the one hand, practices that previously required great effort sometimes became effortless, a change generally reported as being positive. On the other hand, increased levels of effort or “striving” were also accompanied by an increased arousal with corresponding affective, perceptual, and somatic changes that could be associated with unpleasant or destabilizing conditions.

**9.1.4.2** The two phenomena that meditators reported as troubling *conatively* were the lack of desire for activities they previously enjoyed (*anhedonia*) and the loss of motivation to pursue goals (*avolition*). These reactions often arose along with other functional challenges, such as changes in social or occupational behaviours.

Sustained meditation that brings us a profound sense of peace will directly affect how we perceive others. In some ways, we become better at reading people, if we are “**wisdom-inclined**” (that is, our wisdom faculty is strong).<sup>262</sup> We may be even better at “profiling” people, reading their true mental states or intentions. How we respond to this or to such people depends on various factors that we will not discuss here.

Or, if we are “**faith-inclined**” (our faith-faculty is strong) we are likely to be more engaging and patient with others, even when they are not our friends or not friendly. We may even get involved in social or humanitarian work. In either case, we are basically happier and feel more purposeful in life even though we do not have the “high” goals of “motivated” people. We basically *feel happy* and naturally want to celebrate and share it.

<sup>257</sup> “Intentional” is not to be confused with ‘intensional’ spelled with an ‘s’, the latter of which refers to the meaning of a term, (along with ‘extensional’). Intentional, intensional, and extensional can be paired loosely in the following way: intentional with propositional or denotational, intensional with conceptual or connotational, and extensional with perceptual. On intentionality, see also J Proust, “Intentionality,” in O Houdé et al (ed), *Dictionary of Cognitive Science*, 2004:193 f.

<sup>258</sup> Hergenhahn, *An Introduction to the History of Psychology*, 2014:255 f, 274 f.

<sup>259</sup> Hergenhahn, op cit 2014:330 f.

<sup>260</sup> Oxford Dictionary of Psychology 2003: intentionality; also “act psychology.” See also Hergenhahn op cit 2009: 264 f.

<sup>261</sup> Lindahl et al, “The varieties of contemplative experience,” 2017:19 f.

<sup>262</sup> On these 2 faculties, see SD 16.7 (1.1.3) and passim. On the 5 faculties, see *Pañc'indriya*, SD 10.4.

On account of such high levels of **self-actualization**, we may feel out of place with the masked balls and games of high society or the rat-race of even highly-paid jobs. We are happier on our own or with the like-minded, or simply being at peace with ourself. This is the beginning of true renunciation.

## 9.2 Influencing factors during group meditation

**9.2.0 Categories of factors.** Conative phenomena related to the group of meditators were described less as changes in and of themselves, but more as **causal factors** or conditions for the onset or alleviation of difficulties. The researchers on the **2017** meditation study [6.1.1.1] coded 7 categories that may have influenced them, or any meditator, for that matter.<sup>263</sup>

Although this analysis is based on the 2017 study, it is not meant to be purely “psychological,” but also reflects actual experiences from other retreats that I have conducted or experienced, and from counselling sessions I’ve conducted over at least 3 decades. Related observations and common conclusions were compared for some useful understanding and perhaps future benefits.

The 2017 meditation study gave the following feedback in terms of influencing-factors centering on the practitioner [9.2.1], the practice [9.2.2], the meditators’ previous relationships [9.2.3], society and culture [9.2.4], and health [9.2.5].

### 9.2.1 Practitioner influencing-factors

**9.2.1.1** This area—“practitioner influencing factors—reported influencing factors on the practitioners themselves. The **identities** category refers to demographic variables such as gender, age, ethnicity, religion, and so forth, when these were reported as having an impact on a meditator’s experience or degree of social support received by a meditation community.

**9.2.1.2 Medical history, psychological history and trauma history** were reported as having impacted particular meditators in terms of their practice. A meditator’s medical history may impact one *bodily* (somatic). One’s psychological history may affect one’s *cognitive* abilities during meditation. And one’s trauma history may impact one’s feelings (affective) and emotions (conative). Such effects are rarely seen at once, but only after a significant duration of the meditation-related difficulties.

Expert meditators often attribute pre-existing psychiatric or trauma history as a common interpretation and causal attribution for certain meditation-related challenges, such as mental breakdowns. Responsible retreat organizers know better now to interview candidates for long-term sittings, or at least get them to give proper details of any such pre-existing conditions before they are allowed to join. Or some suitable arrangements would be made for their safe instruction and practice. Those under medication should of course be sure to bring their medicines along and take them as prescribed.

**9.2.1.3 Personality** traits and temperaments were identified as being potentially either a risk factor or a catalyst, even a remedy, depending on the personality. Expert meditators often explained certain difficulties as due to the way meditation practices are thought to affect personality structures.

Similarly, certain **intentions, motivations, or goals**, as well as certain **worldviews or explanatory frameworks** can be helpful and supportive of meditative development, whereas others were said to be harmful and as adding on to other risk-factors during practice.

**Worldviews and explanatory frameworks** were also influencing factors in that certain interpretations of the meaning of meditation-related difficulties could lead to further difficulties or to the alleviation of certain areas of difficulties. Practitioners who reported holding or being given multiple, conflict-

<sup>263</sup> These factors are summarized in Table 6 on Lindahl et al 2017:22 (pp 21-24 for nn).

ing worldviews were particularly likely to report on the influential—and often confusing—roles of interpretive frameworks.

In the final analysis, the meditator himself has to carefully observe and decide what works for him. On the other hand, the time has come when it will be extremely beneficial for meditation experts and experienced teachers to discuss meditation-related topics including those already stated and others for the mutual benefit of all concerned.

### **9.2.2 Practice influencing-factors**

**9.2.2.1 Practice influencing factors** pertain to how a meditator engaged in a particular meditation does his practice. *The amount, intensity or consistency of practice* was identified as a risk factor when intensive periods converged with certain practitioner-level influencing factors such as personality or other practice-level factors such as type of practice. However, expert meditators in particular also promoted consistency of practice as a remedy for meditation difficulties expected to be transient in nature.

**9.2.2.2 Practice approach** refer to both the wrong ways of meditating characterized as risk factors as well as the use of correct methods that worked as benefits. Experienced meditators, such as those who have received proper and helpful instructions before, would easily adjust themselves in their practice. Basically, this would mean knowing how to let go of distractions; when to *direct* the mind to the meditation-object, and when to leave it *undirected* to stay with the peace or radiance; when and how to end the meditation; and getting back into the “normal” world.

**9.2.2.3** A related category called **response to experiences** referred to how practitioners either did or should respond to meditation-related changes that endured beyond the formal practice session. We have actually discussed some better known aspects of such changes [9.1.4.2].

The less common changes in this connection would include certain desirable experiences that we want to encounter again badly but dismally failed to do so or, in a worst-case scenario, a bad experience in meditation or with someone else during the retreat (whether an organizer or another meditator) may, on account of very strong negative emotions, deter us from meditating further.

**9.2.2.4** Certain **types of practice** could be identified as risk factors for particular meditation experiences simply due to the nature of the practice, or due to a mismatch between the type of practice and the meditators’ dispositions. Changing type of practice or complementing the practice with another was offered as a potential remedy for the latter type of difficulties.

Certain difficulties were interpreted, especially by expert meditators, as a necessary stage of practice, only to be resolved by passing through the stage signified by specific meditation-related experiences or by integrating stage-related changes into their experience. An assumption articulated in this context was that subsequent stages of practice could or would resolve challenging or difficult meditation-related experiences.

### **9.2.3 Relationship influencing-factors**

**9.2.3.1 Human relationships** pervade the lives and contexts of meditators, ranging from the impact of their early-life family relationships, to the quality of relationships with meditation teachers and communities, to the amount of social support they receive outside of the context of meditation. In traditional communities, such as Myanmar or Thailand, where meditation is common and well accepted, meditators easily feel the support, even respect, for their activity.

Some **early life relationships** were associated with the meditator's psychiatric or trauma history. Families or friends of such meditators are also likely to be supportive of their participation, when they understand the benefits of the practice.

Conversely, supportive early life relationships may also have helped to contribute to healing or coping by the meditator so that he is able to go on to practise in a retreat environment. Even then, their situation or progress should be occasionally and discreetly checked to ensure that they are doing well enough.

**9.2.3.2 Relationships within meditation communities** and especially **relationships to teachers** were reported as being both risk factors for difficulties when teachers and communities were absent, unhelpful, or unsympathetic, as well as being benefits when teachers and communities were supportive, helpful and understanding.

In the 1990s-mid-2000s, both the Zen communities and the Tibetan communities of the US Buddhist community, and Buddhism in Britain were rocked and shattered by the serious **sexual scandals** (and other improprieties) of Eido Shimano Roshi (NY), Richard Baker Roshi (San Francisco), Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (Boulder, CO), and Ugyen Sangharakshita (UK).<sup>264</sup>

In 1992, an **Ethics Committee** and subsequently an **Ethics Review Committee**, worked on the "Ethical Principles and Procedures for Grievance and Reconciliation," adopted by the board in 1996.<sup>265</sup> One of the painful lessons is that a teacher-centred approach *without a precept-based social distancing* will certainly invite certain abuse of authority and emotional trauma to vulnerable and unwary Buddhists.

Experts also often commented on the importance of healthy dynamics in **the student-teacher relationship** for the student's negotiation of meditation-related difficulties. One of the key features in meditation retreats today, whether spoken or unspoken, is that they are or should be guided by at least **the 5 precepts** of Buddhism, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of which clearly forbids sexual misconduct.<sup>266</sup> [10.3.1]

**9.2.3.3 Relationships beyond the meditation community** also had a range of impacts—from risk factors to benefits—depending on whether or not those relationships were stable or supportive. Scandals like those of the Zen communities and the Tibetan communities of the US, and the Buddhist community of the UK, had far-reaching and devastating effects. There were significant mobility of members, slow-down in recruitment, and much reorganization, not to mention, comforting and healing of the hurt and traumatized, but some of whom never recovered from the disasters. Any meditation classes or courses would have to be conducted with some apprehension, with significant lower attendance.

**9.2.3.4 The practice surroundings or environment**, especially in a retreat context of silence and social isolation, was commonly described as a risk factor, such that changes in environment were necessary for alleviating certain challenges that emerged during the retreat. So too, changes from a retreat context to certain destabilizing or challenging environments were also reported as *risk factors* for social and occupational difficulties in particular.

In other words, **the ideal retreat environment** is usually some quiet remote building in the country, or at least a really quiet neck of the city or town. Ideally, such a retreat centre has peaceful natural sur-

<sup>264</sup> See esp **Bad friendship**, SD 64.17. On gay sex guru Sangharakshita of the Western Buddhist Order followed by the Triratna Buddhist Community, see SD 34.5 (1.2.2).

<sup>265</sup> See SD 64.17 (6.2.1); S Bell, "Scandals in Emerging Western Buddhism," in Prebish & Baumann (eds), *Westward Dharma*, 2002:237 f.

<sup>266</sup> On the 5 precepts, see **Dīgha, jānu S** (A 8.54,13), SD 5.10; **Veḷu, dvāreyya S** (S 55.7), SD 1.5 (2); **Sīlānussati**, SD 15.11 (2.2); SD 21.6 (1.2); SD 37.8 (2.2).

roundings, too. Meditators who return to homes or residences that are inconducive to meditation or are unable to find some suitable space for their practice, will have to defer, even end, their practice.

### **9.2.4 Sociocultural factors**

**9.2.4.1** Another prevalent theme in the 2017 meditation study [6.1.1.1] was meditators' perceived degree of compatibility between the worldviews, values, and goals shaped by their meditation experiences, related teachings and the broader **sociocultural context** they inhabited. However, during the 2017 study, both expert and ordinary meditators alike suggested that certain sociocultural contexts could be risk factors, particularly when there was a mismatch between a practitioner's and a teacher's cultural background and social customs.

Buddhism, in its modern forms, such as Theravada, for example, has been in **the Philippines** for over 3 decades now, but there is little growth. One of the key reasons is that it is a strongly Christian country, but yet most of those religious are the poorer working class who have mostly only minimum basic education.

Such believers tend to keep to a materialistic form of religion, especially one that is pragmatic ("God will help us") and imaginatively superstitious (cloud-shapes of holy Christian figures). Buddhist meditation was mostly attractive or affordable to the wealthy elite or working middle class. The members of the poorer classes were likelier to be attracted to more superstitious or charisma-centred Buddhist cults, especially those with promises of immediate material blessings.

**9.2.4.2** Another interpretation offered was that mismatches between practitioners' meditation experiences and the worldviews and values of their sociocultural contexts could create a tension that might lead to or compounded difficulties. Moreover, early Buddhism prescribes careful standards of **moral purity** (keeping the body and speech free from unwholesomeness), so that the body is not a source of distraction to the mind during meditation.

The last of the 5 precepts clearly states that we should train ourselves **never to become inebriate** by way of any kind of drink or drug, "whatever that is the source of heedlessness" (*pamāda-t,ṭhānā*). Hence, we should *not* experiment with any kind of drugs, even recreational drugs or hallucinogen such as the South American entheogenic brew **ayahuasca** (locally *ayawaska*).<sup>267</sup> It is a kind of experimental drug amongst the leisure class, which should never be used in meditation (it's worse than using steroids in sports, since this affects the mind) [9.2.5.2].

The purpose of Buddhist meditation, after all, is to keep the mind unclouded for the arising of insight wisdom, based on moral purity. Meditation trains us to have a healthy mind in a healthy body so that we are able to naturally reach the true heights of spirituality. Having done so, we will be able to see and know true reality just as it is for the sake of our liberation.

### **9.2.5 Health and related influential-factors**

**9.2.5.1 Health habits** were generally categorized as potential risk factors when absent or out of balance, and as benefits when present or in good balance. For example, lack of **sleep**, inadequate **diet**, and lack of **exercise** tended to be associated with (or preceded) destabilizing experiences. They can be corrected to benefit meditation by increasing sleep amount, making dietary changes, or getting suitable exercises, as well as by engaging in such activities described as **grounding**, calming, or embodying.

---

<sup>267</sup> It is an entheogenic (with the effect of both the hallucinogenic and the psychedelic) brew commonly made from Banisteriopsis caapi vine, the Psycholia viridis shrub or a substitute, and other ingredients, and said to be used by shamans and traditional native circles.

**9.2.5.2 Recreational drugs** were sometimes cited as risk factors for certain experiences, although prior drug-related experiences were also reported as a helpful foundation to have for negotiating certain types of destabilizing meditation-related experiences. Drug use was also occasionally reported as an attempt to alleviate meditation difficulties, but with mixed results. As we have noted, proper Buddhist meditation clearly disallows the use of intoxicants or drugs. [9.2.4.2]

**9.2.5.3** Other remedies to meditation difficulties included **psychotherapy or medical treatment**, and expert meditators in the 2017 study, in particular, interpreted certain meditation difficulties as requiring the temporary suspension of practice in order to address them psychotherapeutically. For certain symptoms in the somatic domain, **body-based healing** regimens (such as massage, acupuncture, or healing techniques that manipulate the subtle “energy” of the body) were also attempted and reported as being helpful by certain meditators.

As with phenomenology, the degree to which certain influencing factors or remedies were appraised as helpful or harmful was highly variable and case specific. While some remedies were enthusiastically endorsed, many of the remedies that were attempted or prescribed by others were described by meditators as ineffective or even harmful.

In fact, as meditators, we are wise to avoid any kind of medicine that adversely affect us (like feeling thirsty or drowsy and so on). However, under special circumstances, a regimen of **medication** may be medically properly prescribed especially for severe meditation-related difficulties that may otherwise require other intensive treatments or hospitalization.

### 9.3 MINDFULNESS-SPIRITED LIVING AND LEARNING

#### 9.3.1 The core elements of mindfulness

**9.3.1.1** In this section, we examine an important aspect of meditation that we are advised to maintain all the time: **mindfulness**, *fully minding and well remembering* [0.3.3.2]. Let us take the case of a “mindfulness-inducing Dharma-talk” learning situation, where there is considerable energy of a like-minded gathering. This alone is a key factor in the build-up of the shared “listening experience” for each individual participant.

The class-setting itself, whether a common classroom space or a common global connection, is an emotionally *systemic* process generating “sustained attention” and “switching” with a particular respectful, open and non-judgmental “orientation to experience.”<sup>268</sup> While the lecturer is the key centre holding it all together, each person in the class co-creates a communal moment-to-moment *ambience of silent mindfulness* for a better life.

**9.3.1.2** Such practical ideas were inspired by D H Shapiro, who highlighted the 3 core elements of **mindfulness** as intention, attention and attitude.<sup>269</sup> By explicitly incorporating intention into their model, Shapiro and his team wished to restore what was lost when “Western psychology attempted to extract the essence of mindfulness practice from its original religious/cultural roots”; that is, “the aspect of intention, which for Buddhism was enlightenment and compassion for all beings.”<sup>270</sup>

Shapiro, in a study, showed that the intentions that meditators set for themselves correlated with what was attained during practice. Furthermore, these intentions turned out to be dynamic, shifting on a

<sup>268</sup> S R Bishop et al, *Mindfulness: A proposed operational definition*, 2004.

<sup>269</sup> S L Shapiro et al, “Mechanisms of mindfulness,” 2006; Bishop et al, op cit 2004.

<sup>270</sup> S L Shapiro et al, op cit 2006:375.

continuum from self-regulation, to self-exploration, and finally to self-liberation (transcendence of the self, the experience of the self as an inseparable part of a larger whole).<sup>271</sup>

**9.3.1.2** These findings, which considered the context of **non-meditative mindfulness practice**, such as participation in a life-philosophical lecture, point to the importance of the participants' intentions in setting the level for potential outcomes. Very much like meditation, life-philosophical mindfulness-inducing lecturing sharply distinguishes between intentions (or aims), and identifiable and reachable goals (or targets).

**Intentions**, though often elusive to practical definitions, set for us a direction of action to live our life more fully, or to realize our potential, or develop our compassion for life and wisdom to live. None of these can be reduced to reachable targets.

Yet we are so used to thinking of goals and targets. Buddhist teachings clearly remind us how most people's lives are filled with goals that only accumulate striving, grasping, craving, suffering, separation and loss—as opposed to mental balance, integrity, compassion and happiness. Our task, then, is to see our life as being one *beyond* the discourse of targets and goals.

The rationale for this is simple: no skills or goodness can be set as *targets*, given that these are matters for experience, investigation, reflection and cultivation—the 4 truths of *what, why, how and when* of our daily lives. This is an on-going internal dialogue of learning and change, one that can never be concluded: hence, we feel a deep interest in coming back for lessons, for this inner conversation again and again.<sup>272</sup>

### **9.3.2 The 3 intentional levels**

**9.3.2.1** Finnish philosopher lecturer Esa Saarinen and student Tuuli Lehti, both of Aalto University in Espoo, Finland, co-authors of the remarkable article, "Inducing mindfulness through life-philosophical lecturing," (2014),<sup>273</sup> proposes *an ideal form of lecture-style* that is "**a mindfulness-inducing philosophical lecture**" which should comprise these 3 core "intentional levels":

- (1) orientation to the present moment;
- (2) clearer reflection;
- (3) a better life.

Notice that these aims are entirely generic: they are broad, universal, yet personal. We can all relate to them. Sadly, even our highest institutions of learning do not address these challenges.<sup>274</sup> It is possible, indeed necessary, that we relate our Dharma or sutta study to **our present moment**, addressing us just as we *are* right now, our present *needs* just as they are. For this to happen, we, of course, *need* to be present *mentally*—since it is the mind that will go on this venture of the moment.

**9.3.2.2** Now, at the **1<sup>st</sup> intentional level**, our mindful engaging presence, it seems, makes little difference to the interesting class context where the teacher manages to keep students attentive. This is merely the groundwork for *the enduring take-away ideas, take-home ideals*. These are what move us to feel more than we actually *think* for significant changes in us.

As we gradually commit ourselves to a better understanding of our own improved ways of thinking in keeping with the 3 trainings of moral virtue, mental training and insight wisdom, we aspire to **clearer reflection** (the 2<sup>nd</sup> intentional level). This entails seeing oneself and the world more reflectively, just as a

<sup>271</sup> D H Shapiro, "A preliminary study of long-term meditators," 1992.

<sup>272</sup> Saarinen & Lehti, "Inducing mindfulness through life-philosophical lecturing," 2014:1122 f: see foll n.

<sup>273</sup> In *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Mindfulness*, 2014:1105-1131, esp 1121-27. ©

<sup>274</sup> A T Kronman, *Education's End*, 2007.

clear mirror reflects our image. We engage “with the world of experience without imposing conceptual assumptions or ideas on events and thereby misapprehending or distorting them.”<sup>275</sup>

**9.3.2.3** At appropriate times, we feel the zeal (*chanda*) to assert effort (*viriya*) in directing the mind (*citta*), that is, mindfulness to self-investigation (*vīmaṃsā*)<sup>276</sup>—we are “mind-investigators” (*vīmaṃsaka*).<sup>277</sup> We eagerly explore our own minds by introspecting, the most basic of psychological tools.<sup>278</sup> We apply clearer and helpful Dharma-based concepts as we learn them.

We joyfully put into practice what the Buddha teaches the 7-year-old Rāhula in reflecting on bodily acts, speech and thoughts at each of their 3 phases: *before* executing them, *as* we act, and *after* the fact: pre-mindfulness, present mindfulness, post mindfulness. If we are unable to act with present mindfulness, then we review it during quiet time. We learn to notice negative patterns, and correct them to be truer and more beautiful to ourself. Thus, we significantly upgrade our life by becoming mindful of the possibility of being mindful as our way of life.<sup>279</sup>

**9.3.2.4** With practice comes familiarity—we begin to know ourself better, and feel that pervasive joy that arises with our growing self-realization: this brings us to **the 3<sup>rd</sup> intentional level**. With Dharma-inspired mindfulness—with or without meditation—we can see how we benefit from its strength and versatility. Stronger and more versatile, it helps increase our ability to disidentify from (that is, disown) the negative contents of our consciousness.

This shift from “self as content” to “self as context” must be “a continuation of the naturally occurring human developmental process whereby one gains an increasing capacity for objectivity about one’s own internal experience.”<sup>280</sup> Consequently, we learn “to stand back from and observe our inner commentary about life and the experiences encountered” as well as “begin to stand back from our ‘story’ about who and what *we* ultimately is.”<sup>281</sup> With joyful courage, we accept ourself just as we are.

Shapiro and her team refer to this shift in perspective as “reperceiving” and propose it as a meta-mechanism for inspiring mindfulness-based positive change.<sup>282</sup> Those familiar with early Buddhist teachings will at once see the old wine in new bottles: this is the beautiful and remarkable ancient teaching of atam,mayatā, “non-identifying” with externalities. It is clearly well worth our while, indeed, clearly necessary, that we familiarize ourselves with this very old Dharma friend.<sup>283</sup>

**9.3.3 Mindfulness as a way of life.** For Western Buddhists, Shapiro and Carlson well capture the Socratic ideal, when they state that “mindfulness offers a universally applicable system of ethics based on inquiry and the ability to discern the wholesome from the unwholesome.”<sup>284</sup> Mindfulness can thus act as a

<sup>275</sup> Wallace & Shapiro, “Mental balance and well-being,” 2006:696.

<sup>276</sup> These are the bases of success (*iddhi,pāda*) (S 25): SD 10.3. See also **Ceto,khila S** (M 16,26), SD 51.10.

<sup>277</sup> See **Vīmaṃsaka S** (M 47), SD 35.6.

<sup>278</sup> This is the method use by the earliest psychologists: William James, Wilhelm Wundt and Franz Brentano [9.1.3.2]. See <http://www.scholarpedia.org/article/Introspection>.

<sup>279</sup> See **Amba,laṭṭhika S** (M 61), SD 3.10.

<sup>280</sup> E L Shapiro & L E Carlson, *The Art and Science of Mindfulness*, 2009:96 f.

<sup>281</sup> Shapiro & Carlson, op cit 2009:97. The quotes have been edited into the 1<sup>st</sup> person present.

<sup>282</sup> See E L Shapiro et al, “Mechanisms of mindfulness,” 2006; also E J Langer, *The Power of Mindful Learning*, 1997; *On Becoming an Artist*, 2005. Saarinen & Lehti, op cit 2014:1122-24.

<sup>283</sup> See **Atam.maya S** (A 6.104), SD 19.13(2.4); **Atam,mayatā**, SD 19.13.

<sup>284</sup> The wholesome (*kusala*) and the unwholesome (*akusala*) are key early Buddhist terms denoting basically what are karmically good and karmically bad respectively. In Socratic terms, the discernment of the “wholesome” would correspond to the attainment of knowledge conducive to just actions (Saarinen & Lehti 2014:n2). Shapiro & Carlson, op cit 2006:6.

constant moral inquiry that joins the quest for *the better life* endorsed by ancient Greek philosophers. As part of that legacy, mindfulness-inducing lectures and studies aim at creating a rich environment for uplifting and edifying personal inquiry that translate into moral action, echoing the famous words of Socrates, “The unexamined life is not worth living” (*Apology*, 38a).<sup>285</sup>

## 10 COGNITION: CONSCIOUSNESS DURING MEDITATION

### 10.1 THE COGNITIVE DOMAIN<sup>286</sup>

#### 10.1.1 The 3 cognitive changes

**10.1.1.0** The 2017 study on meditators [6.1.1.1] reports that the **cognitive** domain as pertaining to mental functioning, including the frequency, quality and content of thoughts, as well as other cognitive processes, such as planning, decision-making and memory. Such moments are valuable for psychological researchers since we are, as it were, looking directly into the meditating mind.

However, this may be like when William James spoke of **introspection** [9.3.2.3], that we can only make 2<sup>nd</sup> person or 3<sup>rd</sup> person reports. Ultimately, for the real taste of meditation, the scientists have to eat the pudding themselves! But before they can properly enjoy that meal, they must be well prepared for the inner journey that follows.

It has been well over a century since **psychology** was born; but, any time now, a psychologist well trained in his science, and faithful to early Buddhist teachings, will be able to experience meditation and discourse on it like no other in recent history!

To do this we must be true to both ancient wisdom of the Buddha and the modern sciences of psychology and related fields. We should not merely loot the ancient temples, enrich ourselves, and then spiritlessly bite the very hands that had fed us. We have to live those truth and beauty of the mind that we have here expertly written about. It will then be our turn to speak to and to teach the brave new world.

**10.1.1.1** There are 3 significant cognitive changes associated with the rise of **concentration** (*samā-dhi*): mental stillness, clarity, and meta-cognition (monitoring of cognitive processes). They were variously given both positive and negative associations depending upon their intensity and how they intersected with other changes in perceptual, somatic, affective, or sense of self domains.

The mind that is concentrated in meditation, as it were, stops floundering about like a landed fish.<sup>287</sup> Undistracted by the hindrances [1.2.2], at least momentarily, the mind settles down: this is mental stillness. A clear sign of this is that the mind is free from thoughts, or has exceptionally few thoughts. The mind is generally joyful, even radiant.

**10.1.1.2** **The still mind** clears up and becomes radiant. There is mental clarity. Cognitive processing (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, even thinking) cease. The light that we “see” during meditation is not visual but *mental* [8.2.2.3]. This is an awareness of the mental field of vision as total radiance without a horizon! We are overwhelmed by the embrace of spaciousness: we *are* that boundless space.

It is almost just as enthralling even just to only catch a glimpse of this kind of radiance, lightness and space within. Just a brief whiff of this is supremely exhilarating, even as a memory. It’s like seeing the true beauty of our life—a joy forever.

<sup>285</sup> Saarinen & Lehti, op cit 2014:1125. On Socrates’ quote, see SD 17.8c (1) n on “an unexamined life.”

<sup>286</sup> Lindahl et al, “The varieties of contemplative experience,” 2017:17.

<sup>287</sup> Dh 34; cf Sn 1145.

**10.1.1.3** While we are anchored in *concentration*, there is no “monitoring of any cognitive processes” (metacognition): it is supremely blissful; that’s *it*. However, when the concentration is weak, or we have actually emerged from full concentration, then, we begin to notice how sharp our senses are, no matter what draws our attention.

In practical terms, *this* is the most valued moment in our meditation. In traditional Buddhist meditation, the experienced mentor will, as a rule, teach us how to “emerge” from such a meditation and use the calm (*samatha*) and clarity (*vipassanā*) to see true reality. Usually this is the **reflection on impermanence**, since it is the easiest and most natural one to start with. This is the first of the 3 characteristics: impermanence, suffering and non-self [4.2.1]. When this is properly done as a wholesome habit, it surely brings us to the path of awakening in this life itself.<sup>288</sup>

### **10.1.2 Hyped states of mind**

**10.1.2.1** When we are deep in meditation, especially when we have been habitually doing this, it is like turning on the lights in an ancient mansion, or exploring it with a light down unexplored corridors, floors and rooms. A room-door that we open and enter may be for the first time in ages. Therein, we may discover some rare volume or ancient artefact that fascinates or mystifies us. Or, we may open some window into a new view of the surroundings that we have not known before awaiting our future exploration.

Any of these may be **an enthralling vision** or at least **a vivid** imagery, which we may feel positive about or which may forebode unease, depending on the content or intensity. An experienced meditation teacher will inform us that these are all images from our own past playing before our mind, or some hopes we have been nursing taking their cue to seize our attention. They are all “mind-made,” and should be left so.

The point is not that all experienced teachers are Artists, nor is the Artist (a poet, a painter, a sculptor, a musician, a dancer, a mystic) an experienced meditation teacher. All that an Artist can do is to express his visions, images and feelings in the medium he works with or has mastered. We then have endearing and enduring works of art, things of truth and beauty forever.

**10.1.2.2** In a manner of speaking, to have meditated deeply, we are likely to reach a point where we are able to tap certain depths or breadths of our extrasensory powers (for, the meditating mind is freed from the limiting senses). We have noted how meditation focuses and enhances our mental **bases for success** (*iddhi, pādā*)—we have the will to energize our mind to investigate further<sup>289</sup> [4.1.6.2].

With these *bases for power* (*iddhi, pādā*), our deeply focused mind may be able to gain psychic abilities, super hearing, mind-reading, past-life recall (of our own lives or of those of others, or both): these are 5 *mundane superknowledges* (*abhiññā*); the 6<sup>th</sup> is that of arhathood or awakening itself. The early Buddhist texts are full of records of how these ancient meditators attained such powers.<sup>290</sup>

We may not attain these powers, or any of them, at our level of meditation, but when we do master some profound level of concentration, we may get a taste of that power. And like the fictional mutants of the comic-book universe (such as the X-Men of the Marvel universe), we may gain some degree of super-human power or quality.

Having an **increased cognitive processing speed**, colloquially described as “mind racing,” is merely a broad hint of such abilities. Such an experience is not always something pleasant, not at first anyway.

<sup>288</sup> See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1) and its notes in SD 16,7,

<sup>289</sup> See SD 27.5a (4.3).

<sup>290</sup> See SD 27.5a (5).

This is a sign that our mind is capable of great good, and we should cultivate it in this direction. This is, after all, the Millennium of the Mind.

## 10.2 CHALLENGES TO VIEWS AND WORLDVIEWS

**10.2.1** As our meditation practice advances and matures, we undergo a greater sense of self-awareness and moral quality (to sense otherwise would, of course, means that we are going the wrong way). **Scrupulosity** is obsessive and repetitive thoughts about ethical behaviour, especially concerning the observance of the precepts. Some of these rules were primarily a concern for meditators who had been observing special training precepts, or they were monastics with their own ethical norms and regulations considered integral to meditation practice. These were technical matters which those concerned should settle with their respective teachers or preceptors.

**10.2.2** The principal difficulties in the cognitive domain were problems with **executive functioning** (an inability to concentrate for extended periods, or problems with memory). Since the 2017 meditation study [6.1.1.1] was not a traditional retreat, they were not prepared or able to properly advise such issues. Indeed, such difficulties would be the private experiences of the meditator concerned, and they should consult their own teachers or mentors to resolve them.

**10.2.3 Changes in worldview** pertain to shifts in ways of thinking about the nature of self, reality or life-purpose, including confusion about such views. On the other hand, in general practice, such experiences may suggest a vision into a higher reality, or the realization of a solution to some previous difficulty.

Often, meditators who have difficulties in understanding or accepting some teachings may find that the calm and clarity of their meditation helps to unravel the complexity of the matter and resolve such difficulties. Hence, they have a clearer worldview and learn to adjust themselves to it. This is said to be the working of meditation-inspired insight.

**10.2.4** Then, there were the cases of the **disintegration of conceptual meaning structures**, where percepts and concepts became disconnected. Such cognitive dysfunctions were surely interesting developments for the psychologists running the study [6.1.1.1]. Such interviews and discussions with experienced psychologists might be able help the meditator understand them, even resolve them.

One way such a cognitive breakdown may occur when the meditator, for example, realizes that meditation is such a simple yet effective practice which does not depend on traditional beliefs, religious rituals or external agency. He may realize that all that he had been taught about Buddhism, especially from some parochial or ethnic viewpoint is unrelated to his own liberating meditation insights. This disparity can make him feel uprooted and disconcerting.

It seems that we have to relearn everything from scratch. Indeed, in such a situation, the most natural remedy is for us to go back to **the suttas**, the Buddha's early teachings. We need only to look around to find a suitable Dharma-inspired teacher or centre, or even an online Dhamma platform to connect with people who uphold the early Buddhism of the historical Buddha.

## 10.3 ABNORMAL STATES

**10.3.1** The category that the 2017 research team [6.1.1.1] had the greatest difficulty dealing with was **delusional, irrational, or paranormal beliefs**, partly because a particular belief could be appraised in multiple ways depending on the meditator and his social context. In addition to beliefs described by the meditator in retrospect as delusional or irrational in nature (eg, disconfirmed by objective evidence),

this category also included beliefs that seemed *unusual* or concerning either to an authority in their culture or subculture, such as a meditation teacher, or to a family member.

Meditators who have emotional issues with a family member or even the meditation teacher—especially when such issues are traumatic or have been prolonged but undisclosed and unresolved. Such pent-up emotions are likely to play havoc on the meditator’s practice. Obviously, such issues have to be resolved at once. [9.2.3.2]

**10.3.2 Transient, delusional beliefs** tended to have little impact. However, when endured and coupled with a loss of reality testing, delusional beliefs had a much greater impact and tended to lead to functional impairment and changes in his social context. In other words, it is not the actual incident of such an experience that is the problem, but rather how the meditator perceived it or reacted to it.

Such a negative reaction could be triggered by any underlying condition which should be carefully uncovered through personal counselling preferably by a qualified professional if this is a psychological matter rather than a meditation issue. However, if the situation is not serious, a traditional interview by an experienced teacher will usually help, followed by a more relaxed regime of practice or a break in practice altogether until the subject feels fully ready to meditate again.

**10.3.3** A meditator’s **delusional or irrational beliefs** may partly arise from a particular belief appraised in multiple ways depending on the practitioner and his or her social context. He may receive negative feedback from family, friends and, often enough, from the mass media (such as online information). Anti-meditation critics, who, as a rule, do not meditate anyway, for their own reasons (usually anti-Buddhist sentiments), falsely claim that meditation may bring on any kind of negative situation, including mental problems.

Those who are familiar with meditation, especially the Buddhist practice, well know that by itself it poses no risk. We very well know, too, that meditation, properly taught and practised, is very much less dangerous than driving! The delusion, irrationality or paranormal experiences that a meditator reports is, as a rule, the result of some underlying personal mental health issue either undetected or undisclosed until the incident.

As part of the routine instructions that experienced meditation teachers give their students is that, at the slightest hint of any such mental aberration, the meditator should cease meditation, do just sitting, and regularly report to the teacher for advice. After a proper interview, the meditator is likely to be asked to try some other more suitable meditation method. Such “safety-net” practises usually include lovingkindness cultivation and walking meditation. The meditator is also instructed to take note of any further developments until he is well clear of the issues.

## 11 CONCLUSION

**11.1 THE 5 AGGREGATES.** We began this study [Part I] with a survey of the 5 aggregates. Beginning with **form**, we traced how **feeling** arises. Then, we examined how **perception** (including conception) occurs, leading to **formations**. All this work on, supported by **consciousness**, which is, in turn, fed by all of them. For this very reason, they are called “aggregates” (*khandha*): they work as a group, and so constitute our being.

**11.2 THE 5 ASPECTS OF PSYCHOLOGY.** In Part II, we examined the set of 5 psychological terms as cognates to each of the 5 aggregates [Table 0.1]. Understandably, they are not synonyms but overlap in some functions that help us better understand them as sets. The **somatic** aspects of form are experienced by medi-

tators as they struggle with their body and its shortcomings, and how these can be corrected, or, better, prevented.

Just as the **perceptual** aspects of the aggregates and psychology have so much in common, their **conative** aspects have important differences. In fact, Western psychology agree little amongst themselves what conation really is to be a useful term today. Perhaps, the early Buddhist ideas of it will help modern psychologists think about *conation* more fruitfully and see its significance and application in due course.

**Consciousness**, is clearly the most fascinating aggregate and psychological factor: it overlaps in so many interesting and useful ways with the other aggregates so as to benefit both our understanding of the early Buddhist teaching and the modern scientific discoveries of human consciousness. This also helps us better understand the nature of meditation and improve their practice.

**11.3** Such a comparative study of the ancient wisdom of the 5 aggregates and the modern science of the mind has been very rewarding, even in such a brief study. However, we have compared enough ideas to keep us studying them and applying them in our own respective ways for a long time to come. Both the early Buddhist psychology and modern psychology are practical mind-healing theories and methods very much in use today. For them to be studied in such comparative harmony shows both the relevance and dynamism of both fields for a long time to come.

200520 200609 200908