

# Saññā (Perception)

## A study of the 3<sup>rd</sup> aggregate

by Piya Tan ©2005

### 1 What you see is *not* what you get

**1.1 THE TRAIN ANALOGIES.** Remember the time when you are sitting in a train, and it is drizzling outside. While the train remains stationary, the rain drops straight down. Then as the train begins to move, you see (perceive) that the rain begins to fall obliquely, and then horizontally, when the train goes full speed! And when the train slows down to a stop again, the drizzle begins to fall obliquely, and then vertically down again in the “normal” manner.

Similarly, when the train is moving fast, you may feel the illusion of being a stationary observer, while the scenery outside is moving fast.<sup>1</sup> Remember when you were in a car driving in the country-side: the fences go by fast, the trees more slowly, the distant mountains hardly at all [see picture]. Closer objects seem to move farther than distant ones.<sup>2</sup> Of course, you probably already know that it is the movement of the vehicle that makes you see this interesting phenomenon. This is *parallax* in science; it is called “perception” (*saññā*) in Buddhism.

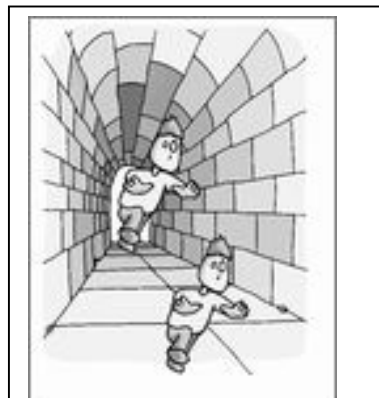
Click on the small tree to see what parallax is like:



perspective & parallax.gif



<http://www.learner.org/teacherslab/science/light/lawsofeyes/index.html>



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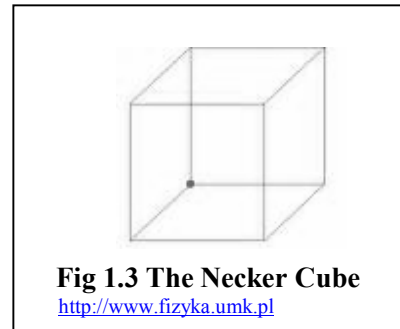
**1.2 TUNNEL VISION?** What you see is *not* always what you get! This famous illusion of perception shows how two equally tall figures in a row in a corridor, one *virtually* appears to be taller. Yet they are of the same height (measure them!).<sup>3</sup> The way our eyes see things is also not what they appear to be. What we think of as seeing is the result of a series of events that occur amongst the eye, the brain, and the outside world. Light reflected from an object passes through the cornea, through the lens which focuses it, and then meets the retina, where it hits a thin layer of color-sensitive cells called rods and cones. Since the light criss-crosses while going through the cornea, the retina “sees” the image upside down. The brain then “reads” the image right-side up. In other words, this page you are looking at is really upside down in your eye, but the mind “turns” it right side up.

<sup>1</sup> Lily de Silva 1984:69.

<sup>2</sup> On the computer screen, click the tree icon below. Otherwise, to download or see the demonstration, go to <http://www.learner.org/teacherslab/science/light/lawsofeyes/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> For more of such illusions, see eg <http://www.scientificpsychic.com/graphics/index.html>.

**1.3 COMPETING FOR ATTENTION.** The Necker Cube<sup>4</sup> [Fig 1.3] shows how information is picked up by the senses and then interpreted by the eye faculty. Looking at the cube by way of simple *sensing*, the eye faculty receives information about twelve lines on the same flat plane (co-planar). However, three different views might be *perceived*, that is, two different cube orientations, or twelve co-planar lines joined together. If you gaze at the dotted corner, it seems to be *inside*, but after 3-5 seconds, it will be on the *outside*, and flips in and out, as it were!



**Fig 1.3 The Necker Cube**  
<http://www.fizyka.umk.pl>

In other words, the eye faculty is not sure how to perceive the cube, so it gives three possible views of the same thing. The Necker Cube illustrates a simple form of what psychologists call “rivalry,” that is, a perceptual phenomenon that occurs when the proximal stimuli to the eye cannot be resolved as a single percept. There are other forms of rivalry, such as binocular rivalry, which is found when different images are separately presented to either of the two eyes. For example, a picture of a tree is shown to the right eye and a car to the left. In such a situation, the tree and the car are not combined into one picture. Instead, perception seems to flip between the two.

Early psychological theories proposed that the flipping was due to eye movements or other peripheral effects, but keeping the eyes still does not stop the alternation. It seems that the flipping occurs higher up in the perceptual process. It seems as though the two (or three) views are competing for attention (or consciousness). **Susan Blackmore** explains:

This simple phenomenon provides an ideal situation for investigating the relationship between the objective facts (input to the eye, events in the visual system and so on), and the subjective facts (being conscious of first one of the pictures and then the other). (Blackmore 2003:234)

Binocular rivalry very well illustrates unconscious processes going on in our minds. When the right eye and the left eye are presented with competing, dissimilar images, the observer does not experience a stable superimposed percept of the images presented to the two eyes, but instead perceives an ongoing alternation between the images seen by each eye every couple of seconds. When one percept is consciously perceived, the other remains unconscious. Yet, even if a stimulus is not reportable (that is, it appears as if unnoticed), there is evidence it is still processed by the brain in various way. Activity in the amygdala,<sup>5</sup> which usually increases when one’s face shows fear or anger, is still detectable even when the emotional face is suppressed on account of binocular rivalry.<sup>6</sup>

**1.4 VIRTUAL REALITY.** Although such experiences are “real,” they are actually illusory: we call them virtual reality. In fact, most of our experiences are *virtually* virtual realities, conjured up by five rapidly moving groups of phenomena called “the aggregates” (*khandha*). When we fail to understand this and identify with such virtual realities, we think that they are permanent “things,” but they are all really impermanent “events,” arising and ceasing almost at the same time in rapid succession.

We have the tendency to form habits (*nati*) as a result of frequent similar or familiar experiences. Bertrand Russell mentions this interesting Pavlovian phenomenon:

<sup>4</sup> The Necker Cube was designed by Swiss crystallographer, Louis Albert Necker, in 1832. The Cube is an ambiguous two-dimensional line drawing of wire-frame in isometric perspective, that is, comprising of pairs sides, all equidistant. When two lines cross, the picture does not show which is in front or which is behind, showing a spontaneous depth reversal. This makes the picture ambiguous: it can be perceived in two different ways. When a person gazes at the Cube, it seems to flip back and forth between the two perceptions. The eye faculty chooses only one perception at a time. This is known as *bistable* or *multistable perception*.

<sup>5</sup> On the **amygdala**, see SD 17.8c(7.3).

<sup>6</sup> Williams, Morris, McGlone, Abbott & Mattingley, 2004. See also A Lutz et al 2007:69.

a bright light makes the pupils of the eyes contract; and if you repeatedly flash a light in a man's eyes and beat a gong at the same time, the gong alone will, in the end, cause his pupils to contract. (Russell 1936)<sup>7</sup>

The fact that you are reading this, and that you can understand this, is mostly a result of various conditionings (such as learning the alphabets and to read) over a period of time. If you still find parts of this paper still beyond your understanding (aside from my own lack of clarity or my stupidity), then you have not been conditioned enough to relate to those aspects. Such conditioning can be useful, but they are mostly automatic responses to stimuli. Being aware of this and understanding why will help you to more and more see the reality behind them.

**1.5 LOOKING AND SEEING.** When we are looking at something or a scenery, we often feel that we see it entirely in all its details, and that we can immediately notice any change in it. However, the reality is that when we look, we do not always see. Take, for example, when we hear a bird singing in a tree, and when we look for it, we will often fail to see it right away, noticing it only after some effort, that is, when our *attention* is directed in the right spot. Indeed, we would not be able to find it if we lack the *interest* to see it.

To complicate things, a phenomenon called *change blindness* may further prevent us from immediately seeing the object, if at all.<sup>8</sup> Our visual memory, for example, may fail us and we mistake another object for the bird. Or, we could be noticing *a* bird, but it is not the one that is singing, and so on. In other words, we perceive change in situation or scenery only when focussed attention is directed to the changing aspect. For a perception of reality, not only must one's attention be properly directed at the target, but one must have wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*),<sup>9</sup> that is, the understanding of the inherent impermanence of all worldly existence.

## 2 Naming and recognizing

**2.1 NAMING.** Our senses are constantly being bombarded with sense-data: we are often flooded with experiences at all our sense-doors. Simply put, perception is the way our mind decides which sense-data or which mental states are to be attended to at the sense-doors. It is a very selective process of sensing and mentating, heavily biased towards what one likes, disregarding what one dislikes, and simply ignoring what one cannot comprehend. An important process of perception is that of linking a present experience to a past one, be it a true or false memory: this is what might simply be called *recognition*. **REA Johanson** gives a helpful working summary of *saññā*, thus:

Perception is produced through the confrontation of a neural message with memories stored in the nervous system. The information supplied through the senses can be interpreted only by being compared with this stored information; this information can from a Buddhist point of view be envisaged as provided by *viññāṇa* and therefore present before the stimulus; it is activated only through the contact, *phassa*. *Viññāṇa* is... a precondition of perception and can therefore be placed earlier in the conditioned series.<sup>10</sup>  
(1979:92)

Although in certain contexts, *saññā* may be rendered as “recognition” (Boisvert 1995:77 f), this, however, connotes that it is always a form of correct knowledge (when one “recognizes” someone or something, it means one has no doubt about this). **Peter Harvey** notes that

<sup>7</sup> From “Do we survive death?” in *The Mysteries of Life and Death*, London: Hutchison, 1936.

<sup>8</sup> See eg Rensink et al 1997 & Carter et al 2005.

<sup>9</sup> See SD 35 \*\*\*

<sup>10</sup> On this aspect on consciousness, see *Viññāṇa* = SD 17.8a(6).

*Saññā* certainly is a form of classificatory, labelling, interpreting activity, but it includes both correct labelling (“recognition”) and incorrect labelling (misinterpretation). For this reason, I prefer the more neutral “cognition.” The more usual “perception” is certainly too broad, as it covers the combined activity of *saññā* and *viññā[ṇ]a*, and in any case hardly covers *saññā* of a mental object. (Harvey 1996:94)

In the next section [2.2], we will see in some detail how we experience things, but look at it briefly here. Our senses come into contact with objects in the world or of our own thoughts. Each moment of such a contact is accompanied by feeling which is pleasant, painful or neutral. When this is cognized (experienced) by *naming* it: this is *saññā*. Although it is usually translated as “perception,” the word “sign” also comes from the same root as *saññā*. This is understandable as *saññā* is a kind of designation.

*Viññāṇa* gives a raw sensing of the sense-stimulus; then our memory moves in and names it, for example, we recognize as sound and say, “That sounds like a dog barking.” Conceptual thoughts begin to cluster around that naming: that which we name, we begin to think about—this is called *vitakka*. We may think, “I wonder who owns that dog?” Or, “Is it the same dog I heard yesterday?” Then *vitakka* grows into *papañca* (mental proliferation). “It is a mass of thoughts and conceptions that burden the heart and mind.”<sup>11</sup>

Perception (*saññā*) works very closely with consciousness (*viññāṇa*).<sup>12</sup> Once one is conscious of an object through one of the sense-doors (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind)—that is, through “form” (*rūpa*)—one perceives (or more technically, *apperceive*) it as a form: one then tries to make sense of it by naming it so that one can control it, as it were, and do things with it. Having named an object or experience, the mind is then able to recognize it (rightly or wrongly) after that. As such, we find in the twelve-link dependent arising, “with consciousness as condition, there is name-and-form” (*viññāṇa, paccayā nāma, rūpaṃ*).<sup>13</sup>

We only perceive what we want to perceive, and very often there are many other things we fail to see. Having “recognized” a sense-experience, we usually fall back on that old experience and forget about the current event going on at the sense-door, and drift into the past, or daydream into the future. This is called *distraction*. Technically, however, perception is a neutral experience of initially making sense of an experience. When there are value judgements, motivated by the unwholesome karmic roots of greed, hate or delusion, or by the wholesome karmic roots of non-greed, non-hate and non-delusion, then the process turns into mental formations (*saṅkhāra*).<sup>14</sup>

**2.2 APPERCEIVING AND CONCEIVING.** The process just described is best termed as “ideation,” or perhaps, “conceptualization,” that is, one mentally “sees” or conceives an image from an earlier experience, or conjures up a new one.<sup>15</sup> When there is input through any of the physical senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, or body), *saññā* arises from the stimulus, that is, one’s attention is directed at the experience: one then apperceives, that is, recognizes or identifies it.<sup>16</sup> When there is no physical sense-stimulus, and the stimulus is purely mental, then one conceives an idea or a state, that is, one ideates.<sup>17</sup> **The Mahānidāna Sutta** (D 15) is the locus classicus for these notions of apperception and conception:

<sup>11</sup> Amaro, “Thinking.” 2001:3.

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion on the differences between perception and consciousness, see SD 17.8a(8.2).

<sup>13</sup> See (**Paṭicca,samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2) = SD 5.15; also SD 17.2a(12).

<sup>14</sup> See SD 17.5(2.1).

<sup>15</sup> See Hamilton 1996a:62.

<sup>16</sup> **WS Waldron** has a helpful n: “Apperception is not commonly used in English; it is neither ‘perception’ nor ‘conception,’ but rather something in between. According to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (1976), ‘apperception’ means: ‘perception with recognition or identification by association with previous ideas,’ with the verb ‘to apperceive’ meaning ‘unite and assimilate (a perception) to ideas already possessed, and so comprehend and interpret.’ This is precisely the term *saññā*.” (2003:189 n69)

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion, see Hamilton 1996a:59 f.

It is said: ‘**With name-and-form as condition, there is contact.**’

Ānanda, how name-and-form conditions contact should be known in this manner:

(1) If, Ānanda, there were no qualities, traits, signs and indicators<sup>18</sup> through which there is a description [definition] (*paññatti*) of the mental body [mind-group]<sup>19</sup>—then would **conceptual impression**<sup>20</sup> manifest in the physical body?<sup>21</sup>

“Certainly not, venerable sir.”

(2) If, Ānanda, there were no qualities, traits, signs and indicators through which there is a description of the mental body [mind-group]—then would **sense-impression**<sup>22</sup> manifest in the mental body?<sup>23</sup>

“Certainly not, venerable sir.”

(3) If, Ānanda, there were no qualities, traits, signs and indicators through which there is a description of the mental body and the physical body [the mind-group and the body-group]—then would **conceptual impression or sense-impression** manifest itself?<sup>24</sup>

“Certainly not, venerable sir.”

(4) If, Ānanda, there were no qualities, traits, signs and indicators through which there is a description of the name-and-form—then would there be **contact**?<sup>25</sup>

“Certainly not, venerable sir.”

“Therefore, Ānanda, this is the cause, the source, the origin, the condition for contact, that is to say, name-and-form. (D 15.20/2:62) = SD 5.17

“**Conceptual impression**” (*adhivacana, samphassa*, literally, “designation-contact”) here refers to verbal (that is, mental or conceptual) impression. The Dīgha Commentary says: “Conceptual impression is synonymous with mind-contact, which arises in the mind-door taking the four (mental) aggregates as its basis [because it is apprehended by means of designation and description].” (DA 2:501)<sup>24</sup> In simple terms, this can be called “labelling contact,” that is, nāma in action. The unawakened being is a shopaholic shopping around for labels and never having enough of it. The bigger our ego or self, the more branded labels we seek.<sup>25</sup> Then we become nothing more than the labels we were. If clothes makes the man, then it must be merely a hollow man.

<sup>18</sup> *Yehi ākārehi yehi liṅgehi yehi nimittehi yehi uddesehi*. Comy: The mutually dissimilar nature of feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness, are called “qualities” (*ākāra*). They are also called “traits” (*liṅga*) because, when carefully looked at, they betray the hidden meanings (of their base) (*līnam-attha*). They are also called “signs” (*nimitta*) because they are the causes of perceiving (*sañjānana, hetuto*); and they are also called “indicators” (*uddesa*) because they are to be indicated (“pointed out”) (*uddisitabbo*) [through these the meaning is signalled or inferred]. (DA 2:500 f; DAṬ within square brackets)

<sup>19</sup> *Nāma, kāya*, the “mind-group” comprises the 4 formless groups of existence (*arūpino khandhā*): feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), formations (*saṅkhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāna*). It is distinguished from *rūpa, kāya*, the body-group, comprising form (*rūpa*), ie the 4 elements (*dhātu, mahā, bhūta*) [see SD 17.1 & 2]. We have here the first canonical occurrence of this term and also at Pm 1.183, but *nāma, kāya* is mentioned by itself at Sn 1074. The twofold grouping (*nāma, kāya* and *rūpa, kāya*) is common in Comys. In **Dhamma, saṅgāṇī**, all phenomena are classified as 3 groups: consciousness (*citta*) (*khandha* 5), mental factors (*cetasika*) (*khandhā* 2-4) and form (*rūpa* = *khandha* 1).

<sup>20</sup> *Adhivacana, samphassa*. U Thittila, in his **Vbh 6** tr, renders this as “analogical contact” (Vbh: T §17/7) with the n, “Mind and mental objects do not impinge but are explained by the analogy (*adhivacana*) of physical states.” On *adhivacana* and *pañigha*, see SD 5.17 Introd 5b above.

<sup>21</sup> *Yehi Ānanda ākārehi yehi liṅgehi yehi nimittehi yehi uddesehi nāma, kāyassa paññatti hoti, tesu ākāresu tesu liṅgesu tesu nimittesu tesu uddesesu asati, api nu kho rūpa, kāye adhivacana, samphasso vā paṭigha, samphasso vā paññāyethā ti*. On *rūpa, kāya*, see SD 5.17 §20(1) n.

<sup>22</sup> *Paṭigha, samphassa*. On *adhivacana* and *pañigha*, see SD 5.17 Introd 5b above.

<sup>23</sup> *Yehi Ānanda ākārehi yehi liṅgehi yehi nimittehi yehi uddesehi rūpa, kāyassa paññatti hoti, tesu ākāresu tesu liṅgesu tesu nimittesu tesu uddesesu asati, api nu kho paṭigha, samphasso vā paṭigha, samphasso vā paññāyethā ti*.

<sup>24</sup> With Subcomy [within parenthesis].

<sup>25</sup> Sometimes rendered as “resistance-contact.”

“Sense-impression” (*paṭigha, samphassa*, literally, “impingement-contact”) refers to impression through sensory stimulus, or simply sense-impression. The Dīgha Commentary says that sense-impression is the contact that arises taking the contact-aggregate of form as basis (*sappaṭighaṃ rūpa-k, khandhaṃ vatthum*) (DA 2:501), that is, five physical sense-stimuli, namely, contact arising through eye-contact, ear-contact, nose-contact, tongue-contact, and body-contact, that is, our raw physical sense-experiences as they arise at the physical sense-doors. In simple terms, this is the “impact contact,” that is, rūpa in action. **Sujato** helpfully summarizes this for us:

We can see that “**impact contact**” deals primarily with receiving data from outside, while “**labelling contact**” deals primarily with processing inner, conceptual information. Thus the earlier, mystical understanding of name-and-form receives a strictly rational, psychological treatment. Name-and-form are shown to be interdependent. If there were no name, there could be no labeling, ie no conceptual processing of sensory experience. If there were no form, there would be no awareness of the world outside. Finally the [Mahā, nidāna Sutta] passage proceeds by way of synthesis to show that both of these processes are essential aspects of “contact.”

(“The mystique of the Abhidhamma,” TMA 8; emphases added)<sup>26</sup>

As human beings living in the sense-realm (*kāma-vacara*), both forms of contact occurs in us. We experience the world of physical reality through impact contacts of the five physical senses with the physical world, and we construct a very private and limited inner world through labelling contacts with thoughts, ideas and emotions.<sup>27</sup> **Sujato** gives this helpful summary on *nāma, rūpa* in this connection:

In the Mahā Nidāna Sutta passage, name and form are also [respectively] called the “name group” and the “form group,” implying that each consists of a number of factors. Elsewhere in the suttas they are indeed defined, not synthetically [see pp 14 f], but analytically. Name is feeling, perception, attention, contact, and volition. Form is the four great physical properties and derived form. The connection between name and its original meaning is growing weaker. It is now an umbrella term for a class of mental functions, only some of which are directly associated with conceptualizing.

One factor which is, however, associated with conceptualizing is “perception.” This is the associative aspect of consciousness. “Perception” (*saññā*) related to “cognition” (*viññāna*) as “connotation” relates to “denotation.” The suttas treat it as a key aspect of concept formation. In everyday usage, it can mean “contract,” “agreement.” In this sense, perception (*saññā*) approaches the meaning of convention (*sammuti*). The two are etymologically parallel. Noteworthy by its absence from name is “thought” (*vitakka*), which is not an essential factor for consciousness. Elsewhere the factors constituting name are said to precede thought. So it seems that despite the terms “name” and “labelling,” name deals with very fundamental, pre-linguistic proto-conceptual processes.

(“The mystique of the Abhidhamma,” TMA 15)

**The Vibhaṅga** briefly mentions both these forms of perception (Vbh 6)—conceptual impression and resistance impression—but they are discussed in its Commentary, **the Sammoha, vinodanī**. The Commentary begins by explaining the three formless aggregates (feeling, perception, and formations) themselves turn inwards upon each other (*sayam piṭṭhi, vattakā hutvā*), using the term “conceptual impression” (*adhivacana, samphassa*) for the perception that is conascent (or contemporaneous) with themselves. But “perception arising from resistance-impression” (*paṭigha, samphassa, jā saññā*) is literally a five-door perception, and “conceptual impression perception” (*adhivacana, samphassa, jā saññā*) is a mind-door perception.

<sup>26</sup> For fuller text, see SD 5.17 Introd 5c.

<sup>27</sup> The terms “labelling contact” and “impact contact” are used by **Sujato** in his essay, “The mystique of the Abhidhamma” (TMA, nd: 12-15).

Here, the five-door perception<sup>28</sup> is gross, since simply by looking at one in the grasp of greed, one knows that he is grasped by greed, and looking at one in the grasp of hate, one knows that he is grasped by hate. The mind-door perception, on the other hand, is subtle because it is only known through some communication. It is recorded in **the Vibhaṅga Commentary** that once two women were sitting spinning thread, when two novice monks (*navaka*) passed by. One of the monks looked at one of the women. The other woman then asked her: “Why did he look at you?” “That monk looked at me perceiving me as a younger sister.” When the two monks reached the sitting hall, the other monk asked, “Did you look at that woman?” “Yes, I did.” “For what reason?” “I looked at her because she resembles my sister.”

Thus it should be understood that the five-door perception knows by looking. This is based on the physical senses only, and some exemplify it as occurring in impulsion. But mind-door perception is subtle because it is only after asking, “What were you thinking?” that, from that person’s reply, could one know what he was thinking, even when both were sitting on the same couch or the same bench. (VbhA 20)

**The Apanṇaka Sutta** (M 60), by way of distinguishing between apperception and conception, interestingly (but only briefly), mentions the kinds of dhyanic gods: the mind-made (*mano,mayā*) gods of the form realm, and the perception-made (*saññā,mayā*) gods of the formless (*arūpa*) realm.<sup>29</sup> **The Vipallāsa Sutta** (A 4.49), too, refers to perception in its role as the faculty of conception, and mentions the four types of distorted conception (*visaññā*), in connection with the three types of perversions (*vipallāsa*), which is discussed below [9.4].

**2.3 MEANING.** What is the meaning of meaning? On a simple level, “**meaning**” can be said to be either intention or one’s view or measure of a thing. While a good level of technical accuracy certainly helps in the proper understanding and communication of ideas, no matter how well defined words and terms may be, the final interpretation is always in the ear and mind of the listener, that is, depending on *what* one has heard and *how* one has understood it. The Humpty-Dumpty Principle (or Rule)<sup>30</sup> often applies: we may insist on the meaning of a word, but it may not always be generally accepted or understood so by others.



**Fig 2.3 The Humpty-Dumpty Rule**

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory’,” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument’,” Alice objected.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

(Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-glass*, 1871: ch 6)

Cartoon by John Tenniel (1871). <http://www.the-funneled-web.com/images/humpty-dumpty.gif>

<sup>28</sup> On the five-door and the mind-door cognitive processes, see *Nimitta & Anuvyañjana* = SD 19.14.

<sup>29</sup> M 60.31/1:410; MA 3:122.

<sup>30</sup> This rule properly means an idiosyncratic or eccentric use of language in which the meaning of particular words is determined by the speaker, but is here more broadly applied.

Successful communication depends of the effective use of language and expression. Words, in a sense, have three dimensions or usages (although not all three may be found in all words), comprising of:

- (1) lexicographical meanings, that is, dictionary meaning;
- (2) stipulative meaning, that is, a private or “intentional” meaning; and
- (3) contextual meaning, that is, a language reflecting the meaning or import of the teaching.

The first usage—the lexicographical—is often applied in the commentarial etymologies, and sometimes in the Suttas [3]. The stipulative use of words, such as the Humpty-Dumpty principle or disambiguation,<sup>31</sup> where the speaker or author gives his own meaning to the words or expressions used in a manner quite different from common usage. This is sometimes called “intentional language” in Buddhist literature [3]. The contextual usage of language is the most common means of communication used in the Suttas where the language includes stories, imageries, and other skillful to facilitate the understanding of the audience.

### 3 Intentional language

As mentioned earlier [2], the second mode of language communication is the stipulative, an aspect of which is **intentional language**. Stipulative language or intentional language, as we shall see, can be humorous or profound, or both. The purpose of such a language is of course to show one that words are not always how they are commonly used, and to look beyond the word so that it brings out the deeper or higher meaning. Let us first look at a mundane example. A popular book on mind and brain gives this interesting contemporary example of how perception (*saññā*) works:

Read this statement:

“The lobster at eighteen is about to blow a fuse!”

At first, this may conjure up bizarre surrealist images. But imagine a busy restaurant with numbered tables—and one harassed waitress making that remark to another. Suddenly it makes sense. (Gellatly & Zarate 1998:66)

Speech, in other words, is not just a matter of recognizing words and understanding grammar, but one has to interpret their meaning and the intention of the speaker.<sup>32</sup> The same also goes for actions or what we call “body language.” In fact, under normal circumstances, the unawakened mind has no choice but to interpret (construct meanings of) such messages.

Intentional language (*sandhā, bhāṣā*; Tib: dgongs-pa) or *sandhyā, bhāṣā* (lit “twilight language”)<sup>33</sup> is neither symbolic in the conventional sense (for then even a non-Buddhist intellectual could “translate” it) nor is it ultimate (insofar as it has been written down and therefore subject to mere intellectual interpretation). It is a “third” language, a *tertium quid*, between the conventional expression and the ultimate understanding of the Dharma.

Intentional language is not only a protection against the profanation of the sacred through intellectual curiosity, and misuse of yogic (meditation) methods and psychic forces by the ignorant and the uninitiated, but has its origin mainly in the fact that everyday language is incapable of expressing the highest experiences of the spirit (which could at best be hinted at through similes and paradoxes). In fact, the skillful application of intentional language serves as a direct communication of spiritual truth and realiza-

<sup>31</sup> Disambiguation: technically, this is the establishment of a single grammatical or semantic interpretation.

<sup>32</sup> For an interesting discussion on “category mistake,” see Paul Williams, *Studies in the Philosophy of the Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Delhi, 1998:129 f.

<sup>33</sup> See Piya Tan, *The Teaching Methods of the Buddha*, 2004, esp §§16-18.

tion, in a manner that transcends ordinary language. In a sense, this is a special transmission between an accomplished teacher and a ready pupil.

A verse in the Dhammapada makes an interesting use of intentional language in a very dramatic situation. It was spoken by the Buddha in connection with Uggasena, an acrobat,<sup>34</sup> while he was precariously poised on his head on top of a high pole:

Let go of the front. Let go of the back.	<i>muñca pure muñca pacchato</i>	
Let go of the middle. Crossing to the far shore,	<i>majjhe muñca bhavassa pārāgu</i>	
With the mind released from everything,	<i>sabbattha vimutta, manāso</i>	
Do not again undergo birth and decay.	<i>na puna jāti, jaraṃ upehisi.</i>	(Dh 348)

On a simple level, we see here the essence of satipatthana practice, where at the start of meditation practice, one keeps one’s mind in the present moment (for example, watching the breath), letting go of the past and the future.<sup>35</sup> Whatever phenomena arise in the present moment, too, one simply “let come, let go” of them, keeping the mind focussed on the meditation object.

On a higher level, this verse means that the arhat has overcome past karma (the back), and faces no more rebirths (the front). The arhat is not attached even to this life itself, not even present moment (the middle), but simply watching it arise, peaking and ending, over and again. The arhat’s mind may go with the flow, but it is never dragged along or drowned by it.

The Dharma language, however, is at best still “conceptual” to the uninitiated or unawakened, especially the intellectually-inclined. Indeed, when the Buddha teaches using Dharma language, it sounds the same to all his listeners but means different a thing to each of them!

In a remarkable case, the Buddha uses intentional language to communicate with **a weaver’s daughter of Āḷavī** (DhA 3:170 ff). When the Buddha looks at her, she knows that he wants her to approach him. The following dialogue—called the **the Four Questions**—ensues before the congregation:

Buddha:	Where do you come from, young girl?	
Girl:	I know not, bhante.	
Buddha:	Where are you going?	
Girl:	I know not, bhante.	
Buddha:	Do you not know?	
Girl:	I know, bhante.	
Buddha:	Do you know?	
Girl:	I know not, bhante.	(DhA 3:170 ff.)

The four questions respectively mean:

“Where were you before you were reborn here?”	
“Where will you be reborn?”	
“Do you know that you will surely die?” and	
“When will you die?”	(DhA 3:172 f).

No one in the crowd who “listens” to the Buddha only conceptually understands his words—the crowd never understands! The weaver’s daughter, however, understands him intuitively, answers the questions correctly and gains the Wisdom Eye (*paññā, cakkhu*) that sees things on the ultimate (*param’attha*) level.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> DhA 24.6/4:59-65, 26.14/4:158 f.

<sup>35</sup> This is a common method of the forest meditation method of Thailand (esp of Ajahn Chah’s lineage).

<sup>36</sup> For the use of shock imagery, see Piya Tan, “The Teaching Methods of the Buddha,” 2002 §18.

The understanding that language (spoken or written) is a relative and conditioned form of human expression is a very vital one. **The Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65) admonition, “Do not go by scriptural authority (*mā piṭaka, sampadānena*),” is given, or should be understood, in this connection.<sup>37</sup> The meaning and benefit of the Buddha Word cannot be found in the Pali Canon or any canon *as text*, that is, not in its form as written scripture.<sup>38</sup> These texts are merely mnemonics (and not always without flaw), and as mnemonics, they are only intelligible to those who already know what they mean, that is, *the context*, and what they point to, that is, the liberating truth. The basis for this truth is a living transmission from a living Dharma master, which in turn helps one to focus one’s mind that will open up to a direct experience of true reality. Of course, there are (theoretically at least) those, like the pratyeka buddhas (individual awakened ones),<sup>39</sup> for whom such spiritual understanding has accumulated to such a point that they simply cannot ignore it, but must awaken to reality even when the ambience is not conducive for the establishment of a sustainable teaching.

#### 4 The name is not the thing named

Lewis Carroll, in *Through the Looking Glass*, relates this witty exchange between the White Knight and Alice:

Alice could only look puzzled: she was thinking of the pudding.  
 “You are sad,” the Knight said in an anxious tone: “let me sing you a song to comfort you.”  
 “Is it very long?” Alice asked, for she had heard a good deal of poetry that day.  
 “It’s long,” said the Knight, “but very, VERY beautiful. Everybody that hears me sing it—  
 either it brings the TEARS into their eyes, or else—”  
 “Or else what?” said Alice, for the Knight had made a sudden pause.  
 “Or else it doesn’t, you know. The name of the song is called ‘HADDOCKS’ EYES.’”  
 “Oh, that’s the name of the song, is it?” Alice said, trying to feel interested.  
 “No, you don’t understand,” the Knight said, looking a little vexed. “That’s what the name is  
 CALLED...”  
 (Lewis Carroll [1865], 1960:212)<sup>40</sup>

In a similar vein, Gregory Bateson says,

The name is not the thing named, but is of different logical type, higher than the thing named; the class is of different logical type, higher than that of its members. (1972)

**Gregory Bateson** (1904-1980) was an anthropologist, social scientist, cyberneticist—known famously and simply as Gregory—was one of the most important social scientists of this century. Strongly opposing those scientists who attempted to “reduce” everything to mere matter, he was intent upon the task of re-introducing “Mind” back into the scientific equations, on which account, among other things, he wrote two famous books *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, and *Mind & Nature*. From his point of view the mind is a constituent part of “material reality” and it is thus nonsensical to try to split mind from matter.

<sup>37</sup> A 3.65.3a/1:189 = SD 35.4.

<sup>38</sup> “Written scripture” is tautologous, but is necessary for emphasis here to denote writing and words, and connotes authority or scholarship (technical accuracy). These factors may be helpful in a “word” understanding of the Buddha Word, but one has clearly to go beyond them for a direct experience of inner stillness and clarity.

<sup>39</sup> For a canonical ref, see S 3.20/1:91-93; U 50. Teaching of pratyeka buddhas are said to be recorded in **Khagga,visāṇa S** (Sn 35-75); “individual awakening” (*pacceka, bodhi*) is mentioned in **Nidhi,kaṇḍa S** (Kh 7). For a study, see Ria Kloppenberg, *The Paccekabuddha, a Buddhist Ascetic*, Leiden: EJ Brill, 1974 (rep Wheel 305-307, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society); reviewed by John Strong, *History of Religions* 15,1 Aug 1975:104 f; & KR Norman, “The Pratyeka-Buddha in Buddhism and Jainism,” in *Buddhist Studies (Ancient and Modern)*, eds Denwood & Piatigorsky; repr in Norman, *Collected Papers* 2, 1991:233-249.

<sup>40</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. NY: New American Library, 1960:212.

Before being championed by the counter-culture of the 1960's, Bateson had been busy in the 1920's and 1930's as an anthropologist in Bali, and in helping to found the science of cybernetics among many other things. His ideas were adopted by many thinkers in the anti-psychiatry movement because he provided a model and a new epistemology for developing a novel understanding of human madness, and also for his formulation of the theory of the double bind.

With colleagues Warren McCulloch, Gordon Pask, Ross Ashby, Heinz von Foerster, Norbert Wiener, etc, he elaborated the science of cybernetics. He inspired several models and approaches in the area of psychotherapy, notably that of the MRI Interactional school of Weakland, Jackson, and Watzlawick, and many other later schools of family therapy (including that of the Milan school of Palazzoli), and he directly influenced family therapists such as Brad Keeney, Tom Andersen, Lynn Hoffman and many others. He was familiar with **Alfred Korzybski**<sup>41</sup> who had earlier thought of the same principle:

This principle, made famous by Alfred Korzybski, strikes at many levels. It reminds us in a general way that when we think of coconuts or pigs, there are no coconuts or pigs in the brain. But in a more abstract way, Korzybski's statement asserts that in all thought or perception or communication about perception, there is a transformation, a coding, between the report and the thing reported, the Ding an sich ["thing-in-itself"]. Above all, the relation between the report and that mysterious thing reported tends to have the nature of a classification, an assignment of the thing to a class. Naming is always classifying, and mapping is essentially the same as naming.

(G Bateson 1979)

All this is sobering as we reflect that even Lewis Carroll, who probably had not encountered Buddhism, has given us some profound, albeit literary, glimpses at the true reality that the Buddha is pointing at. Words and ideas are merely thinking and communicating tools. Anyone can use them, and like Humpty Dumpty, they mean just what they choose them to mean. This private reality sometimes reflects or brings into focus, very profound ideas, often quite unforeseen and unknown to the speaker.

Indeed, the success of Buddhism today is often the result of the work of many, who like, Humpty Dumpty, present the Buddha *word* in just the way as they see it: speakers, writers and teachers (like myself especially) who probably do not really understand half the profundity and potential of what they are saying. On the other hand, a personal spiritual experience, say, of mindfulness practice or of dhyana, uplifts one with a sense of liberation that one's life is bettered and never the same again so that one is propelled into a spiral of less and less self-centred activity.

## 5 Approaches to perception

**5.1 PERCEPTION AS CHANGE.** Gregory Bateson, in his well known work, *Mind and Nature* (1979), points out that "Perception operates only on difference. All receipt of information is necessarily the receipt of news of *difference*." (1979:31). He goes on to compare the cognitive process to a simple electric switch:

the switch, considered as a part of an electric circuit, *does not exist* when it is in the on position. From the point of view of the circuit, it is not different from the conducting wire which leads to it and the wire which leads away from it. It is merely "more conductor." Conversely, but similarly, when the switch is off, it does not exist from the point of view of the circuit. It is nothing but a gap between two conductors which themselves exist only as conductors when the switch is on. In other words, the switch is *not* except at the moments of its change of setting, and the concept "switch" has thus a special relation to *time*. It is related to the notion "change" rather than to the notion "object."

(Bateson 1979:120 f)

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<sup>41</sup> Alfred Habdank Skarbek Korzybski (1879-1950), Polish-born American scientist and philosopher.

In other words, the switch is only what it does: it only exists at the time of switching. Otherwise it is no different from the rest of the circuit. “Hence,” concludes Waldron, “even to speak of perception is necessarily to speak of events—and this is to speak in terms of dependent origination.” (Waldron 2002:144).

**5.2 PERCEPTION AS NARRATIVE.** All teachings are mental metaphors in the sense that they are means to an end, that is, the highest good. The Buddha’s teachings comprise of instructions, dialogues, metaphors, parables and stories. Unlike the systematic dogmas of the Abhidhamma, the Buddha’s teaching is, in terms of language and expression, rich, polysemic, often non-technical, very often audience-friendly, and always efficacious.

The most common method the Buddha uses to avoid, or at least reduce, distortion, projection, drop-outs and forgetting, is that of stories and imageries (metaphors, parables, etc); in other words, the worldly language. Such worldly language is effectively not merely an adjunct to Dharma language, direct expression of truths in technical terms (such as impermanence, suffering, not-self, mindfulness, etc), but are vital in giving an expression and clarity that are often beyond ordinary language.

Let us look at a few examples of this vital worldly language: first, at an example of the use of similes. **The Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2), in explaining this power of the recollection of beings faring according to their karma, employs this simile:

Maharajah, just as if there were a palace in the central square [of a town where four roads meet] (*siṅghātaka*), and a man with good eyesight standing on the top of it were to see people **entering** (*pavisanti*) a house, **leaving** (*nikkhamanti*) it, **wandering** (*sañcaranti*) along the carriage-road, and **sitting down** (*nisinnā*) in the central square [where four roads meet]. The thought would occur to him, ‘These people are entering a house, leaving it, walking along the streets, and sitting down in the central square [where four roads meet]’ (D 2.96/1:83)

Here the usage of “entering” (*pavisanti*), “leaving” (*nikkhamanti*) and “wandering” (*sañcaranti*) refers respectively to one being reborn, dying and seeking a new birth (that is, the intermediate state).<sup>42</sup> The “house” represents the body or form of rebirth, and “sitting down (*nisinnā*) in the central square [where four roads meet]” refers to the consciousness finding a new birth in the sense-world (the four roads representing the four elements, earth, water, fire, wind). Here, the “**sitting down**” of the simile refers to the “discernment”<sup>43</sup> coming to be established in a new personality, after wandering in search of ‘it’.” (Harvey 1995:103)

Another example is that from **the Vitakka,saṅṭhāna Sutta** (M 20), that is, the fourth of the five methods recommended for overcoming distractions during meditation:

If, bhikshus, while the monk is not minding and is disregarding those thoughts, there still arises in him evil unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, hate or delusion, then he should attend to the stilling of the thought-formation [by identifying the causes]<sup>44</sup> of those evil unwholesome thoughts.<sup>45</sup>

Then the evil unwholesome thoughts are eliminated and disappear. By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

**SIMILE.** Bhikshus, just as a man finding no reason for walking fast, walks slowly; finding no reason for walking slowly, stands; finding no reason for standing, sits down; finding no reason for sitting down, lies down—thus giving up an awkward posture for an easy one—even so should the monk rid of the evil unwholesome thoughts by attending to the stilling of the thought-formation.

<sup>42</sup> On the teachings of the intermediate state in the Pali suttas, see SD 2.17.

<sup>43</sup> “Discernment,” Peter Harvey’s term for “consciousness” (*viññāṇa*).

<sup>44</sup> *Vitakka,saṅkhāra,saṅṭhāna*. MA explains *saṅkhāra* here as condition, cause or root, and takes the compound to mean “stopping the cause of the thought.” See **Vitakka,saṅṭhāna S** (M 20) = SD 1.6 Introd (4) for details.

<sup>45</sup> **The Daddabha J** (J 322) illustrates this method of going to the root or source of the problem. This story went to the West as “Chicken Little,” “Chicken Licken,” or “Henny Penny” or the like, and was made into a Disney film as “Chicken Little” (2005). See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Sky\\_is\\_Falling#Origin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sky_is_Falling#Origin).

Then the evil unwholesome thoughts are eliminated and disappear. By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

(M 20.6/1:120) = SD 1.6

From this simile, we have a very good idea that as we let go of an unwholesome thought, the mind feels progressively more clear and easy. Its statement in Dharma language—“he should attend to the stilling of the thought-formation”—is easier teased out when read alongside its simile.

The significant of Buddhist narratives is of course the Buddha narrative: the life and legend of the Buddha that Buddhist children sooner or later inherit as received tradition. Aśvaghōṣa (2<sup>nd</sup> century) turns the Buddha-life into an epic in his **Buddha-carita**. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Asaṅga, in his **Uttara Tantra**, presents “the twelve acts of the Buddha,” namely:

- (1) The Bodhisattva in Tuṣita resolves (*pravata*) to be born into the human world.
- (2) The Bodhisattva’s Descent (*bhagavato utkranti*) from Tuṣita into the human world.
- (3) The Conception (*garbha avakranti*) of Mahā Māyā: the dream of the white elephant.
- (4) The Nativity (*janma*) of Siddhārtha in Lumbinī park.
- (5) Siddhārtha’s education (*kala*) in the arts, sciences and martial arts.
- (6) The life of pleasure (*krāmudu*) in the palaces.
- (7) The Great Renunciation (*mahā’bhinṣkramana*) after the four sights and Rāhula’s birth.
- (8) Self-mortification (*duṣkaracarya*) after mastering Ārāḍa’s and Rāma’s systems.
- (9) The Victory over Māra (*mārajit*) just before the Great Awakening.
- (10) The Supreme Awakening (*abhisambodhi*) under the Bodhi tree at Gayā.
- (11) The turning of the Dharma Wheel (*dharmacakra, pravartan*) to the five monks at Vārānaśī.
- (12) The Final Nirvana (*parinirvāna*) at Kuśinagara.

These events are explained in detailed in Buston’s *History of Buddhism*.<sup>46</sup> **The Buddha-vaṃśa Commentary** (by Dhammapāla, 5<sup>th</sup> century) goes on to list 30 major events of every Buddha’s life (BA 298).<sup>47</sup>

Although very few of such events are actually recorded in the Pali Canon or the Āgamas, they are all very familiar to practically all Buddhists, and serve as important received tradition. On a psychological level, these stories contain valuable symbolisms illustrating the pilgrim’s progress on the path. The serious practitioner, however, in due course begins to wean off the legendary Buddha and begins to turn to the Buddha in the Dharma, such as through the recollection of the Buddha (*buddhānussati*),<sup>48</sup> or reflecting on the Buddha’s exhortation: “He who see the Dharma, see me; he who sees me see the Dharma.”<sup>49</sup>

Some important points concerning this worldly language in terms of the nature of perception is helpful here, as follows:

- (1) Historicity. The stories, imageries and similar teachings place the Buddha story in our history so that we can take him as a spiritual ideal.
- (2) Transhistoricity. At the same time, the narrative language and Buddha legend give a sense of true purpose of the spiritual life, that is, to transcend history (samsara).
- (3) Referentiality. The narrative expositions are not taken as ultimate truths but as easy hands-on pointers to them.

<sup>46</sup> Buston or Butön Rin-chen-grup (1290-1364). A Tibetan teacher, translator and historian of Buddhism of the Kagyu tradition. He was involved with the redaction and classification of the Tibetan Canon. His *History of Buddhism*, or more properly, *Doctrinal History* (chos-’byung) is esp noteworthy as it contains a chronological account of Buddhism in India, Nepal and Tibet, as well as an index to all the translations of the Tibetan Canon.

<sup>47</sup> See eg Encyclopaedia of Buddhism: Buddhakṛtya. On the oldest Buddha biography, see **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26) = SD 1.11 Introd.

<sup>48</sup> See SD 15.7.

<sup>49</sup> S 22.87.13/3:120 = SD 8.8 Introd.

- (4) Contextuality. The narratives have no reality of their own, but can only be appreciated in the context of the Dharma.
- (5) Particularity. The narratives have a special meaning for each person according to their level of understanding and disposition.
- (6) Generality. As one's understanding of these narratives deepens and the narrative embellishments are taken for what they really, there is a growing convergence in a common wisdom of the higher truth.
- (7) Progression. One's spiritual progress can be discerned by a progressive internalization of these narratives, so that one begins to see beyond the forest of narratives for the tree of awakening. One begins to see the essence of these narratives in one's own life.

Put more simply in another way, religious language, imagery and mythology are all skilful means serving as glossy packaging to attract the buyer spoiled for choice in the supermarket of religions, cults and simony. They are also a sort of "Buddhism for dummies" guide. We will remain "dummies" if we only read the words without putting the wholesome teachings into practice. Or, worse we merely print them as a merit investment; for, as far as unopened books go, they are but blocks.

I have elaborated this point elsewhere,<sup>50</sup> so a brief comment will suffice here. As we progressively feel the true inner peace of Buddhist mindfulness practice, we find less use for labels, since the product has been consumed and working well. Through the clarity of the mind and centred stillness, we marvel at how the Buddha, a mere human being, could transcend even the highest Gods to be liberated from rebirth and suffering, from samsara. If the Buddha had been a God, we could not have saved ourselves. It may take some more time before much of humanity realizes that the monotheistic God idea arose alongside man's quest for power and dominance over nature. God made man, and man keeps returning the compliment. The true creator is our mind, and the dismantling of ignorance, delusion and pain must begin there.

## 6 Speech and action

**6.1 SPEECH AND BODY LANGUAGE.** Buddhist psychology regards the two common forms of communication—verbal (speech) and physical (body language)—as being "material" (*rūpa*). The Buddhist technical term for this is *viññatti* ("intimation"), that is, communication phenomena, comprising bodily intimation (*kāya,viññatti*) or body language, and verbal intimation (*vacī,viññatti*) or verbal language.<sup>51</sup> They are physical in the sense that they are bodily expressions, not necessarily reflecting the mental state or intention of the speaker, and that their meaning or response depends on the perceiver (the audience).

As such, in Buddhist spiritual training, speech is a form of bodily action, and together with physical action, they come under the purview of moral training (*sīla,sikkhā, adhisīla,sikkhā*).<sup>52</sup> The Buddhist moral training can be summarized in the five precepts (*pañca,sīla*), thus:<sup>53</sup>

- |                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| Bodily actions: | 1. Abstaining from taking life;<br>2. Abstaining from taking the not-given;<br>3. Abstaining from sexual misconduct.  |
| Verbal action:  | 4. Abstaining from falsehood (here a shorthand for practising right speech, that is, speech guided by truthfulness, concord, pleasantness, and beneficence) |
| Mindfulness:    | 5. Abstaining from drugs, intoxicants and addictive habits.   |

This moral training is not an ideal in itself, but it serves as the basis for mental development (*samādhi,-sikkhā*), leading to training in insight wisdom (*paññā,sikkhā*), all of which, working together, lead one to spiritual liberation (*vimutti*).

<sup>50</sup> **Dharma without Buddhism** = SD 35.2(3).

<sup>51</sup> See chart in *Rūpa* = SD 17.2a Table 10 item IX.

<sup>52</sup> D 1:207, 3:220; A 1:229.

<sup>53</sup> On the five precepts, see D 3:235; A 3:203, 275; Vbh 285. For an analysis, see (**Kusalākusala**) **Saṅcetanika Sutta 1** (A 10.206) = SD 3.9.

**6.2 E-PRIME LANGUAGE.** A very remarkable development in recent times in the effort to reduce, even eliminate, perceptive error, is the proposal of **E-Prime language**, or simply, “English Prime.” The term was coined by David Bourland in his *A Linguistic Note: Writing in E-Prime* (1965) to refer to the English language modified by prohibiting the use of the verb “to be” (am, are, is, etc). E-Prime arose from Alfred Korzybski’s General Semantics and his observation that English speakers most often use “to be” to express dogmatic beliefs or assumptions, or to avoid expressing opinions and feelings as such.<sup>54</sup>

E-Prime eliminates the “is-dependent” over-defining of situations where we tend to confuse one aspect or viewpoint of an experience with a much more complex totality. This over-defining occurs chiefly in sentences using the “is of identity” or copula (eg “Bodhi is a teacher”: but, does he work as a teacher 24 hours a day?) and the “is of predication” (eg “The lotus is white”: but, does it look white in red light?).

E-Prime helps one be more objective and creative in problem solving. Such premature judgments as “There is no solution to this problem” can be restated more objectively as “I don’t see a solution to this problem yet.”

Or, if you were to see a man, reeking of whisky, stagger down the street and then collapse, you might think, “He *is* drunk.” In E-Prime you would instead think, “He *acts* drunk,” or “He *looks* drunk.” After all, the “drunk” might be an actor playing the role of a drunk, or that even though he *smells* drunk, he could be struggling with the effect of some other cause, like he has just been beaten up by some hooligans. Instead of simply walking off, you might then look a little more carefully, and send for an ambulance to help him.

Just as in mindfulness practice, one would observe phenomena objectively, as they arise at the sense-door, so too in E-Prime one shapes one’s language to be closely reflective of the situation in a non-judgmental tone. Here are is famous example of E-Prime reconstruction of a literary piece:

Standard English	E-Prime
<p>Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, “and what is the use of a book,” thought Alice “without pictures or conversation?”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">—Lewis Carroll’s <i>Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.</i></p>	<p>Alice began to tire of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister read, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, “and what use does a book have,” thought Alice “without pictures or conversation?” —modified (Wikipedia)</p>

A few simple Buddhist examples of E-Prime language are as follows:

Standard English	E-Prime
<p>(1) Devadatta is an evil person.                      (2) This teacher is an arhat.                      (3) All non-Buddhists are superstitious.                      (4) Piya is lazy.</p>	<p>(1) Devadatta has done some evil deeds.                      (2) This teacher has the demeanour of an arhat.                      (3) If you do not understand Buddhism, you tend to be superstitious.                      (4) Piya has difficulty finishing the work.</p>

Evidently, an understanding and proper usage of E-Prime helps one express oneself in a clear, positive, compassionate and harmonious manner: it helps in right speech.

<sup>54</sup> A good place to start your research on E-Prime is <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/E-prime> and then follow the links.

## 7 What is perception (*saññā*)?

**7.1 DEFINITIONS.** All definitions are contextual (they depend on the passage) and temporal (they depend on the time or historical period when it is used). This is simply so because language is a human convention and we often use words as we understand or misunderstand them. However, for profitable communication or discussion, it is indispensable that we are talking “about the same things,” that is, we define our terms as clearly as possible and stick to those definitions, or explain any diversions or exceptions.

All these helpful technicalities are not always present in the early Buddhist texts. This is not because of any oversight, but simply because they belonged to an *oral tradition*, where teachings are tailor-cut to fit the listener’s or audience’s disposition, needs or question. The Buddha is like a wise healer who heals his patients with just the right amount of medicine and gives instructions in accordance with the ailment. Understandably, many of his prescriptions and much of his terminology are *contextual*.

While the Abhidhamma is an admirable attempt at “universalizing” the Buddha’s healing methods and terminology, it is a scholastic tradition that sometimes, and in important ways, departs from the canonical (Sutta) text and context.<sup>55</sup> The Abhidhamma is certainly grist for the academic mill, and helpful as it may be in intellectual discussions, the Suttas as a whole present a comprehensive and cohesive teaching so that the meanings and import of their teachings and terminology can be teased out from their various contexts, especially in the light of the living Buddhist contemplative practice. In short, the Suttas are not just great literature for one to “appreciate,” but most significantly, they are living words for personal transformation leading to spiritual awakening.

**7.1.0 “Idea.”** Let us first look at the lexicographical definitions of *saññā* in the Suttas. **The Mahā Vedalla Sutta** (M 43), for example, defines perception (*saññā*) as follows:

“**Perception, perception,**” it is said, avuso. In what connection, avuso, is it called perception? And what does it perceive?

It perceives [notes], avuso, it perceives, therefore it is called perception.<sup>56</sup>

And what does it perceive?

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

It perceives, avuso, it perceives, therefore it is called perception. (M 43.8/1:293) = SD 30.2

And **the Khajjaniya Sutta** (S 22.79), too, defines perception in almost identical words:

And what, bhikshus, do you call **perception**?

It perceives [notes], bhikshus, therefore it is called perception.<sup>57</sup>

And what does it perceive?

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

It perceives, bhikshus, therefore it is called perception. (S 22.79.9/3:87) = SD 17.9

These definitions point to the “recognizing” or “naming” function of perception. (The earlier stage where one *cognizes* a colour, that is, by seeing, is the function of *consciousness*.)<sup>58</sup> As **Gethin** has noted, it appears that this kind of stock definition, illustrating the function of *saññā* by reference to various colours, has led translators to render it in the context of the aggregates as “perception” (1985:36).

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion, see **Dhamma and Abhidhamma** = SD 26.1.

<sup>56</sup> *Sañjānāti sañjānāti ti kho āvuso, tasmā saññā ti vuccati.* On *saññā*, see SD 17.5. **Sue Hamilton**, in *Identity and Experience*, points out that although the def of *viññāṇa* here encroaches on that of *saññā*, we should understand that *saññā* does the actual discrimination of the five sensory objects, identifying say, a taste, more precisely, while *viññāṇa* “is the awareness by which we experience every stage of the cognitive process, including the process of discriminating” (1996a:92). See S:B 1072 n114; also *Viññāṇa* = SD 17.8a.1.

<sup>57</sup> *Sañjānāti ti kho bhikkhave tasmā saññā ti vuccati.*

<sup>58</sup> See SD 17.8a.

Alex Wayman, for example, has pointed out that there passages where “perception” does not make sense of the Nikāya’s usage of *saññā* as a technical term, and he suggests the word “idea” as the proper translation for *saññā* (1976). His suggestion is supported by Gethin:

This certainly seems to make better sense of the technical usage in connection with the *khandhas*. A *saññā* of, say, “blue” then becomes, not so much a passive awareness of the visual sensation we subsequently agree to call “blue,” but rather the active noting of that sensation, and the recognizing of it as “blue”—that is, more or less, the idea of “blueness.” This appears to be in general how *saññā* is understood in the commentarial literature.<sup>59</sup> (1985:36)

It is certainly more technically accurate to translate *saññā* as “idea” or “ideation,” and this would surely help in any explanation of the term. However, such a *technicality* may work against one’s *familiarity* with “perception” as the popular rendition of *saññā*.

For example, it is easier and more useful to speak of “the perception of impermanence” (*anicca,-saññā*) than “the idea of impermanence,” or of “perceiving impermanence” rather than “ideating permanence” (or even “keeping in mind the idea of permanence”). We have effectively here (re)defined *saññā* as “the active noting of an object and the recognizing of it in due course.” English is a living language, and we should keep it alive.

**7.1.1 As one of the aggregates.** It is worth remembering that all the five aggregates are not separate entities, but function interdependently as an integral whole.<sup>60</sup> We know that “perception” is not a separate reality and does not operate in itself. As evident from **the Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18), we see perception *co-operating*<sup>61</sup> with other aspects of the perceptual process:<sup>62</sup>

Friends, dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises.

The meeting of the three is contact.

With contact as condition, there is feeling.

What one feels, one perceives.

What one perceives, one thinks about.

What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates. (M 18.16/1:111) [8.2]

“The meeting of the three is contact”: here we see consciousness operating in the presence of the sense-faculty and sense-object, as simple awareness (without any discriminatory function). Then we see this contact giving rise to feeling, and feeling to perception.

It is interesting to note here that one of the classical Sanskrit meanings of *saññā*, “naming,”<sup>63</sup> is relevant here. At this point, the experience is “named” or tagged as “agreeable,” “disagreeable” or simply disregarded. The mind becomes especially obsessed with the first two, so that mental constructs and ideas proliferate (*papañceti*). And so suffering begins and rapidly grows.

**7.1.2 “Ideas” as meditation-objects.** *Saññā* may also refer to the ideas that are meditation-objects, such as the seven perceptions (*satta,saññā*), such as those given in **the Satta Saññā Sutta** (A 7.46), namely,

the perception of foulness (*asubha,saññā*),

the perception of death (*maraṇa,saññā*),

the perception of the loathsomeness of food (*āhāre paṭikkūla,saññā*),

the perception of not delighting in the whole world (*sabba,loke anabhirata,saññā*),

<sup>59</sup> Vism 14.130; cf Nyanaponika, *Abhidhamma Studies*, Kandy, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 1971:68-72. (Gethin’s fn)

<sup>60</sup> See SD 17.1b Introd (1).

<sup>61</sup> Note that here this word means “working together,” and not its usual dictionary sense.

<sup>62</sup> “Perceptual process” refers to the mental process centering around perception (*saññā*); “cognitive process” refers to the same centering around consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

<sup>63</sup> Sanskrit-English Dictionary: *saññā*.

the perception of impermanence (*anicca,saññā*),  
 the perception of suffering in the impermanent (*anicce dukka,saññā*), and  
 the perception of the not-self in what is suffering (*dukkhe anatta,saññā*). (A 7.46/4:46-53)

Ten perceptions are given in **the Dasa Saññā Sutta** (A 10.56) [Table 9.4a] and another ten in **the Giri-mānanda Sutta** (A 10.60) [Table 9.4a]. These various perception exercises mentioned here are discussed and collated below [9.4].

*Saññā* is also used in reference to wrong views, that is, the perversion of perception (*saññā,vipallāsa*), as in the perception of permanence (*niccam,saññā*), the perception of the pleasant (*sukha,saññā*), the perception of self (*atta,saññā*), and the perception of the beautiful (*subha,saññā*) [9.3].

In this connection, **the Visuddhi,magga** gives an Abhidhamma definition of *saññā* as follows:

All (*saññā*) have the characteristic of noting (*sañjānana*). Its property is the making of a sign that is a condition for noting again, “This is the very same thing”: just as carpenters and others work with wood, etc. Its manifestation is the making of a conviction by virtue of a sign that has been learnt, like the blind perceiving an elephant [U 68 f]. Its basis is whatever object that arisen within range, like the idea (*saññā*) “people” that arises for young animals towards scarecrows.

(Vism 14.130/462; cf DhsA 110; Abhav 18)

Evidently, *saññā* in the role of labelling or noting, plays an important role in the psychology of memory, especially in connection with recognizing and recalling. The Sarvāstivādin, too, give *sañjñā* the same role: “*sañjñā* is noting, the taking up of the sign of the field [object]” (*sañjñā sañjānam viṣaya,-nimittôdgrah*).<sup>64</sup>

The Abhidhamma definition clearly suggests that *saññā* has a close relationship to mindfulness (*sati*): “strong *saññā* is in fact the basis of *sati*.”<sup>65</sup> It should also be noted that many such “memories,” especially those of the unskilled mind, are simply conceptions or notions based on a particular perspective of past events. In other words, they are misconceptions arising through perception associated with unwholesome consciousness.

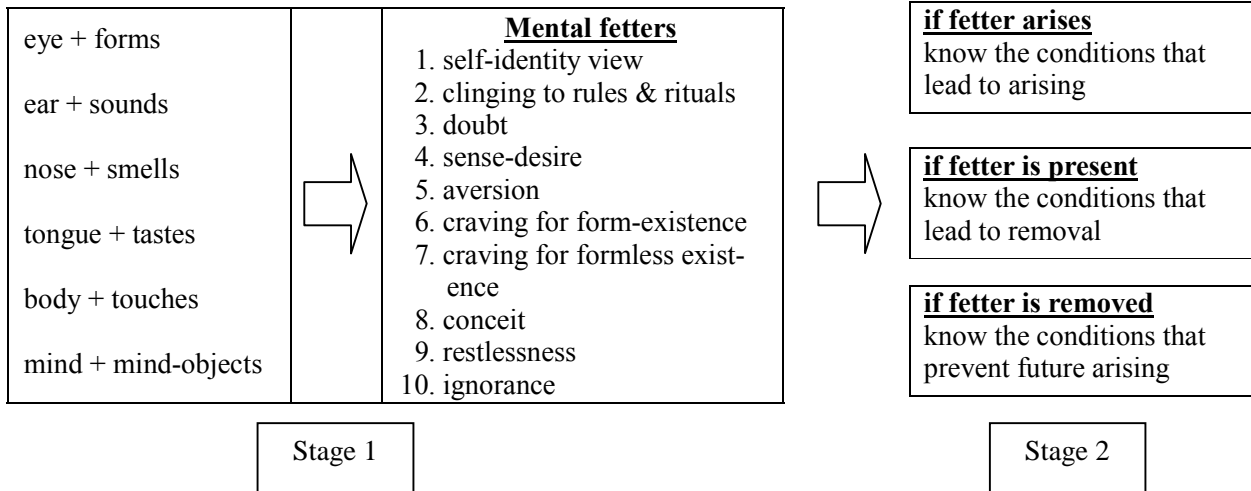
The point is that as far as Abhidhamma is concerned our “remembering” fails to reflect properly the way things truly are. This point is not particularly hard to appreciate, even conventional wisdom tells me that if I am brooding on some wrong done to me, my view of the world is likely to be coloured as a result. (Gethin 2001:42)

**7.1.3 Consciousness in its entirety.** When used in the names of the mental realms or spheres, *saññā* refers to consciousness in its entirety, namely, the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception (*n’eva,saññā,nāsaññāyatana*), and the non-conscious beings (*asañña,satta*). In both cases, *saññā* does not refer to perception alone, but also to all the other aspects of consciousness.

**7.2 DEALING WITH THE MENTAL FETTERS.** An important aspect of meditation is the cultivation of the skill to deal with them, thus:

<sup>64</sup> Abhdk 54. See also Wayman 1976:325-335.

<sup>65</sup> Gethin 2001:41.



**Table 7.2 Two stages in the contemplation of the six sense-spheres**

The Tika Nipāta of the Aṅguttara Nikāya has four suttas of the same name—the **Ti,nidāna Sutta 1-4**—that speak of the “three causes” (*tīṇi nidānāni*) of karma and their ending, thus:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Ti,nidāna Sutta 1</b> (A 3.107/1:263) | Greed, hate and delusion lead to karma.  |
| <b>Ti,nidāna Sutta 2</b> (A 3.108/1:263) | Absence of greed, hate and delusion do not lead to karma.  |
| <b>Ti,nidāna Sutta 3</b> (A 3.109/1:264) | How thinking and pondering over desirable things of the past, present, and future, keep one fettered to desire.              |
| <b>Ti,nidāna Sutta 4</b> (A 3.110/1:265) | How not thinking and pondering over desirable things of the past, present, and future, do not generate the fetter of desire. |

Greed, hate and delusion are the unwholesome roots of karma, which drive one to be lost in thoughts of lust for desirable things in the past, the present and the future. On a more elaborate scale, such thoughts are due to one or other of the ten fetters (*samyojana*) [Table 7.2].

These fetters arise from what has been perceived, by way of various thoughts and considerations, to the arising of desire, and then to bondage (as shown in **the Ti,nidāna Sutta 3**, A 3.109). In the first stage of dealing with the fetters (in satipatthana practice), one notes the fetter (generally one of the first three fetters) as it arises in connection with the appropriate sense-sphere.

In the second stage of mental training, one deals with the fetter that has arisen, noticing the conditions for its arising. Then, one observes without reacting to the instances where perception may cause desire and bondage, and go on to notice the general patterns of one’s mental tendency so that one is able to prevent the fetter from arising again.

**7.3 THE LATENT TENDENCIES.** The contemplation of the sense-spheres places great emphasis on understanding and managing the perceptual process. The attention is directed to the initial stage of perception, which if left unattended, can lead to unwholesome mental reactions. In fact, the unwholesome reactions only reinforce our habits and so build up our latent tendencies (*anusaya*). A set of seven latent tendencies are listed in **the Saṅgīti Sutta**,<sup>66</sup> **the Cha,chakka Sutta**,<sup>67</sup> **the Anusaya Sutta**,<sup>68</sup> **the Paṭisambhidā,magga**,<sup>69</sup> and **the Vibhaṅga**.<sup>70</sup> The last two (in the Abhidhamma tradition) define latent tendencies in practically the same way as the suttas:<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup> D 33.2.3(12)/3:254, 282.

<sup>67</sup> M 148.28/3:285.

<sup>68</sup> A 7.11-12/4:8 f.

<sup>69</sup> Pm §587/123.

And what is **the latent tendency to beings**?

There are the seven latent tendencies:

- (1) the latent tendency to sensual lust;
- (2) the latent tendency to aversion;
- (3) the latent tendency to conceit;
- (4) the latent tendency to wrong view;
- (5) the latent tendency to doubt;
- (6) the latent tendency to lust for existence;
- (7) the latent tendency to ignorance.

That which in the world is pleasant and likable, there the tendency to sensual lust of beings lies latent.

That which in the world is unpleasant and unlikable, there the tendency to aversion of beings lies latent.

Thus in these two states, ignorance continuously occurs, and so too conceit, wrong view and doubt.

This is the latent tendency to beings.<sup>72</sup>

(Pm §587/123; Vbh §816/341)

These latent tendencies are deeply embedded in our minds through past habitual acts and can only be uprooted on attaining the Path. (3)-(4) are eliminated upon stream-winning; (1)-(2) upon non-return; (5)-(7) upon arhathood. **The Abhidhamm’attha Saṅgaha** defines it thus:

The latent dispositions (*anusaya*) are defilements which “lie along with” (*anuseti*) the mental process to which they belong, rising to the surface as obsessions whenever they meet with suitable conditions. The term “latent dispositions” highlights the fact that the defilements are liable to arise so long as they have not been eradicated by the supramundane paths. Though all defilements are, in a sense, *anusayas*, the 7 mentioned here are the most prominent.

(Abhs 7.9; Abhs:BRS 268)<sup>73</sup>

This Abhidhamma list of the seven latent tendencies hints that the shorter list of three latent tendencies is the more compact one, found, for example, in **the Pahāna Sutta** (S 36.3), thus:

- (1) the latent tendency to lust (*rāgānusaya*);
- (2) the latent tendency to aversion (*paṭighānusaya*); and
- (3) the latent tendency to ignorance (*avijjā’nusaya*). (S 36.3/4:204-206) = SD 31.1

A list of two latent tendencies is found in **the Kaccāna.gotta Sutta** (S 12.15)<sup>74</sup> and **the Channa Sutta** (S 22.90),<sup>75</sup> namely, the latent tendency to mindset and to inclination (*cetaso adhiṭṭhānaṃ abhinivesānusa-yam*). The Buddha describes one with right view (in terms of latent tendencies) in the following way:

<sup>70</sup> Vbh §816/341, §949/383.

<sup>71</sup> See **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18.8/1:110) = SD 6.14 Introd (5).

<sup>72</sup> *Katamo ca sattānaṃ anusayo? Sattānusayā: kāmarāgānusayo, paṭighānusayo, mānānusayo, diṭṭhānusayo, vicikicchā’nusayo, bhavarāgānusayo, avijjā’nusayo. Yam loke piyarūpaṃ sātārūpaṃ, ettha sattānaṃ kāmarāgā-usayo [rāgānusayo, Vbh] anuseti. Yam loke appiyarūpaṃ asātārūpaṃ ettha sattānaṃ paṭighānusayo anuseti. Iti imesu dvīsu dhammesu avijjā’nupatitā, tadekaṭṭho māno ca diṭṭhi ca vicikicchā ca daṭṭhabbā. Ayam sattānaṃ anusayo.*

<sup>73</sup> See also Abhs:SR 172; and **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18) = SD 6.14(5).

<sup>74</sup> S 12.15/2:17 = SD 6.13.

<sup>75</sup> S 22.90/3:135 = SD 6.13.

This world, Kaccāna, is mostly bound by fixation [attachment], clinging and inclination.<sup>76</sup>

But the person (with right view) does not engage in, cling to, incline towards that fixation and clinging, that latent tendency to mindset and to inclination—he does not take a stand (that anything is) “my self.”<sup>77</sup>

He has neither uncertainty nor doubt that what arises is only suffering arising, what ceases is only suffering ceasing.<sup>78</sup> His knowledge about this is independent of others.<sup>79</sup>

**The Dhammapada**, in its characteristically pithy style, condenses all the forms of latent tendency into its essence—craving—as shown in this stanza:

<i>Yathā pi mūle anupaddave daḷhe</i>	Just as when its strong roots are unharmed,
<i>Chinno 'pi rukkho punar-eva rūhati</i>	A tree, even when felled would rise again—
<i>Evam pi tañhānusaye anūhate</i>	Even so, when latent craving remains rooted,
<i>Nibbattatī dukkham idarī punappunari</i>	This suffering arises again and again. (Dh 338)

**Analayo** summarizes the effects of the latent tendencies thus:

To contemplate the effects these underlying tendencies can create in the mind may be undertaken by directing awareness to the untrained mind’s “tendency” to react to sensory experience with either lust or irritation; to its “tendency” to respond to more theoretical information by either forming views and opinions or else by feeling confused or doubtful, and by contemplating how the sense of “I” underlying subjective experience “tends” to manifest as conceit and moreover “tends” to clamour for eternal continuation (viz craving for existence). Contemplating in this way will reveal the surprising degree to which the unawakened mind in some way or other “tends” towards ignorance. (2003:223 n19)

In simple terms, our “normal” mode of perceptual operation is that of autopiloting ourselves driven by craving into predictably reacting to internal stimuli (thoughts) and external stimuli (through the physical senses). When we see something we like, we like it because we have liked something like it before. When we dislike something, we are usually reacting to similar stimuli we have experienced before. And

<sup>76</sup> “bound...adherence,” PTS *upāy'upādānābhinivesa, vinibandha*, but preferred reading is Be Ce *upāy'upādānābhinivesa, vinibaddha* = *upāya* (attachment, fixation) + *upādāna* (clinging) + *abhinivesa* (inclination, mindset, adherence) + *vinibaddha* (bound, shackled) [alt reading *vinibandha*, bondage]. Comy: Each of the three—fixation, clinging, inclination [mindset]—arise by way of craving (*tañhā*) and views (*dīṭṭhi*), for it is through these that one fixates to, clings to, inclines to the phenomena of the three spheres as “I” and “mine.” (SA 2:33). These three words appear to be syns or near-syns of latent tendency, but I have rendered them in order of their subtlety (fixation, clinging, inclination [mindset]). See S:B 736 n31.

<sup>77</sup> “But this... ‘My self’,” *tañ cāyam upāy'upādānam cetaso adhiṭṭhānam abhinivesānusayam na upeti na upādīyati nādhiṭṭhati “attā me” ti*. Comy: Craving and views are called “mental standpoint” (*cetaso adhiṭṭhana*) because they are the foundation for the (unwholesome) mind, and “the latent tendency to inclination [mindset],” or perhaps “inclination [mindset] and latent tendency” (*abhinivesānusaya*) because they stay to the mind and lie latent there (SA 2:33). This is a difficult sentence, and I am guided by the Sutta spirit than the letter. See S:B 736 n32. Cf **Hālidakāni S 1** (S 22.3.9/3:10) = SD 10.12.

<sup>78</sup> Comy: Suffering (*dukkha*) here refers to the 5 aggregates of clinging. What the noble disciple sees, when he reflects on his own existence, is not a self or a substantially existent person but only the arising and passing away of causal conditions (*paccay'uppanna, nirodha*) (of dependent arising). (SA 2:33). Cf **Sela**’s verses (S 548-551/1:134) & **Vajirā**’s verses (S 553-55/1:135).

<sup>79</sup> S 12.15.6/2:17 = S 22.90/3:135) = SD 16.13. “Independent of others,” *apara-p, paccayā*. From stream-entry on, the noble disciple sees the truth of the Dharma by himself, and as such is not dependent on anyone else, not even the Buddha, for his insight into the Dharma. However, he may still approach the Buddha or an enlightened teacher for instructions and guidance in meditation until he attains liberation.

when we feel indifferent, we are usually ignorant of the real situation. In this sense, we are what we think, and this is unflattering: but there is a way out.<sup>80</sup>

## 8 The perceptual process

**8.1 THE MADHU,PIṄḌIKA SUTTA.** The *Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta* (M 18) contains a central teaching in Buddhist training: it explains the conditioned nature of the perceptual process. It is also the earliest description of perception in human history. In the *Sutta*, Mahā Kaccāna uses the perceptual process to explain how to dispel the various forms of perceptions so that they are not reinforced and lie latent (*anuseti*) in our minds, and how to overcome the latent tendencies (*anusaya*) operating in the perceptual process.<sup>81</sup> This canonical version differs in some important aspects from the more developed *Abhidhamma* and *Commentarial* version, but one feature is common to both, that is, that an act of complete perception does not arise as an immediate result of the contact between the organ and the sense-object.

Perception is regarded as a thought-process that begins as a simple sensation and ends up with the complete apprehension of the object. The canonical theory of the perceptual process comprises six stages.<sup>82</sup>

(1) The first stage is, for example, **visual consciousness** (*cakkhu,viññāṇa*)—or *mutatis mutandis*, any of the other five sense-consciousnesses—which arises with the eye and visual object as its conditions. At this point, it is bare sensation before the object is fully apprehended (which is similarly understood in the *Abhidhamma*).

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

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

(4) The fourth stage is **perception** or, more technically, *apperception* (*saññā*).<sup>83</sup> The fact that *viññāṇa* (bare sensation) occurs before *saññā* (bare reaction) shows that *saññā* represents a more complex form of awareness. While *viññāṇa* refers to mere sensory awareness, *saññā* “suggests a state of awareness obtained by introducing distinctions to the earlier stage of bare awareness.”<sup>84</sup>

(5) The fifth stage is **thinking** (*vitakka*, often translated as “initial application (of thought)”), suggesting a stage where the perceived object is *interpreted*.

(6) The sixth and last stage is called **mental proliferation** (*papañca*) that “hints at the tendency of the individual’s imagination to break loose” (Ñāṇananda 1971:4).

**Sue Hamilton** gives this illustration of how mental proliferation creates (reifies) various situations for one:

Let us imagine, first, that a person enters a darkened room. So dark is it that the first feeling is one of disorientation—even imbalance: he may even instinctively put out his hands in order to steady himself. In order to feel even minimally oriented, he needs to derive from the darkness some degree of “sorting it out.” Perhaps most basically, in order for him to feel that he is standing on a stable foundation he needs to ascertain that it is “a room,” with walls, floor, ceiling, and so on: otherwise it is simply amorphous disorienting dark space. And in order for it more specifically to be *that* room, he has to ascertain the shape, corners and limits of it. Having done this, if he is dimly aware that there are various dark shapes in the room, it is until he identifies them specifically—table, chair, sofa, standard lamp—that he knows any more about the room than its shape and that it is not empty: it is a sitting room. Gradually, he fills in more detail—pictures, books,

<sup>80</sup> For a practical account of *anusaya*, see “**T** the nature of identity = SD 19.1(5).

<sup>81</sup> **The Cha,chakka S** (M 148) gives a more detailed description on how the latent tendencies arise and how they are overcome (M 148.28-40/3:285-287) = SD 26.6.

<sup>82</sup> M 18.15-18/1:112 = SD 6.14. See also *Analayo* 2003:222-226.

<sup>83</sup> See **WS Waldron’s** fn at (2.2) above.

<sup>84</sup> See *Hamilton* 1996a:53-65 (ch 3); *Karunadasa* 2001:211.

photographs, empty wine glasses, a cushion on the floor, and so on. Each stage contributes to the way that the room as a whole becomes identified to him so that having initially encountered simply dark space he comes to “know” the room and its contents as a complete whole. From the amorphous darkness a “real” room is discerned. (Hamilton 2000:145)

What is happening here is that the person in the dark room is delineating or working out boundaries of each object, thought, idea, feeling and so on, so that he can identify them in some “real” sense. This is basically what “making manifold” (*papañceti*) means.

“Mental proliferation” (*papañca*)<sup>85</sup> or “conceiving” (*maññanā*)<sup>86</sup> are mental constructs created through defilements, and which in turn reinforce themselves as the grounds for even stronger defilements so that it forms a vicious cycle of habitual tendencies. This is a very complex level of experience that is coloured by one’s desires and prejudices.<sup>87</sup> This last stage of the process is clearly detailed in the short **Cetanā Sutta 1** (S 12.38):

Bhikshus, what one wills, and what one plans, and what lies latent—this is a support<sup>88</sup> for the continuation of consciousness. When there is a support, there is a basis for the establishing of consciousness. When consciousness is established and increases, there occurs further rebirth. When there is further rebirth, there arise further birth, decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, anxiety and despair. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. (S 12.38/2:65 f)<sup>89</sup>

(1) Sense-consciousness	The conjunction of sense-faculty, sense-object and <u>sense-consciousness</u> lead to bare sensation.
(2) Sense-impression	This conjunction leads to <u>sense-contact</u> (reaction or stimuli).
(3) Feeling	One reacts to the pleasant feeling, painful feeling, or neutral feeling.
(4) Perception	One recognizes or regards the feeling accordingly.
(5) Thinking	The perceived sense-object is interpreted.
(6) Mental proliferation	One’s desires and prejudices takes over by way of profuse thinking.

**Table 8.1 The perceptual process: a summary**

At the start of the Sutta, the Buddha mentions the seven latent tendencies [7.3], and though not explicitly mentioned, these latent tendencies are clearly the activity of mental proliferation, which are present even in newborn babies.<sup>90</sup> **Nyanaponika** further points out that latent tendency includes both the actually risen mental defilement and the corresponding mental disposition, this being the result of longtime habits (1949:238).

<sup>85</sup> Eg **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18/1:108-114) = SD 6.14.

<sup>86</sup> Eg **Mūla,pariyāya S** (M 2.3-26/1:1-4) = SD 11.8.

<sup>87</sup> Karunadasa argues that in this sixfold process, the final stage of perception is not “mental proliferation” (as proposed by Sarathchandra, 1958 & Ñāṇananda 1971:5 ff) but actually “perception” (stage 4) since “what follows *saññā* could be understood not as a process of sense-perception but as a purely ideational process set up by a process of perception. In point of fact, both Sarachchandra and Ñāṇananda (1971:5 ff, 41 ff) explain the stages subsequent to *saññā* as a process of interpretation and judgement.” (2001:212).

<sup>88</sup> “Support,” *ārammaṇa*, also tr “object,” that is, one of the six sense-objects, forming the external support for sense-perception, and without them there is no sense-perception.

<sup>89</sup> See S:B 757 n112.

<sup>90</sup> **Mahā Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 64.3/1:432 f) = SD 21.10; cf **Samaṇa,maṇḍika S** (M 78.8/2:24 f) = SD 18.9.

**8.2 MANAGING THE PERCEPTUAL PROCESS.** Now let us examine the famous original passage of the teaching in the **Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18):

Friends, dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises.

**The meeting of the three is contact.**<sup>91</sup>

With contact as condition, there is feeling.

What one feels, one perceives.

What one perceives, one thinks about.<sup>92</sup>

What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates.<sup>93</sup>

What a person mentally proliferates is the source through which proliferative notions due to perception<sup>94</sup> impact one regarding past, future and present forms cognizable through the eye.<sup>95</sup>

Friends, dependent on the ear and sounds, ear-consciousness arises....

Friends, dependent on the nose and smells, nose-consciousness arises....

Friends, dependent on the tongue and tastes, tongue-consciousness arises....

Friends, dependent on the body and touches, body-consciousness arises....

Friends, dependent on the mind<sup>96</sup> and mind-objects, mind-consciousness<sup>97</sup> arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates. What a person mentally proliferates is the source through which proliferative notions due to perception impact one regarding past, future and present mind-objects cognizable through the mind. (M 18.16/1:111 f) = SD 6.14<sup>98</sup>

This is the Pali of the first paragraph of the Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta passage, and the verbs have been underlined and translated:<sup>99</sup>

*Cakkhuñ ca āvuso paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati* (“arises”) *cakkhu,viññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso,*

*phassa,paccayā vedanā,*

*yaṃ vedeti* (“one feels”) *taṃ sañjānāti,*

*yaṃ sañjānāti* (“one perceives”) *taṃ vitakketi,*

*yaṃ vitakketi* (“one thinks about”) *taṃ papañceti,*

*yaṃ papañceti* (“mentally proliferates”) *tato,nidānaṃ purisaṃ papañca,saññā,saṅkhā*

*samudācaranti* (“they impact”) *atītānagata,paccuppannesu cakkhu,viññeyyesu rūpesu.*

(M 18.16/1:111) = SD 6.14<sup>100</sup>

<sup>91</sup> *Tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso.* For a discussion on this passage, see Bucknell 1999:318 ff.

<sup>92</sup> “One thinks about,” *vitakketi*. On how when thinking stops, desires do not arise, see **Sakka,pañha S** (D 21.2.2/2:277).

<sup>93</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>94</sup> *Papañca,saññā,saṅkhā*: Analayo tr as “concoctions of proliferation and cognitions” (2003:222): see SD 16.4 Introd (3).

<sup>95</sup> This important passage is the earliest statement on the Buddhist theory of perception. See SD 6.14 Introd (4).

<sup>96</sup> “The mind,” *mana*. Here Comy glosses as *bhavaṅga,citta* (MA 2:79), the life-continuum, sometimes called the unconscious or sub-conscious.

<sup>97</sup> “Mind-consciousness,” *mano,viññāṇa*. Here Comy glosses as “advertence” (*āvajjana*) and impulsion (*javana*) (MA 2:77).

<sup>98</sup> See also **Viññāṇa** = SD 17.8a(8.1).

<sup>99</sup> See Nāṇananda 1986:5.

<sup>100</sup> A similar passage is at **Pariññā S** (S 35.60) where, however, the learned noble is revulsed (*nibbindati*) at the contact arising from sense-organ, sense-object and sense-consciousness (also using the sentence, *tinnaṃ saṅgati*

It is interesting to note that all the verbs of this passage are in *the passive voice*, meaning that the perceptual process is often self-propelled, so that by the time it reaches the last stage—that of mental proliferation—one has become a helpless victim of one’s own thoughts. **Analayo** describes this process thus:

The crucial stage in this sequence, where the subjective bias can set in and distort the perceptual process, occurs with the initial appraisal of feeling (*vedanā*) and cognition (*saññā*). Initial distortions of the sense data arising at this stage will receive further reinforcement by thinking and by conceptual proliferation.<sup>101</sup> Once the stage of conceptual proliferation is reached, the course is set. The proliferations are projected back onto the sense data and the mind continues proliferating by interpreting experience in line with the original biased cognition. The stages of cognition and initial conceptual reaction are therefore decisive aspects of this conditioned sequence. (2003:222)

However, we do have a vital chance of breaking the vicious cycle of mental proliferation: that chance lies between feeling and perceiving, that is, one should have a proper understanding of “what one feels, that one perceives” (*yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti*). We will first examine what happens when we simply let ourselves be autopiloted along into the grasps of mental proliferation. Then we will discuss how to prevent this and free ourselves at least momentarily from mentally proliferating.

**8.3 THE MENTAL CANKERS.** Another important teaching model used by the Buddha here is that of the mental cankers (*āsava*), which is closely related to the perceptual process. It is difficult to find a single English translation (either a word or an expression) for *āsava*, since it is a pregnant term. These cankers have two basic senses: “they flow into” (like a flood) (hence “influx”) or “they flow out” (as of a festering wound; hence “outflows”)<sup>102</sup>—both represented by the word, *āsavati*. As such, the cankers flow into and out of the perceptual process and so influence it.

Scholars have variously translated *āsava* as “taints” (“deadly taints,” TW Rhys Davids), “corruptions,” “intoxicants,” “biases,” “depravity,” “misery,” “evil (influence),” or simply left untranslated. Many scholars, however, use the figurative term “mental canker,” or simply “canker,” which reflects its pernicious and painful nature.

The oldest lists of cankers often mentioned in **the suttas** are threefold, appearing as two separate sets: as what I call “the *diṭṭh’āsava* set” and “the *avijjāsava* set.” The first set of cankers—the *diṭṭh’āsava* set—comprises the following:<sup>103</sup>

- (1) the canker of sense-desire (*kām’āsava*),
- (2) the canker of (the desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), and
- (3) the canker of wrong view (*diṭṭh’āsava*).

The second set of cankers—the *avijjāsava* set—comprises the following:

- (1) the canker of sense-desire (*kām’āsava*),
- (2) the canker of (the desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), and
- (3) the canker of ignorance (*avijjāsava*).

The second is the more common of the two sets, and is found throughout the five Nikāyas and the Vinaya.<sup>104</sup> “Views” (*diṭṭhi*), meaning wrong views, as we know, are rooted in “ignorance” (*avijjā*). As

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*phasso*, S 35.60.16]), and as such “becomes dispassionate (*virajjati*); through dispassion, he is liberated (*vimuccati*); through liberation, he understands, ‘Clinging has been fully understood by me.’” (S 35.604:32 f). **The Mahā Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 28) closes in a similar manner, beginning with the statement: “If, friends, 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 Introd (2).

<sup>101</sup> Sn 874 emphasizes the dependence of conceptual proliferation on cognition in particular.

<sup>102</sup> Cf **Vajira S** (A 3.25/1:124).

<sup>103</sup> **Saṅgīti S** (D 33.1.10(20)/3:216); **Sammā, diṭṭhi S** (M 9.70/1:55) = SD 11.14, **Āsava S** (S 38.8/4:256); **Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 3.59.4/1:167), **Nibbedhika Pariyāya S** (A 6.63/3:410) = SD 6.11.

such, it is likely that in the Canon, “the canker of views” (*diṭṭh’āsava*) and “the canker of ignorance” (*avijjāsava*) are synonymous. This notion is supported by the fact that they appear in very similar contexts, but never appear together in the same sutta.

In the suttas, the two sets are conflated to form the four cankers (*cattāro āsavā*) in a figurative manner and called “the floods” (*ogha*)<sup>105</sup> or “the yokes” (*yoga*).<sup>106</sup> This is the list that is generally found in later suttas (such as the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta), the Abhidhamma and the Commentaries, that is, the cankers of:

- |                  |                                       |
|------------------|---------------------------------------|
| (1) sense-desire | ( <i>kām’āsava</i> ),                 |
| (2) existence    | ( <i>bhav’āsava</i> ),                |
| (3) wrong views  | ( <i>diṭṭh’āsava</i> ), and           |
| (4) ignorance    | ( <i>avijjāsava</i> ). <sup>107</sup> |

There is also a unique set of five cankers, that is, with respect to the birth they lead to, namely, cankers leading to:<sup>108</sup>

- |                        |                                       |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| (1) the hells          | ( <i>niraya,gamaniya</i> ),           |
| (2) the animal kingdom | ( <i>tiracchāna,yoni,gamaniya</i> ),  |
| (3) the ghost world    | ( <i>pitti,visaya,gamaniya</i> ),     |
| (4) the human world    | ( <i>manussa,loka,gamaniya</i> ), and |
| (5) the heavenly world | ( <i>deva,loka,gamaniya</i> ).        |

**8.4 ABANDONING THE CANKERS AND LATENT TENDENCIES.** Like latent tendency, the mental cankers work without conscious intention. **Analayo** gives a helpful summary of the characteristics of the cankers, thus:

Sensual desire and desire for existence come up also in the second noble truth as main factors in the arising of *dukkha*,<sup>109</sup> while ignorance forms the starting point of the “twelve links” depicting the “dependent co-arising” (*paṭicca samuppāda*) of *dukkha*. These occurrences indicate that the scheme of the influxes is intrinsically related to the causes of the arising of *dukkha*.<sup>110</sup> That is, desire for sensual enjoyment, desire for becoming this or that, and the deluding force of ignorance, are those “influences” responsible for the genesis of *dukkha*. (Analayo 2003:224)

<sup>104</sup> **Pārājika Kaṇḍa** (V 3:5); **Saṅgīti S** (D 3:216); **Sabb’āsava S** (M 1:7-9), **Bhaya,bherava S** (M 1:23), **Vattha S** (M 1:38), **Sammā,diṭṭhi S** (M 1:55) = SD 11.14, **Dvedha,vitakka S** (M 1:117), **Cūḷa Suññatā S** (M 121.12/3:108) = SD 11.3, **Cūḷa Hatthi,padopama S** (M 1:184), **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 1:249), **Mahā Assapura S** (M 1:279), **Kandaraka S** (M 1:348), **Apaṇṇaka S** (M 1:413); **Bhaddāli S** (M 1:442), **Sandaka S** (M 1:552), **Cūḷa Sakul’udāyi S** (M 2:39), **Bodhi Rāja,kumāra S** (M 2:93), **Ghoṭa,mukha S** (M 2:162), **Saṅgārava S** (M 2:212), **Devā,daha S** (M 2:227), **Cha-b,bisodhana S** (M 3:26), **Cūḷa Suññatā S** (M 3:108), **Danta,bhūmi S** (M 3:136); **Āsava,pañhā S** (S 38.8/4:256), (**Pahānāya**) **Āsava S** (S 45.163/5:56); (**Satipaṭṭhāna**) **Āsava S** (S 5:190), **Bhikkhu S** (S 5:72); **Āsava-k,khaya,nāṇa S** (A 1:83-85), **Tui,kaṇṇa S** (A 1:155), **Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 1:157), **Subha S** (A 1:209), **Attantapa S** (A 1:211), **Sālha S** (A 1:253), **Paṭhama Yodh’ājīva S** (A 3:93), **Nibbedika S** (A 3:414), **Verañja S** (A 4:179); **Āsava S 1** (It 49), **Āsava S 2** (It 49); **Nanda Māṇava Pucchā** (Nc ), **Jatu,kaṇṇiMāṇava Pucchā** (Nc ), **Udaya Māṇava Pucchā** (Nc ), **Pārāyanānugīti,gāthā** (Nc ); **Ānantarika,samādhī,nāṇa,niddesa** (x10, Pm 1:96), **Āsava-k,khaya,nāṇa,niddesa** (x5, Pm 1:116), **Indriya,samodhāna** (x5, Pm 2:31).

<sup>105</sup> **Ogha: Saṅgīti S** (D33.1.11(31)/3:230); **Āsivisopama S** (S 35.238/4:175) = SD 28.1, (S 4:256), **Ogha,pañhā S** (S 4:257, cf SA 1:17 f), **Āsava S** (S 45.171/5:59), **Ogha S** (S 46.121/5:136), **Ogha S** (S 51.77/5:292), **Ogha S** (S 53.45/5:309).

<sup>106</sup> **Yoga: Saṅgīti S** (D33.1.11(32)/3:230), **Das’uttara S** (D 34.1.5(4)/3:276); **Yoga S** (S 45.172/5:59); **Yoga S** (A 4.10/2:10); Dhs 1059.

<sup>107</sup> **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16.1.12/2:81, 16.2.4/2:92), Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937/373 f; AA 2:355 (ad A 1:241), 3:79 (ad A 2:38), 3:321 (ad A 3:245).

<sup>108</sup> A 3:414 (qu at DA 989; MA 1: 62)

<sup>109</sup> Eg at S 5:421 (Analayo’s n).

<sup>110</sup> This also underlies the fact that descriptions of the actual event of full awakening often apply the scheme of the four noble truths to *dukkha* and again to the influxes; cf eg D 1:84. {Analayo’s n}

The **Sabbāsava Sutta** (M 2) shows how cankers arise from unwise attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*),<sup>111</sup> and the **Nibbedhika Pariyāya Sutta** (A 6.63) shows how it arises from ignorance.<sup>112</sup> The Buddha's rationale for promulgating the **Vinaya**<sup>113</sup> is that it would restrain presently arisen cankers, and prevent or avoid their future arising. Besides the observance of monastic rules, other important methods for keeping away the cankers, especially these seven methods, taught in the Sabbāsava Sutta, as follows:

wise attention and gaining vision (*dassana*) into true reality;  
 restraint of the senses;  
 proper reflective use of the requisites (food, robes, shelter, medicine);  
 enduring heat, cold, hunger, pain, etc;  
 avoiding wild animals, dangerous and inappropriate places, and evil companions;  
 removing unwholesome intentions and thoughts; and  
 cultivating the limbs of awakening.<sup>114</sup> (M 2/1:7-11; cf A 3:387)<sup>115</sup>

And the total destruction of the cankers (*āsava-k,khaya*) is tantamount to full awakening (M 26.25).<sup>116</sup>

The **Añña,titthiya Peyyāla** (the Repetition Cycle on the Sectarrians) of the Saṃyutta Nikāya consists of eight suttas relating to the true purpose of “living the holy life” under the Buddha. These eight suttas are identical in structure and import, that is, walking the noble eightfold path to awakening, but each uses a different theme, that is to say, the Buddha Dharma is:

- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| (1) <b>Virāga Sutta:</b>        | for the fading away of lust;   |
| (2) <b>Saṃyojana Sutta:</b>     | for the abandoning of the mental fetters [7.2];                      |
| (3) <b>Anusaya Sutta:</b>       | for the uprooting of the latent tendencies;                          |
| (4) <b>Addhāna Sutta:</b>       | for the full understanding of the way;                               |
| (5) <b>Āsava-k,khaya Sutta:</b> | for the destruction of the mental cankers;                           |
| (6) <b>Vijjā,vimutti Sutta:</b> | for the realization of the fruit of true knowledge and liberation;   |
| (7) <b>Ñāṇa,dassana Sutta:</b>  | for the sake of knowledge and vision;                                |
| (8) <b>Anupādā Sutta:</b>       | for the sake of final nirvana without clinging. (S 45.41-48/5:27-29) |

What is remarkable here is that all these themes—lust, mental fetters, latent tendencies, lack of understanding of the way, mental cankers, false knowledge, false wisdom and clinging—are effectively synonyms. Their differences lie only in the perspective from which one looks at life and the Buddha's teaching. Take, for example, (1), (2), (3) and (5): they refer to the same basic problem of unwholesomeness regarding the six sense-spheres.

We see such an analysis fully listed and explained, for example, in the **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna** (D 22), where the same basic problem from somewhat different perspectives, namely, that of the arising of craving (*taṇhā*) and related forms of defilements in terms of the six senses, their respective sense-objects, their sense-consciousnesses, contacts, feelings, perceptions, volitions, and initial and sustained applications—all listed as possible instances for the arising of craving,<sup>117</sup> and conversely, that is where craving is abandoned, too.<sup>118</sup> The same analysis of sense-experience recurs in the **Sammasa Sutta** (S 12.66)<sup>119</sup> and

<sup>111</sup> M 2.3-4/1:7 = SD 30.3.

<sup>112</sup> A 6.63.10/3:414 = SD 6.11.

<sup>113</sup> Eg V 3:21; cf **Bhaddāli S** (M 65.31/1:445).

<sup>114</sup> In the 7 limbs of awakening (*satta bojjhaṅga*): mindfulness, investigations of states, effort, zest, tranquillity, concentration, and wisdom: see SD 10.15.

<sup>115</sup> A same list of six methods (omitting the first, *dassana*) is found in **Āsava S** (A 6.58/3:387-390).

<sup>116</sup> **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26.25/1:171). See also BDict: *āsava*.

<sup>117</sup> D 22.19/2:308-310 = SD 13.2.

<sup>118</sup> D 22.20/2:310 f = SD 13.2.

<sup>119</sup> S 12.66/2:107-109.

in the Sutta exposition of **the Vibhaṅga**.<sup>120</sup> Analayo gives a helpful summary, showing how perception fits in here:

In this context, the influxes [*āsava*] represent root causes for the arising of *dukkha* that might “flow into” perceptual appraisal, the underlying tendencies are those of unwholesome inclinations in the unawakened mind that “tend” to get triggered off during the perceptual process, and the fetters arising at any sense doors are responsible for “binding” beings to continued transmigration in *samsāra*.  
(Analayo 2003:224 f)

## 9 Nature and methods of cognitive training

**9.1 CUSTODY OF THE SENSES.** One of the most effective ways to avoid and prevent the arising of the cankers, the latent tendencies and the fetters, is the practice known as the custody of the senses (*indriya, -samvara*),<sup>121</sup> or the guarding of sense-doors (*indriyesu gutta, dvāra*),<sup>122</sup> so that unwholesome states and their reactions do not occur during the perceptual process.

**The Indriya, bhāvanā Sutta** (M 152), the last sutta of the Majjhima, is an excellent text that teaches the custody of the senses. Early Buddhism does not regard the body or the senses to be evil, as the brahmin Pāsārasīya, seems to do so, that is, he teaches that “the cultivation of the faculties” is where “one does not see forms with the eye, one does not hear sounds with the ear.” To this, the Buddha naturally responds thus:<sup>123</sup>

“In that case, Uttara, according to what the brahmin Pāsārasīya says, the blind would be one with cultivated faculty, the deaf would be with cultivated faculty. For, Uttara, the blind sees no form with the eye, the deaf hears no sounds with the ear!”  
(M 152.2/3:298) = SD 17.13

The actual mindfulness practice in connection with sense-restraint is given in the Sutta here, where the whole passage repeats for each of the sense-experience within ⟨angle brackets⟩, as follows:

“Now, Ānanda, what is supreme cultivation of the faculties in the noble one’s discipline?”<sup>124</sup>

Here, Ānanda, when a monk

⟨sees a **form** with the eye,⟩

⟨hears a **sound** with the ear,⟩

⟨smells a **smell** with the nose,⟩

⟨tastes a **taste** with the tongue,⟩

⟨feels a **touch** with the body,⟩

⟨cognizes a **mind-object** [dharma] with the mind,⟩

(in him) the agreeable arises, the disagreeable arises, both the agreeable-and-disagreeable [the neutral]<sup>125</sup> arises.

<sup>120</sup> Vbh 203/101-103.

<sup>121</sup> D 1:70, 1:182 = M 1:181; D 2:281; S 1:54, 5:74; A 3:138, 4:99 = 336, 5:115, 136.

<sup>122</sup> D 1:70, 172, 181; M 1:355; S 4:104, 175; A 1:113, 2:39; Dhs 230; Vbh 248; see CPD 2:302 for more refs.

<sup>123</sup> M 152.2/3:298 = SD 17.13.

<sup>124</sup> *Katham paṇ’ānanda ariyasa vinaye anuttarā indriya, bhāvanā hoti*, lit “But, Ānanda, how is the supreme cultivation of the faculties in the noble one’s discipline?”

<sup>125</sup> Comy says that when a desirable (*iṭṭhe*) object comes within the range of the sense-organ, an agreeable state (*manāpa*) arises; when an undesirable (*aniṭṭhe*) object appears, a disagreeable state (*amanāpa*) arises; and when a neutral (*majjhatta*) object arises, a state that is both agreeable and disagreeable (*manāpāmānāpa*) arises (MA 5:107). “It should be noted that though these three terms are ordinarily used to qualify the sense objects, here they also seem to signify the subtle states of liking, aversion, and dull indifference that arise due to the influence of the underlying tendencies” (M:NB 1366 n1354). An agreeable object arouses lust (*rajjītuṃ*), the disagreeable arouses hate (*dussītuṃ*), and the neutral arouses both as well as delusion (*muyhituṃ*) (MA 5:107; MAṬ:Be 2:440).

He understands thus:

‘In me, this agreeable (state) has arisen, this disagreeable (state) has arisen, this agreeable-and-disagreeable (state) has arisen. And it is conditioned, gross, dependently arisen<sup>126</sup>—this is peaceful; this is sublime: that is to say, equanimity.<sup>127</sup>

The agreeable that has arisen, the disagreeable that has arisen, the agreeable-and-disagreeable that has arisen, ceases in him, and equanimity is established.<sup>128</sup> (M 152.4/3:299) = SD 17.13<sup>129</sup>

In summary, one trains oneself not to *react* to sense-experiences, so that mental proliferation does not occur:

“**Not reacting**” or “letting go” means

- one does not look on at sensually pleasant objects with lust;
- one is not repelled by unpleasant objects so that one harbours no ill will; and
- one notes a neutral feeling by noting the absence of the pleasant and the painful, noting it as being impermanent.

If, on the other hand, one does the opposite—looking lustfully at pleasant objects, harbouring ill will towards unpleasant ones, and ignoring neutral feelings, then **mental proliferation** (*papañca*) occurs. That is to say,

- looking on lustfully, one’s latent tendency to lust is reinforced;
- harbouring ill will, one’s latent tendency to hate is reinforced; and
- failing to note neutral feelings, one’s ignorance is reinforced.

Mindfulness practice, that is, on-going awareness, prevents mental proliferation from happening, or at least, minimizes it.

“Indeed,” says Analayo, “living with full awareness in the present moment, free from sensual distraction, can give rise to an exquisite sense of delight” (2003:225). **The Pamāda, vihārī Sutta** (S 35.97) describes how true happiness arises in one whose senses are restrained in this manner:

And how, bhikkhus, is one who dwells diligently (*appamāda, vihārī*)?

When one dwells restrained in (the sense-faculty), the mind is not soiled amidst (sense-objects) cognizable by (the sense-faculty).<sup>130</sup>

To one whose mind is not soiled, gladness (*pamuḍḍa*) arises.

To one is glad, zest (*pīṭi*) arises.

When the mind is zestful, the body becomes tranquil (*passambhāti*).

One tranquil in body feels happiness (*sukha*).

The mind of the happy becomes concentrated (*samādhīyati*).

When the mind is concentrated, phenomena becomes manifest.<sup>131</sup> Because phenomena become manifest, one is regarded as “one who dwells diligently.”

(S 35.97.11-18/4:78 f; condensed)

<sup>126</sup> See SD 17.13 Introd 4.2.

<sup>127</sup> Cf **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62), where the Buddha teaches Rāhula the 5 element-like meditations to attain impartiality or equanimity (M 62.13-17/1:423 f = SD 3.11).

<sup>128</sup> Comy: This is the equanimity of insight (*vipassan’upekkhā*). The monk does not allow his mind to be overcome by lust, hate or delusion, but comprehends the object and sets up insight in the neutral state (MA 5:107), meaning that he enters into equanimity regarding formations (*saṅkhār’upekkhā*) (MAṬ:Be 2:440). On *saṅkhār’-upekkhā*, a particular stage of insight knowledge, see **Bhāvanā** = SD 15.1(11) on the 7 purifications, & Vism 21.61-66/656-657.

<sup>129</sup> See also esp Tables 3a & 3b.

<sup>130</sup> For spiritual practice, those sections within (angle brackets) have to be filled out in full, as found in the text.

<sup>131</sup> This key phrase, *dharmā patubhavanti*, is expl by Comy to mean that the states of calm and insight (*samatha, vipassanā dharmā*) do not arise (SA 2:385), which is sadly technical and not very helpful. In fact, **Bodhi** notes: “I think the point is that the internal and external sense bases (the *dharmā*) do not appear as impermanent, suffering, and nonself” (S:B 1411 n83), and goes on to refer to **Samādhi S** (S 35.99), where each of the sense-faculties, their

**The Kandaraka Sutta** (M 51) similarly speaks of the unsullied or pure happiness (*abyāseka sukha*) that is gained through sense-restraint.<sup>132</sup>

**9.2 SIGNS AND DETAILS.** The custody of the senses or sense-restraint is one of the most effective ways of preventing the arising of the cankers, the latent tendencies and the fetters, so that unwholesome states and their reactions do not occur during the perceptual process. This is the basic step in mindfulness practice (*satipaṭṭhāna*): as long as one is mindful, one at least suppresses the reactive and proliferative tendencies that would otherwise occur when we perceive things.

Now we will examine the teaching on sense-restraint a little deeper on its psychological, or more specifically, *cognitive* level. Craving and other defilements arise and thrive because of wrong perception, that is, when one grasps at the “**signs**” (*nimitta*) and “**details**” (*anubyāñjana*) of sensory objects “and uses them as raw material for creating imaginative constructs, to which it clings as a basis for security” (S:B 1127). This process is called “mental proliferation” (*papañca*) or “conceiving” (*maññanā*).

The term “sign” here refers to an object’s *outward appearance*, that is, “the distinguishing feature by which one recognizes or remembers something,”<sup>133</sup> which would also include “general appearance.” “Sign” (*nimitta*) is often contrasted with “details,” “features” or “particulars” (*anuvyañjana*).<sup>134</sup> Of one who restrains his senses it is said, “He does not seize at the sign” (*na nimitta-g, gāhi*) of an object.<sup>135</sup>

In terms of perception, says Analayo, this “sign” is “related to the first evaluation of the raw sense data, because of which the object appears to be, for example, ‘beautiful’ (*subha, nimitta*) or ‘irritating’ (*paṭigha, nimitta*), which then usually leads to subsequent evaluations and mental reactions.”<sup>136</sup> (2003:225 f). The Commentaries say that “**sign**” (*nimitta*) here refers to a grasping arising through one’s sensual lust (*chanda, rāga, vasena*) or on account of one’s view (*diṭṭhi, matta, vasena*); “**details**” (*anuvyañjanā*) here refers to finding delight by grasping at a limb or body part (eyes, arms, legs, etc).<sup>137</sup> s such, the advantage of understanding the nature of perceptual “signs and details” is that it provides one with an early cognitive warning system as well as nipping a potential perceptual hazard in the bud.<sup>138</sup>

**9.3 THE BĀHIYA TEACHING.** **Bodhi**, in his Introduction to the translation of the Saḷāyatana Vagga of the Saṃyutta Nikāya explains that sense-restraint “involves stopping at the bare sensum, without plastering it over with layers of meaning whose origins are purely subjective” (S:B 1127). In the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, **Upali Karunaratne**, in his article on “Indriya Saṃvara,” notes the crucial role of sense-restraint in the perceptual process when feelings arise (1993:568). In the suttas, the most famous instruction on sense-restraint is known as the Bāhiya Teaching, because its best known (and perhaps the oldest) formulation is the teaching given by the Buddha to Bāhiya Dārucīriya, and recorded in **the Bāhiya Sutta**

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respective sense-objects, sense-consciousnesses, sense-contacts, and whatever feeling whether pleasant, painful or neutral that arise therefrom are all *impermanent*. (S 35.99/4:80)

<sup>132</sup> M 51.16/1:346.

<sup>133</sup> Analayo 2003:225. For example, **Potaliya S** (M 54.3/1:360) refers to the outer aspect of being a householder, or at **V 3:15. The Raṭṭhapāla S** (M 82) relates how a slave woman, in a similar manner, recognizes monk who was the former son of her master, returning after a long absence, by “the characteristic features of his hand, his feet, and his voice.” (M 82.18/2:62)

<sup>134</sup> M 39.8/1:273.

<sup>135</sup> D 2.64/1:70 = D:RD 1:80n; M 33.7/1:221, 38.35/1:269; Vism 1.53-59/20-23.

<sup>136</sup> In **Nivaraṇa, pahāna Vaggo** (A 1:3), sensual desire arises due to unwise attention to the “sign of beauty,” (A 1.2.1/1:3) and aversion arises due to the “sign of repulsion” (A 1.2.2/1:3). **The Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43) explains that greed, hate and delusion are each a “maker of signs” (*nimitta, karaṇa*) (M 43.37/1:298), ie, they ascribe a false significance to things as being impermanent, pleasurable, self, or beautiful (ie in terms of the 4 perversions, *vipallāsa*, A 2:52; Pm 2:80; Bodhi 1980:4, 25 n27.). **The Uddesa Vibhaṅga S** (M 138) describes how when consciousness follows the sign, it becomes “tied and shackled by the gratification derived in the sign,” and thereby becomes fettered to the sign (M 138.10/3:225). It is also possible that a grasping at a “sign” may be followed by various types of thought that could be regarded as “association” (**Vitakka Saṅghāna S**, M 20.3/1:119).

<sup>137</sup> D 3:249; A 1:256, 3:319, 375 f, 4:33, 418 f; J 1:420; Pm 1:60, 91 f, 164, 170, 2:39, 64; Vbh 193 f; Nm 2:390; Nc 141, 141; DhsA 400, 402; cf MA 1:75, 4:195; SA 3:4, 394; Nc 1:55; DhA 1:74. See SD 19.7.

<sup>138</sup> Further, see *Nimitta & Anuvyañjana* = SD 9.14.

(U 1.10).<sup>139</sup> The same teaching is given to the aged Māluṅkyāputta (when he has given up all his intellectual speculating and decides to go into solitary retreat), as recorded in **the Māluṅkyāputta Sutta** (S 35.95):

Here, Māluṅkyāputta, regarding things<sup>140</sup> seen, heard, sensed<sup>141</sup> and cognized [known] by you:<sup>142</sup>  
 in the seen will be only the seen;  
 in the heard there will only be the heard;  
 in the sensed there will only be the sensed;  
 in the cognized there will only be the cognized. (MS 35.95.12/4:73) = SD 5.9

This sutta also contains a very spiritually beautiful poem composed by Māluṅkyāputta himself on the same subject.<sup>143</sup>

**9.4 DISTORTIONS AND PROJECTIONS.** The Bāhiya Teaching's singular purpose is to ward off and rectify any kind of mistaken, distorted or biased perception that affect the basic structure of ordinary experience. **The Māgandhiya Sutta** (M 75), using a graphic simile of a leper, infested with worms in his wounds trying to cauterize them over a charcoal-pit fire, would actually mistake the heat as pleasant: this is called distorted perception (*viparīta, saññā*), or cognitive distortion.<sup>144</sup> **The Samaṇa, maṇḍikā Sutta** (M 78) identifies perceptions of sensual-desire, of ill will, and of cruelty, as the source of all unwholesome thoughts and intentions.<sup>145</sup>

**The Vipallāsa Sutta** (A 4.49), discussing *saññā* as the faculty of conception [2.2], summarizes the various unwholesome reactions that can arise through faulty perception in terms of the three kinds of perversions:

- |                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| (1) the perversion of perception | ( <i>saññā, vipallāsa</i> ),                |
| (2) the perversion of thought    | ( <i>citta, vipallāsa</i> ), and            |
| (3) the perversion of view       | ( <i>diṭṭhi, vipallāsa</i> ). (A 4.49/2:52) |

The Vipallāsa Sutta goes on to say that each of these three perversions occur in the same four fundamental ways, thus:

- (1) the perversion of regarding what is impermanent as permanent;
- (2) the perversion of regarding what is painful as pleasant;
- (3) the perversion of regarding what is not-self as self; and
- (4) the perversion of regarding what is foul as beautiful.

So we have a total of twelve possible perversions. The bottom line is that in all these forms of perversion, one unconsciously creates mental images that do not reflect true reality.

<sup>139</sup> **Bāhiya S** (U 1.10/6-8) = SD 34.3.

<sup>140</sup> “Regarding things seen, heard, sensed and cognized,” *diṭṭha, suta, muta, viññātabbesu dhammesu*, lit “in things that are to be seen, to be heard, to be sensed, to be cognized.” See foll n.

<sup>141</sup> *Muta*, that is, what is tasted, smelt and touched. See prev n.

<sup>142</sup> This verse is the crux of the sutta and *satipaṭṭhāna*. In sutta terms, such experiences are not to 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*) (**Anattā, lakkhaṇa S**, S 3:68). In short, such experiences are not “beliefs” but direct experiences of reality. See Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995:32 f. In simple Abhidhamma terms, such a process should be left at the sense-doors, and not be allowed to reach the mind-door. As long as the experience of sensing is mindfully left at its sense-door and taken for what it really is, that is an experience of reality (*param'attha*); after it has reached the mind-door and evaluated, it becomes conventional (*paññatti*) reality, that brings one suffering due to greed, hate or delusion. When such sense-experiences are mindfully left on the reality level, one would in due course see the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self. See Mahasi Sayadaw, *A Discourse on Malukyaputta Sutta*, tr U Htin Fatt, Rangoon, 1981.

<sup>143</sup> For a study of Bāhiya's Teaching, see SD 5.9 Introd (2).

<sup>144</sup> M 75.15-18/1:507 f.

<sup>145</sup> M 78.10+12/2:26-28.

The perversion of perception is the most rudimentary of the three, arising at the sense-doors through habitual reactivity to sense-experiences. The perversion of thought mulls over this rudimentary projections like a child preoccupied with his video-game. The perversion of view finally shapes these projections into a definitive idea or dogma. The most famous and ancient Indian philosophical example is that of

- (1) a person perceives a coil of rope lying in the half-light that is appear to be like a snake;
- (2) he thinks that what he has seen is actually a snake; and
- (3) he concludes that it is a snake, and either flees in panic or hits at it with a stick.

The humanist psychotherapist, **Erich Fromm**, during his years of Buddhist influence, reflects in a very familiar manner:

Man in the state of repressedness...does not see what exists but he puts his thought image into things, and sees them in the light of his thought images and fantasies, rather than in reality. It is the thought images...that creates his passion, his anxieties. (1960:127)

**9.5 COGNITIVE TRAINING.** Understandably, the suttas are replete with cognitive training methods so that one could avoid the pitfalls of the perceptual process, and to cultivate wholesome perceptions. Some of these perception exercises [7.1(2)] direct one's attention to the impermanence or unsatisfactoriness of all aspects of experience, or to more specific observation, such as the unattractive qualities of the body or of food. **Analyo** makes this insightful note of perception:

Regarding the nature of these cognitions, an important point to bear in mind is that to cognize something as beautiful or as impermanent does not refer to a process of reflection or consideration, but only to being aware of a particular feature of an object, in other words, to experience it from a particular point of view. In the case of ordinary cognitive appraisal, this point of view or act of selection is usually not at all conscious. Cognizing someone or something as beautiful often takes place as the combined outcome of past conditioning and one's present mental inclinations. These tend to determine which aspect of an object becomes prominent during cognition. Reflective thought only subsequently enters into the scene, influenced by the kind of cognition that has led to its arising. (2003:227; emphases added)

Analyo's note here is actually a paraphrase of the passages on this unconscious process stated in **the Samaṇa,maṇḍikā Sutta** (M 78).<sup>146</sup> In fact, **the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta** (D 9) actually clearly states that

It is consciousness, Poṭṭhapāda, that arises first, and then knowledge.<sup>147</sup> And the arising of knowledge is dependent on the arising of consciousness.<sup>148</sup>

<sup>146</sup> M 78.11-13/2:27 f = SD 18.9.

<sup>147</sup> Comy offers alternative explanations: (1) "Consciousness" (here *saññā*) = dhyana-consciousness (*jhāna, saññā*), "knowledge" = insight knowledge (*vipassanā ñāṇa*); (2) "Consciousness" = insight consciousness (*vipassana, saññā*), "knowledge" = path knowledge (*magga, ñāṇa*); (3) "Consciousness" = path consciousness (*magga, saññā*), "knowledge" = fruition knowledge (*phala, ñāṇa*). Buddhaghosa then quotes Tipiṭaka Mahāsiva Thera as saying, "Consciousness" is the consciousness of the fruition of arhathood, and "knowledge" the proximate "reviewing knowledge" (*paccavekkhana ñāṇa*) (DA 2:375). Cf Vism 1.32/13, 22.19/676. Walshe remarks, "But in fact 'reviewing-knowledge' is said also to occur at lower stages on the enlightenment path. It is, however, this 'reviewing-knowledge' which best seems to explain just how one is supposed to know that perception [consciousness] arises first and then knowledge." (D:RD 554 n213). In keeping with the pre-Buddhist usage of the term *saññā*, I have consistently rendered it as "consciousness" here rather than the Buddhist "perception." Cf **Madhu, piṇḍika S** (M 18,16/1:111 f).

<sup>148</sup> *Saññā'uppādā ca pana ñāṇ'uppādo hoti.*

	impermanence	suffering in impermanence	not-self in suffering	foulness	death	loathsomeness of food	not delighting in all the world	danger ( <i>ādānava</i> )	impermanence in all formations	letting go ( <i>pahāna</i> )	dispassion ( <i>viārga</i> )	Cessation ( <i>nirodha</i> )	mindfulness of breath
5 perceptions conducive to maturity (D 33.2.1(26)/243)	√	√	√							√	√		
6 perceptions conducive to penetration (D 33.2.2(22)/3:251)	√	√	√							√	√	√	
7 perceptions (D 33.2.3(8)/3:253)	√		149 √	√				√		√	√	√	
9 perceptions (D 34.2.2(8)/3:289)	√	√	√	√	√	√	√			√	√		
5 perceptions (A 5.61/3:79)				√	√	√	√	√					
5 perceptions (A 5.62/3:70 f)	√		150 √		√	√	√						
5 states ( <i>dhammā</i> ) arousing revulsion leading to nirvana (A 5.69/3:83-85)				151 √	√	√	√		152 √				
7 states of non-decline (A 7.25/4:24)	√		153 √	√				√		154 √	√	√	
7 states of great benefit (A 7.45/4:46; in detail at A 7.46/ 4:46-53)	√	√	√	√	√	√	√						
9 states of great benefit (A 9.16/4:387)	√	√	√	√	√	√	√			√	√		
10 states of great benefit (A 10.56/5:105-107)	√	√	√	√	√	√	√			√	√	√	
Girim-ānanda Sutta (A 10.60/5:109) = SD 19.18	√		155 √	√			√	√	√	√	√	√	√

**Table 9.5a The perception exercises**

And this, Poṭṭhapāda, may be understood from the fact that a man understands: “It is from this condition that knowledge has arisen to me.”<sup>156</sup> (D 9.20/1:185) = SD 7.14

<sup>149</sup> As perception of not-self (*anatta, saññā*).

<sup>150</sup> As perception of not-self (*anatta, saññā*).

<sup>151</sup> As contemplation of foulness in the body (*asubhānupassī kaye*).

<sup>152</sup> As contemplation of the impermanence of all formations (*sabba, sañkhāresu aniccānupassī*).

<sup>153</sup> As perception of not-self (*anatta, saññā*).

<sup>154</sup> As perception of letting go (*pahāna, saññā*).

<sup>155</sup> As perception of not-self (*anatta, saññā*).

<sup>156</sup> *Idap, paccaṃ kira me ñāṇaṃ udapādi ti*. “From this condition,” *idap, paccaṃ*.

Since perception precedes knowledge, it is clear that perception has a considerable influence on what we “know” or choose to know. And since our perceiving is by way of habits, we can train those habits in wholesome ways. Such methods of mental training are also called “perception” (*saññā*). The Suttas contains over a dozen perception exercises, namely:

the perception of foulness	( <i>asubha,saññā</i> ),
the perception of death	( <i>maraṇa,saññā</i> ),
the perception of the loathsomeness of food	( <i>āhāre paṭikkūla,saññā</i> ),
the perception of not delighting in the whole world	( <i>sabba,loke anabhirata,saññā</i> )
the perception of impermanence	( <i>anicca,saññā</i> ),
the perception of impermanence in all formations	( <i>sabba,saṅkhāresu anicca,saññā</i> ),
the perception of suffering in the impermanent	( <i>anicce dukka,saññā</i> ),
the perception of the not-self in what is suffering	( <i>dukkhe anatta,saññā</i> ),
the perception of not-self	( <i>anatta,saññā</i> ),
the perception of danger	( <i>ādinava,saññā</i> ),
the perception of letting go	( <i>pahāna,saññā</i> ),
the perception of dispassion	( <i>virāga,saññā</i> ), and
the perception of cessation	( <i>nirodha,saññā</i> ).

These perception exercises are collated in this table, according to the suttas wherein they appear as sets:

What is striking about these perception exercises are rarely listed in the same sequence in each set. Although the perception of impermanence is usually listed first, the others do not always follow the same arrangement. This shows the primacy of the perception of impermanence, and that one has a free choice of the remaining methods, or that they would automatically fit in as one progresses in one’s practice.

**Analayo** gives a practical example of perception practice:

To give a practical example: if, on the basis of an intellectual appreciation of impermanence, one regularly contemplates the arising and passing away of phenomena, the result will be the arising of *aniccasaññā*, of cognition apprehending phenomena from the viewpoint of impermanence. With continued practice, awareness of impermanence will become increasingly spontaneous and have an increasing influence on one’s daily experiences, outside of actual contemplation. In this way, sustained contemplation can lead to a gradual change in the operational mechanics of cognition, and in one’s outlook on the world. (2003:228)

The primacy of the perception of impermanence is again attested by **the Indriya,bhāvanā Sutta** (M 152). The Sutta first points out how the arhat has a choice of how to perceive something agreeable or attractive (*appaṭikkula, manāpa*), or something disagreeable or unattractive (*paṭikkula, amanāpa*), or something neutral (*manāpāmanāpa*). He perceives sense-experiences in any of these five ways:<sup>157</sup>

<sup>157</sup> Here the 5 perceptions are powers accomplished in the arhat. Elsewhere, the Buddha teaches them to his unawakened disciples as a way to overcome the three unwholesome roots (greed, hate and delusion), ie, in **Metta,-sahagata S** (S 46.54.12-13/S 5:119 = SD 10.11 Introd 2) & at **Tikaṇḍaki S** (A 5.144.2/3:169 = SD 2.12), where they are explained in some detail. In both cases, however, the sequence of the perceptions are 2, 1, 4, 3, 5. For further details, see **Paṭisambhidā,magga** (Pm 22.26/2:212 f), **Vism** 12.36/381 f & also SD 17.3(7.4).

Perception	Objects	Method
The unrepulsive in the repulsive	An agreeable object (such as an attractive person)	Perception of foulness, or of impermanence
The repulsive in the unrepulsive	A hostile object (such as a hostile person)	Lovingkindness, or the body as being comprised of the 4 elements
The unrepulsive in the repulsive and in the unrepulsive	Both agreeable and disagreeable objects as repulsive	Perception of foulness, or of impermanence
The repulsive in the unrepulsive and in the repulsive	Both agreeable and disagreeable objects as unrepulsive	Lovingkindness, or the 4 elements
Rejecting both the repulsive in the unrepulsive and the repulsive	Avoiding both agreeable and disagreeable objects	Equanimity

**Table 9.5b Summary of the five perceptions.**

In the Tikaṇḍaki Sutta (A 5.144), these five perceptions are taught to unawakened monks for overcoming the three unwholesome roots. The perception of impermanence, in fact, applies to all the five kinds of object. Now, we shall examine this very simple but efficacious perception as given in the suttas.

## 10 The (Anicca) Saññā Sutta

**The Okkanti Saṃyutta** (ch 25) consists of ten parallel and short, but remarkable, suttas with only one message, that is, the reflection of impermanence on the six internal sense, the six external senses, the six sense-consciousnesses, the six sense-contacts, the six feelings, the six perceptions, the six volitions, the six cravings, the six elements, and the five aggregates.<sup>158</sup> All of them lead to—or constitute the “descent” (*okkanti*) into—stream-winning in this life itself—whether one “has faith, who firmly believes” (*saddahati adhimuccati*) in the impermanence of the six senses, etc (that is, as a faith-follower, *saddhā-nusāri*), or who only accepts this truth “after pondering over them with some wisdom” (*paññāya mattaso nijjhānaṃ khamanti*) (that is, as a truth-follower, *dhammānusāri*), one is assured of becoming a stream-winner. One would not die without having realized the fruit of stream-winning.<sup>159</sup>

### (Anicca) Saññā Sutta

#### The (Impermanent) Perception Discourse

(S 25.6/3:227)

- 1 At Sāvatti.
- 2 There the Blessed One said:

#### The five aggregates are impermanent

- 3 “Bhikkhus, the perception of form is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise.  
The perception of sound is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise.  
The perception of smell is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise.  
The perception of taste is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise.  
The perception of touch is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise.  
The perception of mind-object is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise.

<sup>158</sup> For details, see **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1) = SD 16.7.

<sup>159</sup> On lay followers attaining stream-winning, see **Laymen Saints** = SD 8.6 & **The Layman and Dhyana** = SD 8.5(3), esp **Sa,upādisesa S** (A 9.12/4:380-382).

The faith-follower

4 <sup>160</sup>Bhikkhus, one who has faith thus, who firmly believes these truths [is convinced of these truths], is called a **faith-follower**.

He has entered the fixed course of rightness, entered the plane of superior persons,<sup>161</sup> gone beyond the plane of the worldlings.<sup>162</sup>

He is incapable of doing any intentional deed by which he might be reborn in hell, or in the animal birth, or in the ghost realm. He is incapable of dying without having attained the fruit of stream-winning.<sup>163</sup>

The truth-follower

5 Bhikkhus, one who accepts these truths after pondering over them with some wisdom thus,<sup>164</sup> is called a **truth-follower**.

He has entered the fixed course of rightness, entered the plane of superior persons, gone beyond the plane of the worldlings.

He is incapable of doing any intentional deed by which he might be reborn in hell, or in the animal birth, or in the ghost realm. He is incapable of dying without having attained the fruit of stream-winning.

The stream-winner

6 One who knows and sees these truths thus is called a **stream-winner**, no longer bound for the lower world,<sup>165</sup> sure of liberation, destined for awakening.<sup>166</sup>

— evaṃ —

<sup>160</sup> *Yo bhikkhave ime dhamme evaṃ saddahati adhimuccati, ayaṃ vuccati saddhā'nusārī okkanto sammatta, -niyāmaṃ sappurisa, bhūmiṃ okkanto vītivatto puthujjana, bhūmiṃ.* The operative verbs here are *saddahati* (“he has faith (in)”) and *adhimuccati* (“he resolves, adheres to, is sure of”). I have rendered *adhimuccati* here as “(he) firmly believes...”. On the stream-winner’s faith, see **Entering the Stream** = SD 3.3(5).

<sup>161</sup> “True persons,” *sappurisa*, also “superior persons,” also “virtuous person,” “ideal person”; often syn with “noble disciple,” *ariya, sāvaka*, but here clearly includes those, although not yet on the path, but assure of it, viz the faith-follower and the truth-follower, although the two are not yet aryas (noble saints). The qualities of the *sappurisa* are given at D 33.2.2(6)/3:252, 34.1.8(7)/3:283; M 113; A 7.64/4:113, 8:38/4:144 f & at M 110.14-24/3:23 f.

<sup>162</sup> “Worldling,” *puthujjano*, ie “born of the crowd”; more fully called “uninstructed worldling,” one unskilled (*akovida*), ie, lacks theoretical knowledge of the Dharma, and is undisciplined (*avinīta*), and also lacks practical training in the Dharma. He is not a “seer of the noble ones” (*ariya, dassavī*), ie, of the Buddha and the noble disciples (the saints), because he lacks the wisdom-eye that discerns the truth they have seen. “Noble ones” (*ariya*) and “true persons” (*sappurisa*) are synonymous. See also MA 1:20-25; SA 2:98-101, 2:251 f; AA 1:61-63; Nc 75-78; Pm 2:445-449; DhsA 348-354.

<sup>163</sup> *Abhabbo taṃ kammaṃ kātuṃ yaṃ kammaṃ katvā nirayaṃ vā tiracchāna, yoniṃ vā petti, visayaṃ vā uppajjeyya. Abhabbo ca tāva kālaṃ kātuṃ yāva na sotāpatti, phalaṃ sacchikaroti.* This is the sutta’s key statement and clearly refers to what, after the Buddha’s time, is referred to as a “lesser stream-winner” (*culla, sotāpanna, cullaka, -sotāpanna*). See **Entering the Stream** = SD 3.3(6).

<sup>164</sup> *Yassa kho bhikkhave ime dhammā evaṃ paññāya mattaso nijjhānaṃ khamanti.*

<sup>165</sup> *Avinīpāta*, alt tr “not fated for birth in a suffering state”; opp of *vinīpāta*, “the world of suffering”, another name for the 4 woeful courses (*duggati*) or the 4 lower worlds (*apāya*) (Vism 13.92 f). Sometimes 5 woeful courses (*pañca, gati*) (D 3:234=33.2.1, A 11.68) are mentioned: the hells (*niraya*), the animal birth (*tiracchāna, yoni*), the ghost realm (*pitti, visaya*), the human world (*manussa*) and the heavenly world (*deva*). Of these, the first three are woeful, with the asura-demons (*asura, kāya*) as the fourth woeful course. The remaining two are “happy courses” (*sugati*). For a discussion, see Nyanaponika & Bodhi (tr), *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 1999:14-19.

<sup>166</sup> *Yo bhikkhave ime dhamme evaṃ jānāti evaṃ passati ayaṃ vuccati sotāpanno avinīpāta, dhammo niyato sambodhi, parāyano ti.* “This statement makes it clear how the stream-enterer [stream-winner] differs from those on the way to stream-entry. The faith-follower accepts the teachings on trust (with a limited degree of understanding), the Dhamma-follower through investigation; but the stream-enterer has *known and seen* the teachings directly. I read Se: *evaṃ jānāti evaṃ passati.*” (S:B 1099 n270)

## 11 Key position of perception

Of all the five aggregates, indeed in terms of all Buddhist training methods, **perception** (*saññā*) plays the most crucial role (that is, in terms of actual mindfulness practice). A clear understanding of the nature and workings of perception is the first step towards awakening.<sup>167</sup> In **the (Saññā) Nibbāna Sutta** (A 4.179), when Ānanda asks Sāriputta why some do not find final nirvana (*parinibbāna*), that is, not liberated, in this life itself, the latter answers as follows:

Here, avuso Ānanda, beings do not understand, as it really is,<sup>168</sup>

that this perception that is conducive to decline (*hāna, bhāgiyā saññā*),

that this perception that is conducive to stability (*thiti, bhāgiyā saññā*),

that this perception that is conducive to distinction (*visesa, bhāgiyā saññā*),

that this perception that is conducive to penetration (*nibbedha, bhāgiyā saññā*),

This is the reason, this is the condition, why some beings do not win final nirvana in this life itself. (A 4.179/2:167)

And for those who do win final liberation in this life itself, Sāriputta continues, the opposite is the case. These four conditions are explained in **the Vibhaṅga**<sup>169</sup> and in **the Visuddhi, magga**,<sup>170</sup> in reference to “perception and attention” (*saññā, manasikāra*) in terms of the four dhyanas and the first three attainments:

Perception and attention <u>that conduce to decline</u>	cause one to fall from concentration (due to the arising of opposing states);
Perception and attention <u>that conduce to stability</u>	support concentration (that is, the persistence of the mind);
Perception and attention <u>that conduce to distinction</u>	lead to higher stages of concentration (that is the quality of a higher state);
Perception and attention <u>that conduce to penetration</u>	lead to liberating insight (due to the promptings of perception and attention associated with revulsion).

On a simple level, these four conditions refer to one’s understanding how perception

- (1) causes defilements to arise;
- (2) clears away the defilements;
- (3) helps one progress on the meditative levels; and
- (4) leads on to spiritual liberation through seeing the true nature of reality.

**The Sutta Nipāta** has a number of sayings on the benefit of understanding the nature of perception. Penetrative insight into perception enables one to cross the floods of cankers [8.3]:

<i>Saññam pariññā vitareyya ogham</i>	Who has understood perception would cross the flood,
<i>pariggaheṣu muni nōpalitto</i>	The sage, undefiled by clinging (to things).
<i>abbūḷha, sallo caram appamatto</i>	The barb (of suffering) drawn out, living heedfully,
<i>nāsiṃsati lokam imam parañ cā ti</i>	He longs for neither this world nor the next. (Sn 779)

<sup>167</sup> It is rather curious that “[t]here is no place for *saññā* in the Abhidhamma formula of perception. Scholastic exegesis, not knowing what to do with *saññā*, actually relegates it to a more subordinate position, distinguishing it from *viññāṇa* and *paññā* which are regarded as more specialized functions [Vism 437].” (Sarachandra 1994:16)

<sup>168</sup> **The Das’uttara S** (D 34) has “concentration” (*samādhi*) instead of “perception” with these same 4 qualities, listed as “4 things difficult to penetrate” (D 34.1.5(7)/3:277).

<sup>169</sup> Vbh 799/330 f.

<sup>170</sup> Vism 3.22/88.

One who has transcended the powers of perception, that is, the awakened saint, has thereby gone beyond the bondage of suffering and does not quarrel with the world:

<i>Saññā, virattassa na santi ganthā</i>	For one detached from perceptions, there are no bonds.
<i>paññā, vimuttassa na santi mohā</i>	For him liberated by wisdom, there are no delusions.
<i>saññaṃ ca diṭṭhiṃ ca ye aggahesum</i>	But those who have grasped perception and view,
<i>te ghaṭṭayantā vicaranti loke ti</i>	Wander in the world, falling into conflicts. (Sn 847)

The final word on perception is found in the ancient **Aṭṭhaka Vagga** of the Sutta Nipāta, where in **the Kalaha, vivāda Sutta**, it is said (of the arhat), that:<sup>171</sup>

<i>Na sañña, saññī na visañña, saññī</i>	He perceives not perception, nor misperceives it, <sup>172</sup>
<i>no pi asaññī na vibhūta, saññī</i>	Nor is he a non-perceiver, <sup>173</sup> nor one without perception: <sup>174</sup>
<i>evaṃ, sametassa vibhoti rūpaṃ</i>	For one who has won such a state, form ceases to be:
<i>saññā, nidānā hi papañca, saṅkhā</i>	For proliferative notions have perception as their source. (Sn 874)

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<sup>171</sup> For explanation, see **Samiddhi S** (S 49/1.20/1:22) = SD 21.4(3.4).

<sup>172</sup> As in madness (*ummattaka*) or when mentally unhinged (*khitta, citta*). (SnA 553)

<sup>173</sup> As in the realm of the non-conscious beings (*asañña, sattā*), or in the state of cessation of perception and feeling (*saññā, vedayita, nirodha*). (SnA 553)

<sup>174</sup> *Na vibhūta, saññī*, lit “not one whose perception has disappeared (*vi + bhavati*),” ie with perception suppressed, as in the formless attainments (*āruppa*). (SnA 553)

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