

The Unconscious

How the mind really works, or are we really in control?

An introduction by Piya Tan ©2006

1 Conscious, unconscious and involuntary

1.1 NEITHER WILL NOR FREE WILL. The study on feelings (SD 17.3) opens with the remark that there is a common notion in western philosophy and popular belief that *our behaviour is not fully determined by our conscious mind*. Buddhism teaches that we are often at the mercy of both forces: while feeling is the active conscious workings of our being, reacting to the world by way of liking, disliking and ignoring the sense-experiences, all such processes are really controlled by our unconscious habits or latent tendencies. Buddhism teaches that if we are no longer attached to our feeling, we will clean up and tame our unconscious, then, we are truly free.

The notion of **the unconscious** is as ancient as Buddhism, defined as the latent tendencies (*anusaya*) [1.2].¹ I use the term “unconscious” in this sense, referring to the latent tendencies of lust, aversion and ignorance, which manifest as the three unwholesome roots—greed, hate, and delusion—or **the pre-conscious**, motivating negative karmic acts through the body, speech and mind [2.2]. The pre-conscious is so called because we are in some conscious of our motive, but may not be in control of it. The term **sub-conscious** I use to refer to the “existential consciousness,” rebirth consciousness, or the *bhav’āṅga* (life-continuum) [3].²

Buddhism does not have any notion of “the will” nor of “free will” as found in Western philosophy and religion. A number of western scholars have shown that it was Augustine of Hippo (354-430), a dominant personality of the western Church during his time, who “was, in fact, the inventor of our modern notion of the will”³ and “the first philosopher of the will.”⁴ One of his reasons for his invention of the notion of “will” (*voluntas*) was to explain the origin of evil and sin, which Augustine traced back to a primeval “perversion of the will.”⁵

Modern Buddhist scholars are themselves aware of the absence of “free will” in Buddhism, and that as such it is also free from its philosophical problems. **Y Karunaratna**, for example, writes:⁶

The expression “freedom of the *will*” or its equivalent is not found in the *suttas* or other authentic texts recording the teachings of the Buddha and its use in modern expositions only reflects an unstated wish to interpret Buddhist thought in terms of the categories of Western thought.

(Karunaratna, *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*: cetanā, p91)

As such, we can say that since the Buddha’s teaching does not subscribe to the notion of the will (which is a later theistic invention), Buddhism does not subscribe to the notion of “free will,” too. This is not because the Buddha does not teach that one has a moral choice in one’s actions,⁷ but simply that both the

¹ See Irvin A Hanse, “Buddhist influences on the idea of the Unconscious,” 2007.

² See **Viññāṇa** = SD 17.8a (6.1). For similar (but not identical) usages, see de Silva 1992: 49-51.

³ Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity*, University of California, 1982:144, also 123, 127; & Alasdair McIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame, 1988:156 ff. See also foll n.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* 2: “Willing,” NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978:84-110. John Hick says that “St Augustine... has probably done more than any other writer after St Paul to shape the structure of orthodox Christian belief... for Augustine’s influence was exerted at an earlier and more plastic stage in the growth of the Christian mind...” (J Hick, *Evil and the Good of Love*, London: Macmillan, 1985:37). See also Hick 1985:59-69.

⁵ *Confessions* 7:15.22: The perverted will is “twisted away from you, O God, the highest substance, to lower things.” Perversion = *per* (wrong way) + *versus* (turning).

⁶ Qu by Keown 1992:216, 218, who also qu Padmasiri de Silva, *Introduction to Buddhist Psychology*, 1979:78.

⁷ See eg **Atta,kārī S** (A 6.38/3:337 f) = SD 7.6.

notion of the “will” and connected idea of “free will” are both later theistic constructions that are narrow and problematic, and as such are rejected by most modern philosophers.⁸

1.2 UNCONSCIOUS PROCESSES AND INVOLUNTARY REACTIONS. Neuroscientists have empirical evidence that clearly indicates that only a certain set of neurons in the brain participates in any given moment of consciousness. In fact, many emotional, motor, perceptual and semantic processes occur unconsciously. These unconscious processes are usually limited brain activities in local and specialized brain areas.⁹

This result suggests when a stimulus is phenomenally reportable from the standpoint of experience, it is the result of translocal, large-scale mechanisms that somehow integrate local functions and processes. In other words, it has been hypothesized that the neural activity crucial for consciousness most probably involves the transient and continual orchestration of scattered mosaics of functionally specialized brain regions, rather than any single, highly localized brain process or structure.¹⁰ (A Lutz, Dunne & Davidson 2007:65)

Early Buddhism similarly does not locate mental processes anywhere in the body. The Buddhist way of talking about such processes is always a causal one, that is, by way of dependent arising.

As we have seen in our study of consciousness,¹¹ our lives as unawakened beings, are largely run by our **latent tendencies** (*anusaya*).¹² In fact, we *are* our latent tendencies. Even the way we *perceive* (or apperceive) things is through *recognizing*, or giving names and forms to nameless and formless sense-data.¹³ In this sense, we are ruled by our past: very often, our lives are run on an autopilot of habitual tendencies and selective memories. We might consider ourselves to be conscious beings, but there is still a great part of ourselves that is ruled by the unconscious mind.

Unconscious actions are, however, still regarded as morally motivated, and should be understood to differ from *involuntary* actions or reactions. **Sue Hamilton**, for example, discusses the possibility of involuntary reactions and how it is accounted for:

I have suggested that if one is not conscious of a sound then one has not heard it [1996a:88 f]. We can, however, sometimes react “involuntarily” to a sound *without* being conscious of it: in sleep, for example, a loud sound can cause one to make a movement even if there is absolutely no consciousness of the sound at all. We also experience peripheral awareness which we do not seem to be conscious *of*. We regularly avoid obstacles in our path while our attention is wholly elsewhere, for example. Though such experiences of peripheral awareness might indicate the minimal level to which consciousness of, or awareness, operates, this question is not explicitly dealt with in the Sutta Piṭaka. Nor is the experience of involuntary reactions explained. This is a significant omission because involuntary reactions such as wet dreams became the subject of controversy in the early Buddhist *saṅgha*: if they are unconscious, do they constitute a volition with moral implications?¹⁴ (1996a:90)

The early Buddhist view is that, in an ordinary person, a conscious action—whether a physical act, speech, or thought—is rooted in one of the three unwholesome roots (greed, hate or delusion) or one of the three wholesome roots (charity, lovingkindness or wisdom).¹⁵ An unconscious action, on the other hand, is an action done without much awareness or mindfulness, especially a habitual act.

⁸ See **Free will and Buddhism** = SD 7.7(6-7).

⁹ Dehaene & Naccache 2001.

¹⁰ Llinas, Ribary, Contreras & Pedroarena, 1998; Tononi & Edelman 1998; Singer 2001; Dehaene & Naccache 2001.

¹¹ **Viññāṇa** = SD 17.8a(5.1).

¹² See **(Dve) Khandha S** (S 22.48) = SD 17.1a Introd (1.2) & **Anusaya** = SD 31.3.

¹³ See **Saññā** = SD 17.3, esp §2.

¹⁴ See LS Cousins, 1991. (Hamilton’s fn). Arhats do not have wet dreams (V 1:294; Kvu 2.1.21/172).

¹⁵ See eg **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41/1:285-290) = SD 5.7; **Cūḷa Kamma, vibhaṅga S** (M 135/3:202-206) = SD 4.15; **Itṭha S** (A 5.43/3:47-49); **Kusalākusala Sañcetanika S** (A 10.206/5:292-297) = SD 3.9

For example, while a butcher is killing, he may rationalize that he is earning a living to support his family. He might even be convinced that he has no ill intentions at all in slaughtering animals. In fact, the butcher may have been slaughtering animals with such frequency that he often does so “without a thought,” as it were. The action is still immoral.¹⁶ We also have the case of some pre-literate tribesmen (such as the Kalahari !Kung or Zhun/twasi) who perform certain rituals before the carcass of an animal they have killed, “asking for forgiveness” for having killed it and “thanking” it for offering its meat. In karmic terms, such acts may be less immoral than, say, a big game hunter who kills for sport; but both acts are karmically immoral, even if it is a matter of degree.

An important point to remember is that an unconscious act is done unmindfully: it is a routine of simply going through the motion; one goes on autopilot, as it were. One could for example make a routine of performing prayers and rituals, but one’s life remains untouched and unmoved in any way. In religion, one often sees such an unconscious religious lifestyle when one surrenders one’s mind to a guru figure or a God figure, that is, when one places one’s locus of control outside of oneself.¹⁷

One of the most pernicious effects of the belief in an almighty God (that is, the God of one’s choice) coupled with the notion that “man proposes, God disposes,” is that such a zealot simply feels he is not responsible for his deeds. This probably explains why religious wars and crusades have been going on throughout history by way of remorseless, even glorified, acts of mass murder, massacre, terrorism and destruction. The perpetrators simply do not feel that they are doing anything wrong: they are not only *unconscious* about the evil deeds, but they are actually *deluded* in thinking that they are right in doing so.

1.3 UNCONSCIOUS PERCEPTION. Although there is no scientific evidence that commercial self-help subliminal tapes actually work,¹⁸ some experiments have shown that one can unconsciously be effected by certain events. Scientists have found a long-lasting and somewhat unnerving effect in a controversial study of people undergoing general anaesthesia. During a real surgical operation involving ten patients, a mock crisis was staged, where a statement was made to the effect that the patient was going blue and needed more oxygen. A month later, they were hypnotized and asked whether they remembered anything that had occurred during their operation. Four of them remembered the statement verbatim, and four more recalled something of what was being said.¹⁹

In another interesting experiment, subjects had to rate a series of Chinese characters according to whether they thought each represented a “good” or a “bad” concept. One group of subjects saw either a smiling face or a scowling face for one second before each one. They were told to ignore these faces and concentrate only on rating the characters. The second group was shown the same faces for only 4 milliseconds, which is not long enough to see them. The interesting result was that the first group managed to ignore the faces as instructed, but the second group were somehow influenced by the faces they claimed not to see. If the invisible face was smiling, they were more likely to rate the character as “good.”²⁰

Brain scans have also shown that unconscious perception can affect the brain. An fMRI²¹ study showed that subjects who unconsciously perceived fearful faces had increased activity in the amygdala²² than

¹⁶ One must note that “butcher” is simply a word: there are occasions when the butcher might not kill (say, during holy days) or when he visits a temple and listens to a Dharma talk, which actions are of course wholesome. Karma is what one *does*, not what one *is*.

¹⁷ See *Saṅkhāra* = SD 17.6(2.2).

¹⁸ See eg PM Merikle, “Subliminal perception.” In AE Kazdin (ed), *Encyclopedia of Psychology*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2000 7:497-499.

¹⁹ BW Levinson, “States of awareness during general anaesthesia.” *British Journal of Anaesthesia* 37, 1965: 544-546; see also JF Kihlstrom, “Perception without awareness of what is perceived, learning without awareness of what is learned.” In M Velmans (ed), *The Science of Consciousness*, London: Routledge, 1996:23-46, & PM Merikle & M Daneman, “Memory for unconsciously perceived events: evidence from anesthetized patients.” *Consciousness and Cognition* 5, 1996:525-541..

²⁰ ST Murphy & RB Zajonc, “Affect, cognition, and awareness: affective priming with optimal and suboptimal stimulus exposures.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 64, 1993:723-739.

²¹ fMRI = functional magnetic resonance imaging, which is the use of MRI to measure the hemodynamic response (ie blood flow) related to neural activity in the brain or spinal cord of humans or other animals. It is one of the most recently developed forms of neuroimaging.

did those who saw happy faces.²³ And a PET²⁴ study showed that angry faces activated the right, but not the left amygdala.²⁵ Such studies confirm that even when information is not consciously perceived it can have effects in the same parts of the brain that would be activated by consciously seen stimuli of the same kind.²⁶

In fact, scientists have also observed that when the brain was activated by unconscious primes,²⁷ there was activity not only in sensory areas, but also in motor areas, suggesting covert responses to the unseen masked stimuli. They concluded that “A stream of perceptual, semantic, and motor processes can therefore occur without awareness.”²⁸ This, notes Susan Blackmore (2003:278), is reminiscent of William James’ contention that “Every impression which impinges on the incoming nerves produces some discharge down the outgoing ones, whether we be aware of it or not” (1890 2:372).

1.4 IMPLICATIONS OF UNCONSCIOUS PERCEPTION. Blackmore, in her instructive study, *Consciousness: An introduction* (2003:279 f) discussing the implications of unconscious perception, states that “The evidence for unconscious perception shows that some popular ideas about consciousness have to be wrong.” Here I summarize the conclusions regarding the three ways of thinking about consciousness, adding my own comments by way of explication.

(1) The Cartesian theatre theory. This traditional view stems from the French philosopher, René Descartes,²⁹ from whom came the theory of the “Cartesian theatre.”³⁰ According to this view, *consciousness is like a multi-sensory cinema, whereupon “I” can experience and act on it*. In its most extreme view, this

²² **The amygdala**, also called “amygdaloid nucleus,” is an almond-shaped mass of grey matter in the anterior portion of the temporal lobe (ie the limbic system, which plays an important role in motivation and emotional behaviour). It is activated in stressful situations to trigger the emotion of fear. Hallucinations related to post-traumatic stress are thought to be caused by the activation of memory traces in the amygdala that have not been integrated and modified by other parts of the brain. See also SD 17.8c(7.3).

²³ PJ Whalen et al, “Masked presentation of emotional facial expressions modulate amygdala activity without explicit knowledge.” *Journal of Neuroscience* 18, 1998:411-418.

²⁴ PET = positron emission tomography, ie, tomography in which a computer-generated image of a biological activity within the body is produced through the detection of gamma rays that are emitted when introduced radio-nuclides decay and release positrons. A medical imaging technique that monitors metabolic, or biochemical, activity in the brain and other organs by tracking the movement and concentration of a radioactive tracer injected into the bloodstream.

²⁵ JS Morris, A Öhman & RJ Dolan, “Consciousness and unconscious emotional learning in the human amygdala.” *Nature* 393, 1998:467-470.

²⁶ On the other hand, scientists had also observed during research on meditating Tibetan Buddhist monks that the left prefrontal cortex (associated with happiness, zest, and alertness) showed a high level of activity. See **Consciousness and meditation** = SD 17.8c(7.3).

²⁷ In physiology and psychology, a **prime** refers to the triggering of specific memories or perception by a particular cue, eg one can “prime” the recall of such diverse memories as “fire engine” and “apple” with the word “red.”

²⁸ Dehaene et al, “Imaging unconscious semantic priming.” *Nature* 395, 1998:597.

²⁹ **René Descartes** (1596-1650) is one of the most important Western philosophers of the past few centuries. During his lifetime, Descartes was just as famous as an original physicist, physiologist and mathematician. He has been called the father of modern Western philosophy because (1) he was one of the first to abandon scholastic Aristotelianism, (2) he formulated the first modern version of **mind-body dualism**, from which stems the mind-body problem, and (3) he promoted the development of a **new science** grounded in observation and experiment. Applying an original system of methodical doubt, he dismissed apparent knowledge derived from authority, the senses, and reason and erected new epistemic foundations on the basis of the intuition that, when he is thinking, he exists; this he expressed in the dictum “I think, therefore I am” (best known in its Latin formulation, “**Cogito, ergo sum**,” though originally written in French, “Je pense, donc je suis”). See **Self & Selves** = SD 26.9 (3.2).

³⁰ The **Cartesian theatre** is a somewhat disparaging term coined by philosopher Daniel Dennett (b 1942) to pointedly refer to the defining aspect of Cartesian materialism, which he considers to be the often unacknowledged remnants of Cartesian dualism in modern materialistic theories of the mind. See his *Consciousness Explained*, 1991: 107. See D Dennett & M Kinsbourne, “Time and the observer,” <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/time&obs.htm>; also Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, reason, and the human brain*, Avon Books, 1994 and also: <http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/bb/damasio/descartes.html>.

theory assumes that perception is always conscious, and that sensory information can only lead to action once it has passed through the theatre of consciousness. As we have seen, there are many good reasons for rejecting this view: there is unconscious perception (which is in fact, a major part of our consciousness) and there is also subliminal perception.³¹

(2) Cartesian materialism. The second view accepts these reasons, but still fails to reject the theatre theory: sensory information enters the consciousness and is acted upon consciously, *while some bypass consciousness and is acted on unconsciously*, perhaps by using routes through the brain that lead to motor output without actually reaching consciousness. While rejecting the notions of a homunculus (“little man”) watching events on a mental screen, it retains essential idea that things are either “in” or “out” of consciousness. This is perhaps the most common academic view in consciousness studies today.

(3) Subjective statements. The third view is basically *what people say about their own experience*. However, there is no undisputed measure for deciding whether something has been consciously perceived or not, and there are many stimuli that are deemed to be consciously perceived by some measures and not by others. So we cannot really say for sure whether an experience is “in” or “out” of consciousness. Sensory information is processed in many different ways, interpreted in different ways, bringing differing results for different kinds of behaviour. Some such behaviours may be taken as indication of consciousness, such as verbal response or choices between clearly perceptible stimuli, while others are usually considered to be unconscious, such as fast reflexes, or certain measures of brain activity. In between, there are many kinds of behaviour that are sometimes taken to indicate consciousness, and sometimes not.

The main problem for this third theory is what people say about their own experience, that they are sure what is and is not in their consciousness, even if they cannot always explain what they mean. One response is to try to explain how the illusion comes about.³² Another is to show how these misguided intuitions disappear with proper introspection.³³

2 Consciousness is not-self

2.1 THE “DOER” IS NOT-SELF. Most of us go through life thinking we have full control of things around us; some politicians go further and think that they are in control of everything. This is one reason why religion—or, more specifically, the spiritual aspects of religion—stand out at the other end of the scale of things. The delusion that “I’m in charge” is a major hindrance to meditation and mindfulness practice. The notion that everything, or at least things around oneself, should run just as one wants it, often creates restlessness, worry and fear.

Restlessness arises when one feels strongly compelled to *do* things or get things *done*, and in the way one *wants* it. *Worry* is the dwelling on past pains, failures and perceptions, or dreaming of future pleasure and success. *Fear* is the dark side of desire: when one has a strong desire for something, the fear of not attaining it, or of not enjoying it, is always lurking close by. All these negative emotions thrive, driven by the notion that there is a permanent self that is “in charge.”

The way out of this “doing” cycle is to understand that the “**doer**” cannot let go of doing: the doer simply keeps on doing, and cannot help itself. It takes some wisdom to see that the doing is merely a conditioned reflex. A reflection may help here.

The next time you relax beside a lake, notice how ripples form on the water surface. A single leaf, flower, or object drops on the water, and ripples appear in waves moving outwards. Look closely and you see with your mind’s eye that the water is not moving *outwards*: it is only the kinetic energy pushing the water *upwards* each time. The waves appear to move towards you: moving, yet not moving. There are really no waves, but only water pushed up and down in a patterned way.³⁴

³¹ On subliminal perception, see Blackmore 2003:273-279, 283.

³² D Dennett 1991.

³³ Blackmore 2003:401-414 (ch 27): “Buddhism and consciousness.”

³⁴ See **Self & Selves** = SD 26.9 (2.5.2) Reflection.

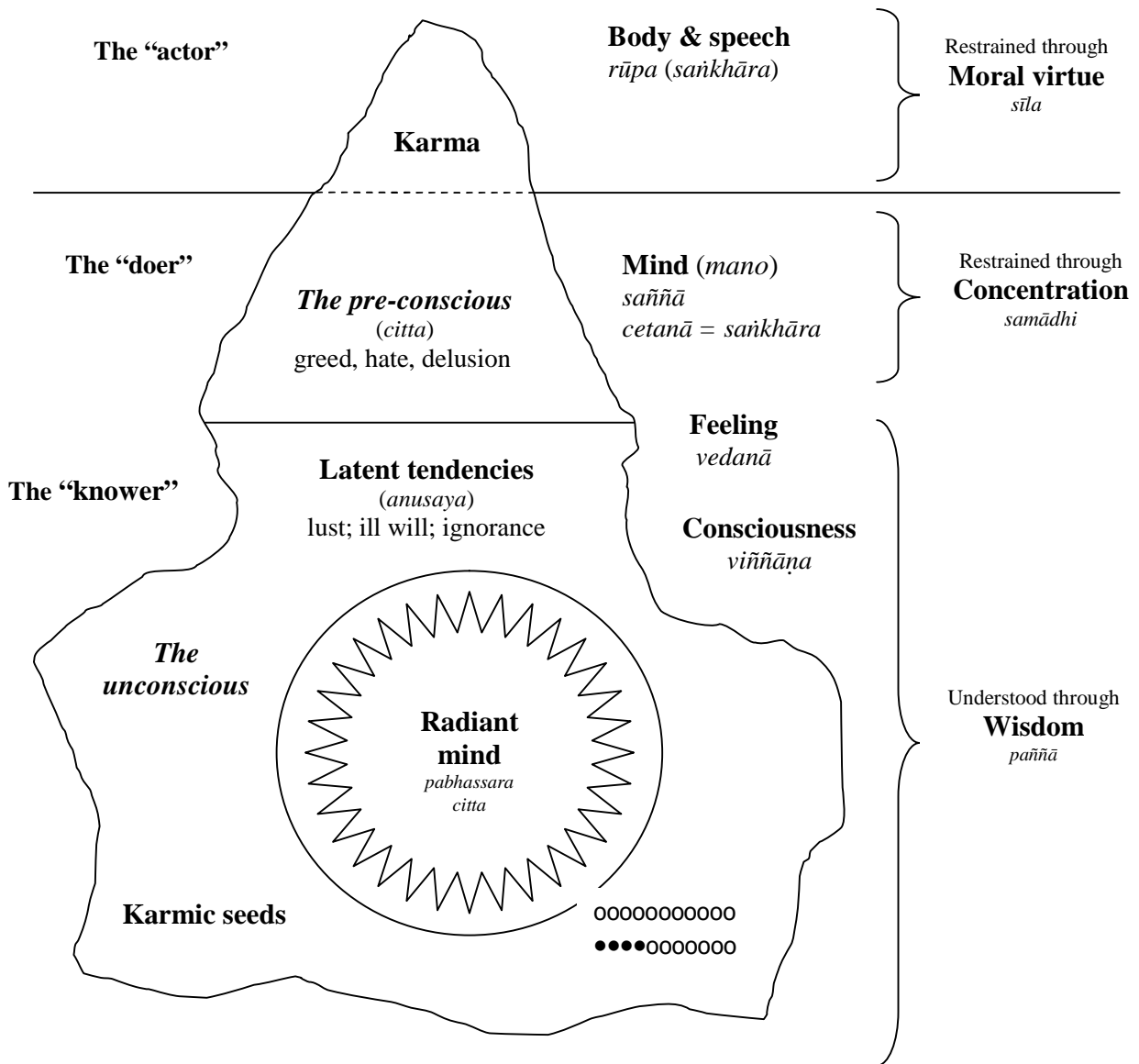


Fig 2.2 The Iceberg diagram

We are made up of body and mind. On a conscious **public level**, only our physical and verbal acts can be seen. Such acts are often consciously motivated by greed, hate and delusion: they are intentional acts (*cetanā*). On a conscious **private level**, the mind is constantly perceiving things (*saññā*), and we judge them as pleasant, unpleasant and neutral according to our feelings (*vedanā*). Such reactions arouse craving (in the form of like and dislike based on delusion), forming ideas (*saṅkhāra*) about them. Such unwholesome acts go on to form habits (*nāti*) and sink as “karmic seeds” deep into our consciousness as latent tendencies (*anusaya*), ready to spring into action when the conditions are right.

On the **social level**, our physical acts and speech can be moderated and purified through moral virtue (*sīla*). However, the negative **thoughts** behind such acts and speech need to be restrained and purified through mental concentration (*samādhi*) or mindfulness (*sati*). Our physical acts, speech and and thoughts can only be consistently wholesome and pure when we have attained insight wisdom (*paññā*) or awakening (*bodhi*), that is, reached the state of an arhat (*arahatta*).

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Our minds work in the same way: we form ideas and emotions and take them to be real, and act or react accordingly. A simple way of exposing the falseness of such “doings” is to recall some childhood difficulties (such as fear, anger, etc) we have gone through. Most likely, we would think that we know better now and would have responded differently with that wisdom. The same reasoning should then be applied to our present condition: “What would I do if I were wiser now?” We may be growing older but the child is still in us, and this child—our “doing” mind—has to grow, too. Let us now examine how we can tame and free the doer.

2.2 THE “KNOWER” IS NOT-SELF. Powerful as the “doer” may be, there is yet another side to our mind, a sort of silent (sometimes, sleeping) partner. This is the “knower,” whose roots lie just as deep as those of the doer, but they always go together in the unawakened mind. You can use deep meditation to stop the doer for a while, even a long while—such a being reborn in a dhyanic realm and spending aeons there. However, even those states are impermanent, and they go in an unending cycle called *samsara*.

The “knower” reacts to what it knows, and knowing leads to doing. This knower is technically known as *consciousness* (*citta*). On a simple level, this *citta* merely processes what is going on at each of the six sense-doors; but it also has other important functions.³⁵ So, this *citta* is like a huge iceberg, of which only about 10% is seen above the water, and 90% lies hidden underneath. The seen 10%—the “actor”—comprises our actions and words, mostly motivated by the “doer,” lying just below on the pre-conscious level. But there is the massive behemoth, the strong silent “knower” that lies mostly hidden, forming the bulk of the unconscious.

Very often people today still make the “Cartesian error” of thinking that since one thing is sure—“I exist”—therefore, it must be a permanent self, an abiding entity. They think there is *something* there that knows, or **Brahmavamso** puts it:

“The knower” is usually called consciousness or *citta* (mind), which is what knows. That knowing is often seen to be the ultimate “self.” Very often people can get the perception, or the paradigm, in their minds of perceiving something in here, which can just know and not be touched by what it knows. It just knows heat and cold, pleasure and pain. It just knows beauty and ugliness. However, at the same time (somehow or other), it can just stand back and not be known, and not be touched by what’s actually happening. It is important to understand that the nature of consciousness is so fast, so quick, that it gives the illusion of continuity. Owing to this illusion, one misses the point that whatever one sees with your eyes, or feels with the body, the mind then takes that up as its own object, and it knows that it saw. It knows that it felt. It’s that knowing that it saw, knowing that it felt, that gives the illusion of objectivity. It can even know that it knew.

When philosophy books talk about “self reflection” or “self knowledge”, the fact that not only do “I know”, but that “I know that I know”, or that “I know that I know that I know”, is given as a proof of the existence of a self. I have looked into that experience, in order to see what actually was going on with this “knowing” business. Using the depth of my meditation, with the precision that that gave to mindfulness, to awareness, I could see the way this mind was actually working. What one actually sees is this procession of events, that which we call “knowing.” It’s like a procession, just one thing arising after the other in time. When I saw something, then a fraction of a moment afterwards I knew that I saw, and then a fraction of a moment afterwards I knew that I knew that I saw. There is no such thing as, “I know that I know that I know.” The truth of the matter is, “I know that I knew that I knew.” When one adds the perspective of time, one can see the causal sequence of moments of consciousness. Not seeing that causal sequence can very easily give rise to the illusion of a continuous “knower.” This illusion of a continuous “knower” is most often where people assume that their “self” resides.

However, as it says in the suttas, one can see that even knowing is conditioned (*saṅkhata*) (M 64).³⁶ One can see that this too rises because of causes, and then ceases when the causes cease.

³⁵ We have discussed its two important forms, cognitive consciousness and existential consciousness: see *Vīñ-ñāna* = SD 17.8a(6). See also (3) & (5.1) below.

³⁶ **Mahā Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 64) = SD 21.20.

This is actually where one starts to see through the illusion of objectivity. It is impossible to separate the “knower” from the known. As the Buddha said many times, “In all of the six senses, such as the mind base, when mind base and mind objects come together it turns on mind consciousness. The coming together of the three is called *phassa* (contact)” (eg M 28).³⁷ Consciousness is conditioned, it has its causes, and it’s not always going to be there. During the experience of jhana one is totally separated from the world of the five senses. All five senses have disappeared. All that’s left is mind, mind base, mind experience. One then knows clearly what mind (*citta*) is. (Brahmavamso 2001:4, digital ed)

As the English neuropsychiatrist, **P Fenwick**, puts it very succinctly, “The characteristic of enlightenment is a permanent freeing of the individual from the illusion that he is ‘doing’.”³⁸ **Susan Blackmore** provides contemporary insight on this:

How is it possible to live without doing? One answer lies in the simple phrase “as if.” You can live *as if* you have free will; *as if* you are a self who acts; *as if* there is a physical world outside yourself. You can treat others *as if* they are sentient beings who have desires, beliefs, hopes and fears—adopting the intentional stance towards others, and towards yourself. This way of living drops any distinction between real and *as if* intentionality, or real and *as if* free will. (2003:413 f)

This *as if* approach means, I think, that you have some level of understanding that the real world is not what it appears to be, but since that is the way most people view it, you respect and respond to that virtual world in a way that would not mentally or spiritually jeopardize yourself in anyway, and at the same time you will be able to healthily relate to others. It is like playing “Let’s pretend” but being serious and compassionate about it.

3 The two consciousnesses

In our study of *viññāṇa*,³⁹ we have looked at the two types of consciousnesses: cognitive consciousness and existential consciousness,⁴⁰ and we also see, in **the Mahā, nidāna Sutta** (D 15) and **the Nagara Sutta** (S 12.65), how consciousness interact with *nāma, rūpa*,⁴¹ in a loop: it begins with *viññāṇa*, but states that *viññāṇa* and *nāma, rūpa*, given as the second link in the formula, are mutually conditioning.⁴² We can in fact apply this looped sequence to see how both types of consciousness interact. We saw that in the link, “**With name-and-form as condition, there is consciousness**” (*nāma, rūpa, paccayā viññāṇam*), *viññāṇa* refers to existential consciousness, and in the link, “**With consciousness as condition, there is name-and-form**” (*viññāṇa, paccayā nāma, rūpam*), it is cognitive consciousness. This distinction is useful in explaining the functions of *viññāṇa*, but as **WS Waldron** cautions,

We draw these conclusions [“they are, in this temporal sense, causal conditions of one another”], however, only through inference and analysis, since there are no extant passages in the early Buddhist texts that explicitly differentiate these two, nor relate them in this fashion.⁴³

³⁷ **Mahā Hatthi, padopama S** (M 28) = SD 6.16.

³⁸ P Fenwick, “Meditation and the EEG.” In M West (ed), *The Psychology of Meditation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987:117. See also S Blackmore 2003:413 f.

³⁹ SD 17.8a(6).

⁴⁰ Amongst the scholars who have used this distinction are OH de A Wijesekera 1964, Rune EA Johansson 1965: 198 f, & WW Waldon 2003: 41-45. I regard this as the *sub-conscious*: see definitions [1.1].

⁴¹ D 15.3/2:56 = SD 5.17 & S 12.65.9.3/2:105, 12.65.17ab/2:105) = SD 14.2 respectively.

⁴² SD 17.8a(6).

⁴³ “This is not to say that this distinction can be or need be discerned in all occurrences of the term. The point is that these two divergent contexts of meaning form part of a complex, with all its inherent tensions, whose unity as well as differentiation calls for some sort of explication.” (Waldron’s fn). Waldron is using this distinction to understand the background and context of the Yogācāra concept of the *ālaya, vijñāna*—“to be able to delineate two regularly occurring and consistently distinct contexts in which these ‘aspects’ of *viññāṇa* appear in the material

(2003:41)

This lack of differentiation is not only understandable in early Buddhism, but it is its strength, that is, in focusing on experiential truths rather than theoretical accuracies that characterizes the Abhidharma and later philosophical traditions. The Abhidharma texts, for example, shifted the focus “from the more general processes that govern progress along the Buddhist path to the events that constitute those processes,” **Gethin** explains “might be viewed as an attempt to provide a more detailed and accurate map of the path” (2005:194).⁴⁴ As we know, the map is not the territory. This is especially true in the case of early Buddhism which has a strong critique of language⁴⁵ (as compared to, say, the Abhidhamma penchant for naming the world and creating ultimate units of categorization).

REA Johansson, a pioneer in Buddhist psychology, has noted a number of Sutta passages where *viññāṇa* “is found twice in the same context, and it may be difficult to decide, whether the same meaning is intended or not” (1965:198), but, as we shall see, he drops clear hints of an understanding of a distinction between the two types of consciousnesses. Let us examine the two passages that he has cited.

Johansson first quotes from **the Anātha,piṇḍik’ovāda Sutta** (M 143), from Ānanda’s final instructions to the dying Anātha,piṇḍika. Ānanda admonishes Anātha,piṇḍika to let go of anything that could serve as a support for *viññāṇa* to be bring about rebirth, that is, within which *viññāṇa* occurs as cognitive consciousness, thus:

5 “Then, householder, you should train yourself thus:

‘I will not cling to the eye, (the ear, | the nose, | the tongue, | the body, | the mind) and my *viññāṇa* will not be dependent on the eye (the ear, | the nose, | the tongue, | the body, | the mind).

6 ...I will not cling to sights, (sounds, | smells, | tastes, | touches, | mind-objects) and my *viññāṇa* will not be dependent on sights (sounds, | smells, | tastes, | touches, | mind-objects).

7 ...I will not cling to eye-consciousness, (ear-consciousness, | nose-consciousness, | tongue-consciousness, | body-consciousness, mind-consciousness) and my *viññāṇa* will not be dependent on eye-consciousness (ear-consciousness, | nose-consciousness, | tongue-consciousness, | body-consciousness, | mind-consciousness).

8 ...I will not cling to eye-contact, (ear-contact, | nose-contact, | tongue-contact, | body-contact, | mind-contact) and my *viññāṇa* will not be dependent on eye-contact (ear-contact | nose-contact | tongue-contact | body-contact | mind-contact).

9 ...I will not cling to feeling born of eye-contact, (of ear-contact, | of nose-contact, | of tongue-contact, | of body-contact, | of mind-contact) and my *viññāṇa* will not be dependent on feeling born of eye-contact (of ear-contact | of nose-contact | of tongue-contact | of body-contact | of mind-contact).

10 ...I will not cling to the earth element, (to the water element, | to the fire element, | to the wind element, | to the consciousness element,) and my *viññāṇa* will not be dependent on the earth element (to the water element | to the fire element | to the wind element | to the consciousness element).

11 ...I will not cling to form, and my *viññāṇa* will not be dependent on form.
I will not cling to feeling, and my *viññāṇa* will not be dependent on feeling.
I will not cling to perception, and my *viññāṇa* will not be dependent on perception.
I will not cling to formations, and my *viññāṇa* will not be dependent on formations.
I will not cling to *viññāṇa*, and my *viññāṇa* will not be dependent on *viññāṇa*.⁴⁶

(M 143.5-10/3:259 f; abridged) = SD 23.9

which later thinkers [incl the Abhidharma traditions] drew upon in formulating their own innovative theories of mind.” (Waldron 2003:41-45)

⁴⁴ On the origin on the Abhidhamma, see **Dhamma and Abhidhamma** = SD 26.1.

⁴⁵ See **Saññā** = SD 17.4(3-6) & also Ronkin 2005:246.

⁴⁶ *Na viññāṇam upādayissāmi, na ca me viññāṇa, nissitam viññāṇam bhavissati.*

Johansson cites the last line and adds that:

...there is a form of *viññāṇa* dependent on cognitive processes, and probably *viññāṇa* in its rebirth-aspect is intended, as the context deals with meditation. As the factors mentioned are mostly perceptions and ideas without much mystery about them, rebirth-*viññāṇa* probably also simply is ordinary *viññāṇa*. It would be strange, eg, that a metaphysical *viññāṇa* could arise from the cognitive *viññāṇa*: they must both consist of similar conscious processes.
(1965:1999; emphasis added)

Johansson correctly identifies the second *viññāṇa* as the “rebirth-*viññāṇa*,” or what is here called existential consciousness. His second quotation is from **the Upāya Sutta** (S 22.53):⁴⁷

If, bhikkhus, a monk has abandoned lust for ⟨the form element..., the feeling element..., the perception element... for the formations element⟩ **the consciousness element**, with the abandoning of lust, the basis is cut off. There is no establishing of consciousness.

And when that **consciousness** is unestablished, not growing, non-generative, it is liberated...
(S 22.53/3:53 f) = SD 29.4

Here the Saṃyutta Commentary explains “**the basis is cut off**” (*vocchijjat’ārammaṇam*) as meaning that the basis (*ārammaṇa*) is cut off through the lack of any ability to bring about rebirth (SA 2:272). The Ṭīkā adds that the basis is the condition for rebirth by way of the karmic sign, etc, is “cut off” by way of the cutting off of karma that produces rebirth (SAṬ:VRI 2:198). **Bodhi** notes that

SAṬ [the Porāṇa Ṭīkā] thus takes *ārammaṇa* here in the sense dominant in the Abhidhamma, ie, as the object of rebirth-consciousness [see Abhs:BRS 3.17]. However, I understand the word in the older sense of “basis,” elsewhere glossed simply as *paccaya*; [see S:B 759 n112]. SA’s explanation need not entail the interpretation proposed by SAṬ. (S:B 1060 n71; refs normalized)

Here **the consciousness element** (*viññāṇa, dhātu*) refers to the consciousness aggregate (*viññāṇa-k, -khandha*), that is, the cognitive consciousness. This is one of the rare occasions in the Suttas where *dhātu* is used as a synonym for *khandha*.⁴⁸ **The non-generative consciousness** (*anābhisaṅkhāra viññāṇa*) refers to what becomes of the existential consciousness. The term non-generative (*anābhisaṅkhāra*) means that the consciousness does not generate formations (that is, the formations do not grow) (*saṅkhāra*), in the sense, says the Commentary, that it is “liberated,” that is, it does not generate rebirth (SA 2:272). The Sutta closes by declaring that such a person has attained nirvana.

This teachings become clearer if we examine **the Atthi, rāga Sutta** (S 12.64), where the Buddha describes the nature of the arhat’s consciousness. Using the analogy of a shadow not forming in empty space, the arhat’s consciousness similarly does not settle or is not established anywhere.

So, too, bhikkhus, if there is no lust for edible food... for the food that is contact... for the food that is mental volition... for the food that is consciousness... consciousness is not established there and grow.

Where consciousness is not established and does not grow,... I say that it is without sorrow, without anguish, without despair.
(S 12.64/2:101-104) = SD 26.20

⁴⁷ ⟨*Rūpa, dhātuyā... vedanāya, dhātuyā... saññāya, dhātuyā... saṅkhāra, dhātuyā...*⟩ *ce bhikkhave bhikkhuno rāgo pahīno hoti, rāgassa pahāna vocchijjat’ārammaṇam patiṭṭhā viññāṇassa na hoti. Tad apatiṭṭhitam viññāṇam avirūham anābhisaṅkhāraṇ ca vimuttam...*

⁴⁸ In fact, this usage is only found in **Hālidakāni S 1** (S 22.3/3:10) = SD 10.12, **Hālidakāni S 2** (S 22.4/-3:13), **Upāya S** (S 22.53/3:53), **Bīja S** (S 22.54/3:55) and **Udāna S** (S 22.55/3:58), all found in **the Khandha Saṃyutta**.

(1)	<i>avijjā</i>	ignorance	}	I. Past karma conditions a new life. Formations condition <u>existential consciousness</u> to descend into a new living body (<i>nāma, rūpa</i>).
(2)	<i>saṅkhāra</i>	formations		
(3)	<i>viññāṇa</i>	consciousness	}	II. Conscious body (<i>sa, viññāṇa, kāya</i>) conditions cognitive processes. Existential consciousness supports the arising of <u>cognitive consciousness</u> through the senses, contact, feeling.
(4)	<i>nāma, rūpa</i>	name-and-form		
(5)	<i>saḷāyatana</i>	the 6 sense-bases	}	III. Cognitive processes collectively condition existential consciousness. Cognitive consciousness fuel existence, leading to rebirth.
(6)	<i>phassa</i>	contact (sense-stimulus)		
(7)	<i>vedanā</i>	feeling	}	The full cycle: Conditioned by formations, consciousness is enters a new body; existential consciousness conditions cognitive consciousness, which in turn fuel existence leading existential consciousness to rebirth.
(8)	<i>taṇhā</i>	craving		
(9)	<i>upādāna</i>	clinging	}	
(10)	<i>bhava</i>	existence		
(11)	<i>jāti</i>	birth		
	↓	...		

Table 3. The three-life dependent arising formula

Bodhi, in a long footnote, instructively explains:

It should be noted that [the Saṃyutta Commentary] explains that statement that the arahant’s *consciousness* is unestablished to mean that his kamma in unestablished. This seems too free an interpretation. Nevertheless, I think it would be wrong to interpret the sutta as saying that after his parinibbāna the arhant’s consciousness persists in some mode that can only be described as unestablished. The present passage is clearly speaking of the arahant’s consciousness *while he is alive*. Its purport is not that an “unestablished consciousness” remains after the arahant’s parinibbāna, but that his consciousness, being devoid of lust, does not “become established in” the four nutriments in any way that might generate a future existence. (S:B 775 n174)

In the unawakened, however, the two consciousnesses continue operating by mutually reinforcing one another through dependent arising [Table 3]. In the presence of form, that is, the sense-faculties, consciousness gives rise to feeling, from which follows craving, clinging and the formations that create and feed the existential (or samsaric) consciousness. As long as this happens, the rebirth cycle will continue, at the heart of which is the stream of consciousness itself. The monk **Nāgasena** summarizes this vital point in his exposition on dependent arising to Milinda (Greek king Menander),⁴⁹ in the famous episode:

Then the elder (Nāgasena), having drawn a circle (*cakka*) on the ground, said this to the king Milinda, “Does this circle have an end, maharajah?”
 “There is not, bhante.”
 “Even so, maharajah, are those cycles (*cakka*) spoken of by the Blessed One, thus:

⁴⁹ Milinda was probably Menander (r 2nd-1st cent BCE), a Bactrian king of Śākala in east Punjab.

‘Visual consciousness arises on account of the eye and forms; the meeting of the three is contact.⁵⁰ On account of contact, there is feeling. On account of feeling, there is craving. On account of craving, there is karma.⁵¹ From karma, the eye arises again—is there an end to this cycle (*santati*)?’

“There is not, bhante.”

“And ear consciousness arises on account of the ear and sounds...

And nose consciousness arises on account of the nose and smells...

And tongue consciousness arises on account of the tongue and tastes...

And body consciousness arises on account of the body and touches...

And mind consciousness arises on account of the mind and mental objects; the meeting of the three is contact. On account of contact, there is feeling. On account of feeling, there is craving. On account of craving, there is karma. From karma, the eye arises again—is there an end to this cycle?

“There is not, bhante.”

“Even so, maharajah, their first⁵² point of this journeying (*addhāna*) is not to be seen.”

“You are capable, bhante.”

(Miln 51)

Although here Nāgasena is demonstrating the beginninglessness of samsara to Milinda, the same explanation applies to consciousness and the karmic cycle: it can appear to be endless, too. Ignorance imprisons one in the permanent pain; wisdom breaks one out of it.⁵³

4 The store consciousness

4.1 YOGĀCĀRA DEVELOPMENTS. The **Yogācāra** (“the practice of yoga”), one of the most important post-canonical Indian Buddhist schools, teaches a form of idealistic (“mind-only”) philosophy. It attacked both the complete realism of the Theravāda and the provisional practical realism of the Mādhyamaka. Their name comes from an important text of the school, the *Yogācāra, bhūmi Śāstra* (“the treatise on the stages of yoga practice”): *yoga* here meaning mind-training or meditation and *ācāra*, “conduct or practice.”

The school is also called **Vijñāna, vāda** (“the doctrine of consciousness”) because of its philosophical position, which is that the reality a human being perceives does not exist, and only the consciousness of the momentary events (*dharma*) is real. The school emerged in India around the 2nd century, but reached its apex in the 4th century, during the time of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu.⁵⁴ Following them, the school split into two: that of the textual tradition (*Āgamānusariṇo Vijñānavāda*) and that of the logical tradition (*Nyāyānusariṇo Vijñānavāda*), the latter of which produced the great logicians Dignāga (c 480-540 CE) and his successor, Dharmakīrti (c 600-660 CE).

Asaṅga (4th century) was the best known of the Yogācāra teachers, best remembered for his development of the *ālāya, vijñāna* doctrine [4.2]. His approach is often known as *citta, matrā* (“mind-only”).

Richard King gives a helpful summary of the nature of *citta* according to the Yogācāra:

It is important to bear in mind that the Yogācāra conception of *citta/vijñāna* denotes a whole complex of events and processes which cannot be adequately rendered by English terms such as

⁵⁰ See **Madhu, piṇḍika S** (M 18.17/1:112) = SD 6.14, **Pariñña S** (S 35.60/4:32) = SD 6.17.

⁵¹ *Upādāna, paccyā kammaṃ*, which is an innovation by the Miln author. Cf Miln 65 where it is said that the five sense-fields arise from different karmas.

⁵² *Purimā*, lit “earliest.”

⁵³ See further, **Unconscious views** = SD 31.9 (2.3.4).

⁵⁴ Maitreya, nātha, the little known teacher of Asaṅga, and the latter’s half-brother, Vasubandhu, are usu regarded as the historical founders of the Yogācāra school. **Vasubandhu** (late 4th cent) initially studied Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma as presented in the Mahā, vibhāṣā. Dissatisfied, he wrote an important summary and critique of the Mahā, vibhāṣā from the Sautrāntika viewpoint. Later, he converted to Mahāyāna, and became one of the most influential thinkers and commentators of the Yogācāra school.

“consciousness” or “mind.” The “*citta*” of *cittamatrā* includes within it the conscious apprehension of sensory objects (six in all including the *mano-vijñāna*). This is a crucial point to acknowledge since, for the Yogācāra school, the sensory apprehension of objects cannot be divorced from one’s consciousness of it (though it is possible to make a purely abstract and theoretical distinction between *vedanā* on the one hand and *vijñāna*, *sañjñā* and *samskāra* on the other when discussing the *skandhas*). In a sense the Yogācāra position offers the flipside to the standard Abhidharma position that *citta* is intentional, that is, that to be conscious is to be conscious of an object. For the Yogācāra, to postulate an object requires that it is first apprehended by a *citta*. The emphasis here is no longer on the suggestion that *citta* is intentional but rather on the fact that objects of consciousness are just that.

Thus, the thesis of the intentionality of *citta* becomes displaced in the emerging Yogācāra philosophy by an emphasis upon the “phenomenalistic” nature of objects. Objects are really dharma-constructs and representations (*vijñapti*), dependent upon the complex processes of *citta* for their appearance. Thus, one can talk of apprehending a sensory object only after one has become conscious of it. Sensory apprehension is thereby subsumed by the Yogācāra analysis under the broader domain of “*citta*,” which, now more clearly than ever, remains too rich and all-embracing a term to be rendered by “mind” or “consciousness”.

As well as an awareness of sensory objects, *citta* also denotes the organising faculty of the *manas*, the affective distortion of that process by the defiled mind (*kliṣṭa manas*) as well as the subliminal karmic seeds (*samskāras*) and latent dispositions (*anusaya*) that are collectively known as the *ālayavijñāna*. The complexity of terms like *citta*, therefore, when combined with the Yogācāra endorsement of the category of *rūpa-dharma* and the acknowledgment that *vijñāna* remains only one of five *skandhas* suggests that it is problematic to interpret the early Yogācāra literature as propounding a form of idealism at least in the sense in which this has commonly been understood in the West. (Richard King, 1998:8)

For the Yogācāra school any statement beyond the experiential limits of *citta* are mostly idle speculation, leading to the rise of conceptual distinction (*vikalpa*) and mental proliferation (*prapañca*). This approach is of course not new, as it is found in the Sautrāntika and the Theravāda. It is the case for the Yogācāra that we are simply “imagining” our experiences. They are “real” to the extent that they are “merely given” (*vastu, matrā*) without our conscious apprehension, and this is beyond our conscious control.

4.2 ĀLAYA, VIJÑĀNA. We have noted, in our study of consciousness, that *citta*, *mano* and *viññāna* often appear together as synonyms⁵⁵ in both the Pali Canon and its Commentaries. In fact, the early Buddhist schools such as the Sarvāstī, vāda⁵⁶ and the Yogācāra,⁵⁷ too, take the three terms to be synonyms. A radical shift was, however, made by **Asaṅga** who divided *vijñāna, skandha* (aggregate of consciousness) into three layers, roughly represented by *citta*, *manas* and *vijñāna*. Thus he defines the *vijñāna, skandha* in his **Abhidharma, samuccaya** as follows:

vijñāna, skandha, vyavasthānam katamat | yac cittam mano, vijñānam api ||

How is the consciousness aggregate defined? It is mind, thought, and consciousness.

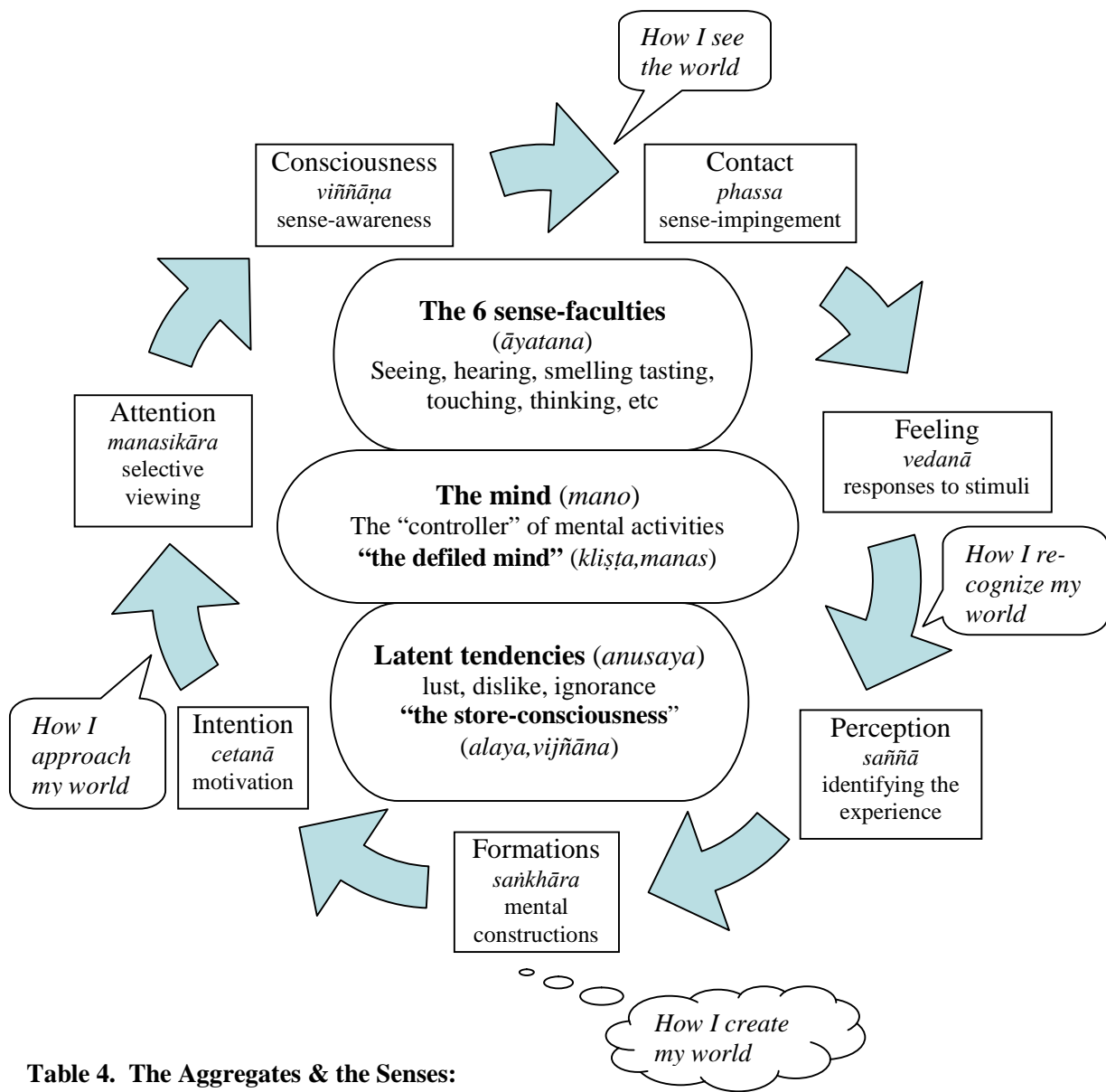
tatra cittaṁ katamat | skandha, dhātṽ-āyatana, vāsānā, paribhāvitatam sarva, bījakam ālaya, vijñānam | ...

Therein, what is the mind? It is the store consciousness with all the seeds, pervaded with the impressions of the aggregates, the elements, and the spheres...

⁵⁵ SD 17.8a(12).

⁵⁶ Eg *cittam mano'tha vijñānam ekārtham* (Abhidharma, kośa 2.34).

⁵⁷ Esp Vasubandhu, in his *Vimśatikā, vijñapti, matratā, siddhi: cittam mano vijñānam vijñaptiś ceti paryāyāḥ* (Vimśs 3).



**Table 4. The Aggregates & the Senses:
How we create and live our world**

How we create and live in our virtual world

The above Table is a representation of how we experience the external and internal worlds. Through the six senses, “the mind” (*mano*) gives meaning to the physical world we experience, storing such data as “latent tendencies” (*anusaya*) (in “the store-consciousness” (*ālaya, vijñāna*), according to the Yogācāra Abhidharma). This stored existential consciousness is perpetuated recursively by the forward process of dependent arising (*anuloma*), so that we are imprisoned by our own virtual world. [The above diagram is for purposes of meditation theory, and not meant to be a historically accurate comparative study.]⁵⁸

(Diagram based on Caroline Brazier, *Buddhist Psychology*, 2003:106 = Fig 6.3) ©Piya Tan 2004; rev 2007

⁵⁸ On “defiled mind” and “store-consciousness,” see PaulWilliams, *Buddhist Thought*, 2000:159 f.

manah katamat | yan nitya, kālam manyan 'ātmākam ālaya, vijñānam caturbhiḥ kleśaiḥ samprayuktam ātma, dr̥ṣṭy-ātman, snehāsmi, mānen 'āvidyayā...

What is thought? It is the store consciousness that is always thinking of the self, associated with the four defilements, namely, self-view, self-love, the “I am” conceit, and ignorance...

vijñānam katamat | ṣaḍ vijñāna, kāyaḥ | cakṣur, vijñānam śrotra, ghrāṇa, jihvā, kāya, mano, vijñānam...

What is consciousness? It is the six groups of consciousness, namely, eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, and mind consciousness...⁵⁹ (Abhsm:P 11-12)

Here again we see close parallels with the early Buddhist conception of consciousness as rudimentary reaction of the sense-organs to sense-stimuli. This is in fact the outermost or most superficial layer of the *vijñāna, skandha*. *Manas* involves the aspects of mentating, thinking, reasoning, ideating, etc. *Citta*, here also called *ālaya, vijñāna*,⁶⁰ is the deepest and subtlest layer of the consciousness aggregate, containing all past impressions, and all good and evil potentials.

The **store consciousness** (Skt *ālaya, vijñāna*)⁶¹ or substratum consciousness is the eighth and the most fundamental of the eight consciousnesses proposed in the teachings of the Yogācāra school of Buddhism. Store consciousness accumulates and store all the past mental and physical karmic impressions (*vāsanā*) as the continuing potential for one's existence, and serves as the support for all existences. It also receives impressions from the other consciousnesses, and retains them, in a mental receptacle, as it were. From it, the remaining seven consciousnesses arise and produce all present and future modes of samsaric experience.

Since the store consciousness serves as the basis for the production of the other seven consciousnesses (called the “evolving” or “transforming” consciousnesses), it is also known as the root consciousness (*mūla, vijñāna*) or causal consciousness. Since it serves as the receptacle for all experiential impressions (metaphorically called *bīja*, “seeds”),⁶² it is also called the seed consciousness (種子識). **Bīja** here refers to the “seeds of defiled states” (*saṃkleśika, dharma, bīja*)⁶³ that supports the run of samsara.

Nirvana is attained by “the turning around (*parāvṛtti*) of the store consciousness,” called *āśraya, parāvṛtti*⁶⁴ or *parāvṛttāśraya*,⁶⁵ “the turning around at the seat of consciousness”; sometimes, it is called *bīja, parāvṛtti*,⁶⁶ “the conversion of the seeds.” Yogācāra philosophy equates this cognitive transformation with awakening itself.⁶⁷

William Waldron, a Yogācāra specialist, gives this insightful contemporary paraphrase,

There is no single term in cognitive science that corresponds with *ālaya-vijñāna* other than, perhaps, “cognitive unconscious,” which is probably about right, since in my view *ālaya-vijñāna*

⁵⁹ Also at W Rahula (ed & tr), *Le Compendium de la Super-doctrine (Philosophie) (Abhidharmasamuccaya) d'Asaṅga*, Paris, 1971:17. The same defs are briefly given in Mahāyāna, sūtrāṅkāra: *cittam ālaya, vijñānam manas tad-ālabanam ātma, dr̥ṣṭy-ādi, samprayuktam vijñānam ṣaḍ vijñāna, kāyāḥ* (Mahāys 19.76/174). A polyglot version of Abhsm accessed on 26 Oct 2006, <http://www.shiga-med.ac.jp/public/yugagy/AS.html>.

⁶⁰ As at Sandhi, *nirmocana Sūtra*, ed & tr Lamotte, Paris 1935:55, 185.

⁶¹ Tib ཀུན་གཞི་རྣམ་པར་ཤེས་པ་ (kun gzhi nram par shes pa); Chin 阿賴耶識 (ālāiyē-shí; Jap araya-shiki); Viet a-lai-da thúc.

⁶² Chin 種子, Jap shuji.

⁶³ *Sarva, saṃkleśika, dharma, bīja, sthānatvād ālayaḥ*, “it is called *ālaya* because it is the place for the seeds of all defiled states” (Trimśikā 18).

⁶⁴ Trimśikā 22, 44; Śūtrāṅkāra 11.44; Lankāvatāra Ś 10.14, 93.3.

⁶⁵ Lankāvatāra S 9.11.

⁶⁶ Sūtrāṅkāra 11.44.

⁶⁷ See “the Eightfold Proof of Store-consciousness in the Abhidharma-Samuccayabhāṣya” in PJ Griffiths, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist meditation and the mind-body problem*, La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986:129-138 (Appendix C).

is not a single process at all, but rather a categorical term for a variety of processes. As Asaṅga says, “although it continuously arises in a stream of moments, it is not singular (*ekatva*).” (Yogācāra, bhūmi, Derge #4038, 4a.5; T31.1606.580a18).

Hence, it can hardly count as an entity, either. In fact, strictly speaking, in the Buddhist view there are no entities at all. But there are mental processes that are not conscious, some of which are strictly individual and some of which have shared qualities or characteristics, not unlike the fact that sugar tastes sweet to most people, so if they all eat something sweet then their experiences will be similar. Extrapolate this to other aspects of human life—such as speaking a common language, having similar emotional responses to cultural symbols, or imagining similar things about one's own cultural, ethnic or national group—and you end up with a sense of common or collective awareness that is nevertheless, like all of us eating something sweet, still based in our individual sense faculties. I am quite certain that this is also what Jung, for example, had in mind with his “collective unconscious.”

That such collective illusions as nationalism or ethnic identity are illusory does not, unfortunately, make them any less effective nor any less pernicious. They are the illusions we all, to a greater or lesser degree, labor under and whose broader and long-term consequences determine much of our collective lives. (W Waldron, email posting, 2008)⁶⁸

4.3 ROOTS IN EARLY BUDDHISM. The term *ālaya* (ts) is not ancient but is common in the early Buddhist texts, where it is used in both the literal and figurative sense, thus (according to CPD & BHSD, sv *ālaya*, selected):

1. Literal (physical) senses of *ālaya*

- (a) house, dwelling, habitat, household, a built structure: Ap 507,19 (*vanā-*); DhA 2:170,4, 162,10 (implied household attachment).
- (b) nest, lair, perch, shelter: Tha 307; Ap 121,15, 534,7; MA 2:216,2 = AA 3:202,2; UA 56,3.
- (c) abode, seat, place of rest, resort, haven, repository: S 5:400,21* = A 2:55,32*.
- (d) domain, field of activity, sphere, ken: D 3:147,6* (*sīlā-*); Ap 3,9.

2. Psychological senses of *ālaya*

- (a) liking, inclination, attachment, fondness for, partiality towards: MA 5:57,18; DhA 1:121,15 = 18, 4:183,18.
- (b) affection, love: SA 1:38,2; J 6:458,2.
- (c) (as a psychological concept) desire, yearning, clinging, (sensual) attachment (= *taṇhā*): V 1:4,35 ff; M 1:167,32-34, 191,4; S 1:136,11 ff; A 2:34,24, 2:131,30-34; Sn 177 = S 1:33,3* (two kinds: *kāmesu taṇhā, diṭṭhi, vasena*) [BHS has three *-āni* = *trṣṇā: kāma-*, *bhava-*, *vibhava-*, BHSD: *trṣṇā* 2], Sn 535 (SnA 433,4, two kinds mentioned), 635 = Dh 411; U 12.18; VA 5:961 = DA 3:464 = MA 2:174 = SA 1:195 (= *pañca, kāma, guṇa*).

Noticeably interesting is that *ālaya* is mostly used in the Canon in its psychological sense (2c), but in the Commentaries it is more commonly used in its literal and physical sense (as an abode). We can also see that the Pali usage of *ālaya*⁶⁹ is very close to its Mahayana sense. The Yogācāra terms *āśraya, parāvṛtti* and *bīja, parāvṛtti* are practically identical in sense to the Pali terms *ālaya, samugghāta*, the “uprooting of *ālaya*,”⁷⁰ and *khīna, bīja*, one whose “seeds of defilement are destroyed,”⁷¹ an epithet of the arhat. The Commentaries, however, take *ālaya* to have the simple meaning of “the five cords of sense-pleasure” (*pañca, kāma, guṇa*) [meaning 2c], and idea elaborated in Yogācāra philosophy.

⁶⁸ Email to Bruce Burrill, which he posted on Buddha-L forum, 27 Nov 2008.

⁶⁹ See esp **Ariya, pariyesanā S** (M 26.19/1:167) = SD 1.11; **Āyācana S** (S 6.1.3/1:136) = SD 12.2. In Mahāyāna, saṅgraha, Asaṅga qu a Śrāvaka, yāna text, identified by Lamotte (Mahāys:L 26) as **Acchariya S 2** (A 4.128.1/-2:131) = SD 31.6 Introd.

⁷⁰ A 2:34,25 = 3:35,30 = It 88,5 (≠ V 3:20,4 = 111,29 ≠ J 5:483,7). See CPD sv for more refs.

⁷¹ Sn 235.

It can thus be seen that the Yogācāra notion of *ālaya, vijñāna* is already found in seminal form in the Pali Suttas, and which in fact is also an expedient in the explanation of the early doctrine of karma, especially “where” or how karma is “stored.” In due course, however, later Mahāyāna philosophy parted ways with early Buddhism, as it were in their conception of the *tathāgata, garbha*, “the Buddha embryo,” which holds that all beings inherently have the potential to become a Buddha. The Laṅkāvatāra Śūtra, for example, uses the term *tathāgata, garbha* as a synonym for *ālaya, vijñāna*,⁷² describing it as being “radiant by nature” (*prakṛti, prabhāsvara*) and “pure by nature” (*prakṛti, parisuddha*), but is “soiled on account of adventitious defilements” (*āgantuka, kleśopakliṣṭatayā*).⁷³

This passage is a very close parallel to an Aṅguttara one which states that “this mind is radiant, but it is defiled by adventitious impurities [that go through the sense-doors]”!⁷⁴ In the Laṅkāvatāra Śūtra, the *tathāgata, garbha*⁷⁵ is regarded as eternal and permanent in the sense that emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is eternal and permanent (p778). It further equates it with **the *ālaya, vijñāna*** or store-consciousness of Yogācāra thought.⁷⁶ This is a similar concept to that of the Theravādin *bhavaṅga citta*, both systems incorporating conception (*manas*) and the six forms of sense-consciousness (Harvey 1990: 107-109).

As in all philosophical developments, conceptual problems often arise, because it is rare that many can understand or accept the same idea at the same time. Both early Buddhism and early Mahāyāna agree that it is the mind, or in the Yogācāra’s context, the *ālaya, vijñāna* that is often mistaken by people to be an abiding entity (such as a self or soul).⁷⁷

The Brahma, jāla Sutta (D 1), for example, states that there are those who using their reasoning, regard the “mind” (*citta*), or “thought” [mentation] (*mano*), or “consciousness” (*viññāṇa*)⁷⁸ as being “permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change: it will remain so just as eternity itself.”⁷⁹ **The Mahā Taṇhā, saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38) shows how the Buddha takes great pains to correct the monk Sāti’s wrong view that “it is this same consciousness,⁸⁰ not another, that runs and flows through the rounds of births.”⁸¹

4.4 VACUUM STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS. **B Alan Wallace**, US science philosopher and Buddhist practitioner,⁸² in his essay entitled, “Vacuum states of consciousness: A Tibetan Buddhist view,” gives us a remarkably clear and contemporary explanation of the nature of consciousness and space, and how both science and Buddhism can comfortably share a common view of them. According to Wallace, the Theravāda Abhidhamma conception of *bhav’āṅga* (literally, the “ground of being”)⁸³

may be characterized as a relative vacuum state of consciousness, voided of all manner of mental activity known as *javana*.⁸⁴ This appears to be identical to the substrate consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) [4.2]... This state of consciousness is presented not simple as a philosophical speculation but as an experienced mental phenomena that can be accessed through the achievement of meditative quiescence (*śamatha*). According to the Great Perfection [Dzogchen] school, primordial

⁷² Laṅkāvatāra S 221, 222.

⁷³ Laṅkāvatāra S 77, 222. Cf DT Suzuki, *Studies in the Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, London, 1930:182.

⁷⁴ *Pabhassaram idam bhikkhave cittam tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkīlesehi upakkiliṭṭham* (A 1.6.1-2/1:10; also 1.5.9-10/1:10) = SD 8.3.6. Qu at MA 1:167; DhA 1:23; NmA 1:22; PmA 1:242; DhsA 68.

⁷⁵ On the *tathāgata, garbha*, see SD 8.3(14).

⁷⁶ See Harvey 1995:161 f, 175 f, 217 f.

⁷⁷ Mahāyāna Saṅgraha 14; Trimśikā 16, 22.

⁷⁸ On these three terms, see *Viññāṇa* = SD 17.8a(12).

⁷⁹ D 1.2.13/1:21 = SD 25.2.

⁸⁰ “Consciousness,” *viññāṇa*: see SD 17.8a. On *viññāṇa* as a link in dependent arising, see (**Paṭicca, samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2/2:2-4) = SD 5.15.

⁸¹ M 38/1:256-271 = SD 7.10.

⁸² Wallace (b 1950) is an author, translator, teacher, researcher, interpreter and Vajrayana practitioner interested in the intersections of consciousness studies and scientific disciplines such as contemplative neuroscience. He has a bachelors degree in physics and philosophy of science from Amherst College and a PhD in religious studies from Stanford. He also founded (2003) and is President of the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies.

⁸³ Wallace’s tr.

⁸⁴ On *javana*, see SD 19.14(2.2).

consciousness (*jñāna*) may be regarded as an ultimate ground state of consciousness, and it can allegedly be ascertained non-dually through the cultivation of contemplative insight (*vipaśyanā*). These relative and ultimate vacuum states of consciousness bear remarkable similarities with the definitions of relative and absolute vacuum states of space presented in contemporary physics. The Buddhist and scientific views may be regarded as complementary, each having its own strengths and weaknesses. (Wallace 2006a:1 f, “Abstract”)

One of the most important contributions to Buddhist psychology is that Abhidhamma theory of consciousness that distinguishes between mental activity, called *javana* (impulsion), and the mental ground out of which such activity emerges, that is, the *bhavaṅga* (life continuum).⁸⁵ The Abhidhamma term *javana* refers to all kinds of conscious mental processes, including sense-perceptions, discursive thoughts, memories, intentions, desires and imagination, most of which can be observed by means of mental perception [5]. The *bhavaṅga*, according to the Abhidhamma, in the absence of sense-perceptions and cognitive activities, is, comments Wallace,

the resting ground state of consciousness, withdrawn from the physical senses. While all mental and sensory processes are *conditioned* by the body and the environment, in the Buddhist view they actually *emerge* from the *bhavaṅga*, not the brain. Described as the natural, unencumbered state of the mind, its innate radiance and purity are present even when the mind is obscured by afflictive thoughts and emotions.⁸⁶ The *bhavaṅga* may be characterized as a “vacuum” state of consciousness, voided of all manner of *javana*. Generally speaking, it is indiscernible while the mind is active, for it normally manifests only in dreamless sleep and during the very last moment of a person’s life. Indeed, Buddha declared that there are multiple similarities in the cognitive processes while falling asleep and dying.⁸⁷

To unlock this natural purity and luminosity of consciousness so that its radiant potential is revealed, one must calm the involuntary activity of the mind through the practice of meditative quiescence.⁸⁸ In this way, one can see through the superficial turbulence of the mind into its limpid depths. In the Buddhist view, the *bhavaṅga* acts as the basis for all volitional states of consciousness, and thus for *karma*; and it is therefore the basis for the emergence of the world experienced by each individual. (Wallace 2006a:4 f)

Both early Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism make a distinction between what might be called the *substrate* and the *substrate consciousness*. While in the early Buddhist texts the *substrate* is called *upādhi*,⁸⁹ it is called *ālaya*⁹⁰ in the later schools (such as the Tibetan). The term *upādhi* is common in the early Suttas,⁹¹ and the attainment of nirvana is said to be “the abandoning of all substrates” (*sabbūpadhi paṭinissagga*).⁹² The early usage of *upādhi* is more broad and can refer to either *the objects* of desire (pro-

⁸⁵ See eg Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995:155-179 (ch 10) & passim (see index). Also Wallace 2001a:24, 2001b:7 f (online ed).

⁸⁶ **Paṇihita Acchanna Vagga** (A 1.5/1:8-10) = SD 8.3(4)

⁸⁷ Harvey 1995:159 f

⁸⁸ Wallace, *The Bridge of Quiescence*, 1998 & “The Buddhist tradition of Śamatha,” 1999:175-187.

⁸⁹ The Pali term *upādhi* (“clinging,” from *upa* + *ā* + *dā* “to take”) is often confused with the Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit *upādhi* (meaning “remnant, substrate,” or more correctly, “acquisitions” or “belongings,” attachment to which leads to rebirth). Despite the subtle but important difference in meaning, most modern commentators regard them as synonymous, and do not try to explain how and why the difference arose (see KR Norman, “Mistaken Ideas about *Nibbāna*,” *The Buddhist Forum* 3, ed T Skorupski & U Pagel, 1995:215)

⁹⁰ *Ālaya* (ts) lit means “home, dwelling, habitat, household, a built structure; but is usu used in the fig sense of “liking, inclination, attachment” or “desire, sensual attachment.” See CPD sv.

⁹¹ Sn 33, 364, 546, 728.

⁹² The full phrase with syns: *Sabba,saṅkhāra,samatho sabb’upādhi,paṭinissaggo taṅha-k,khayo virāgo nirodho nibbānam*, D 14.3.1/2:36 = M 1:167 = S 1:136 = 3:133 = 5:226 = A 5:8 = 320 = V 1:5 = Nm 1:27 = 424. Comy: “*sabba,saṅkhāra,samatho ti ādi sabbam nibbānam eva*” (DA 464).

perty, belongings, etc) (eg Sn 33), that is, the worldly sense, or to the *desire* for such objects (eg Sn 364, 546, 728), that is, the psychological sense.

The Commentaries generally define *upadhi* as both objectively and subjectively as being fourfold, namely, “the five aggregates (*khandha*), defilements (*kilesa*), the cords of sense-pleasures (*pañca, kāma, -guṇa*), and karma-formations (*abhisāṅkhāra*, ie karma).”⁹³ The Buddhist Sanskrit term *ālaya* similarly has an objective (“home, house, dwelling, abode”) and a subjective (“desire, inclination, attachment”). If we accept that the early teachings tend to be less technical than later doctrines, then *upadhi* (that is, *desire* as a synecdoche for the three unwholesome roots) is synonymous with the Buddhist Sanskrit term *ālaya*.

Both the terms have a common sense of “substrate” that serves that the underlying cause and condition for continued suffering. What is even more interesting is how the connection between *ālaya* and *ālaya, vijñāna* helps have a better understanding of what consciousness is and how it arises. Wallace explains:

In the later Great Perfection (Dzogchen) school of Tibetan Buddhism... a distinction is made between the substrate (*ālaya*) and the substrate consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*). Tibetan contemplatives describe the substrate as the objective, empty space of the mind. This vacuum state is immaterial like space, a blank, unthinking void into which all objective appearances of the physical senses and mental perception dissolve when one falls asleep; and it is out of this vacuum that appearances re-emerge upon waking.⁹⁴ (Wallace 2006a:6)

Both the Pali scripture and the Sanskrit tradition agree that when the mind and the physical senses are dormant (such as during deep, dreamless sleep, fainting, coma, dhyana, and the dying moment), there only remains the *bhavaṅga*, that is, “the basis for the emergence of all appearances to an individual’s mind-stream,”⁹⁵ that is, a sort of “central processing unit” that reconstructs phenomena appearing to sense- and mental perception into something intelligible to the perceiver. In its natural state, uncovered by preconceptions, mental hindrances and ignorance, it is a radiant and clear consciousness.⁹⁶

This self-created virtual world of appearances is superimposed, as it were, over the real world, hiding true reality. It is like looking through coloured lenses, or seeing the drizzling flying past horizontally while one is inside a moving vehicle (when the rain is really falling vertically down).⁹⁷ Wallace is careful to point out that

By fathoming the nature of the substrate consciousness, one comes to know the nature of consciousness in its relative ground state. This realization, however, does not illuminate the nature of reality as a whole. It is also important not to confuse this substrate consciousness with a collective unconscious, as conceived by Carl Jung. Buddhist accounts of the substrate consciousness all refer to it as an *individual* stream of consciousness that carries on from one lifetime to the next.

The Buddhist tradition claims that the *appearances* to our senses do not exist in external, physical space, independent of perception. Likewise, the *objects* that make up our experienced world, each of them imbued with sensory attributes, such as color, taste, smell, and texture, are not to be found in the objective space described by modern physics. But within the context of our experienced world, it is conventionally valid to say that the physical objects we perceive in the world around us, such as planets and stars, exist within the external, intersubjective⁹⁸ space of

⁹³ *Upadhī ti khandha, kilesa, kāma, guṇābhisāṅkhāra, bheda cattāro* (SnA 436); *upadhīsū ti khandha, kilesābhisāṅkhāresu* (SA 1:270); *khandhūpadhi abhisāṅkhārūpadhi pañca, kāma, guṇūpadhī ti ime upadhayo honti* (MA 5:60 ad M 3:245,21).

⁹⁴ Dudjom Lingpa, *Dag snang ye shes drva pa las gnas lugs rang byung gi rgyud rdorje’i snying po*; Skt: *Vajra-hṛdayasūddhadhutijñānahāresrīlamjātiyātisma. Collected Works of HH Dudjom Rinpoche* 68.

⁹⁵ Wallace 2006a:6

⁹⁶ See **Pañihita Acchanna Vagga** (A 1.5/1:8-10) = SD 8.3(4)

⁹⁷ See **Saññā** = SD 17.4(1).

⁹⁸ By “intersubjective,” Wallace means “the dynamic interrelation of self and other,” on which see eg Wallace 2001a.

consciousness; and the mental objects we perceive, such as thoughts and mental images, exist in the internal, subjective space of the consciousness of each individual. (Wallace 2006a:7 f)

Pali term	Sanskrit term	Wallace's translation
<i>upadhi</i> (substrate)	<i>ālaya</i> (store-house)	substrate
<i>bhavaṅga</i> (life continuum)	<i>ālaya vijñāna</i> (store-house consciousness)	substrate consciousness; "false vacuum" [4.6]
<i>javana</i> (impulsion)	<i>javana</i> (impulsion)	mental activity
<i>ñāna</i> (wisdom)	<i>jñāna</i> (knowledge)	primordial consciousness
<i>dhamma, dhātu</i> (dharma element)	<i>dharma, dhātu</i> (dharma-realm)	absolute space of phenomena; "true vacuum" [4.6]

Table 4.4 A comparison of key Buddhist cognitive terms and their translations

4.5 THE DHARMA, DHĀTU. According to Buddhist psychology, the physical world exists, the world out there is real. However, our *perceptions* of the world, its appearances to our senses, do not exist in the external physical spaces, independent of perception. Similarly, the *sense-objects* that comprise our experienced world, along with their sensory qualities of form, colour, smell, taste, and texture, are not found in the objective space described by modern physics.

But within the context of our experienced world, it is conventionally valid to say that the physical objects we perceive in the world around us, such as planets and stars, exist within the external, intersubjective space of consciousness; and the mental objects we perceive, such as thoughts and mental images, exist in the internal, subjective space of the consciousness of each individual.

Neuroscientists commonly assume the human brain exists in the real, objective space of physics, but all their sensory images and concepts of the brain appear in the space of consciousness. Moreover, all the *sensory images* of space experienced by physicists arise within the external space of their consciousness, and all their *concepts* of space emerge within the internal space of consciousness. Although we may believe in the existence of space independent of consciousness, all our concepts of such real, objective space arise within the space of consciousness. As for the relation between sensory images and their related objects believed to exist in the objective world independent of consciousness, neurologist **Antonio Damasio** acknowledges, "There is no picture of the object being transferred from the object to the retina and from the retina to the brain."⁹⁹ To generalize, the appearances to our senses are not replicas, or re-presentations, of phenomena in objective, physical space. They are fresh creations arising in the space of consciousness. Likewise, our concepts of space and the objects within it are not replicas of anything existing independently of the mind. In short, the brain believed by neuroscientists to exist in real, objective space is as devoid of consciousness as is the physical space conceived of by physicists.

(Wallace 2006a:8 f; emphasis added)

We, for example, superimpose connect lines to name a lion or a dipper in a configuration of stars, or imagine a face or a rabbit on the moon. Do these images exist in internal space or in external space? These are mind-made images, but we superimpose them outside of our minds. But each one of us tend to perceive that external space subjectively.

However, when we turn our attention inwards and focus on an image of the moon, for example, what we perceive may be virtually the same as other people's perception of it. Whatever we perceive in our

⁹⁹ Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, 1999: 321.

separate minds is more intersubjective than the images we superimpose on external space. In short, says Wallace,

there is nothing inherently external or intersubjective about external space, nor is there anything inherently internal or private about internal space. While we commonly speak of directing the attention outward to the physical world or inward to the mind, this distinction is only conventional. Our experience presents us only with the nondual space of consciousness, in which the distinctions between outer and inner are artificially superimposed by concepts and language.¹⁰⁰

(Wallace 2006a:10)

Wallace goes on to say that in the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism the non-duality of external and internal space is called *dharmadhātu*, or absolute space phenomena, out of which emerge all the phenomena that make up our intersubjective experienced world.

It is important to note here that the Sanskrit *dharmadhātu*, as used here, is a very different term from *dhamma, dhātu* of the Pali Suttas, whose usages can be summarized as follows:

- (1) As a mental element that constitutes and conditions the perceptive process, that is, as “mind-element” (*mano, dhātu*), “mind-object element” (*dhamma, dhātu*) and “mind-consciousness-element” (*mano, viññāṇa, dhātu*). (M 115.4/3:62; S 2:140, 143, 145 f (×2), 146, 148 f (×2); A 4:285). Here, **the mind-object element** “includes the types of subtle material phenomena not involved in sense-cognition, the three mental aggregates of feeling, perception, and formations, and Nibbāna. It does not include concepts, abstract ideas, judgements, etc. Though these latter are included in the notion of mind-object (*dhamm’ārammaṇa*), the mind-object *element* includes only things that exist by their own nature, not things constructed by the mind.” (M:Ñ 1324 n1077).
- (2) As “element of the Dharma,” that is, the knowledge of a disciple’s perfection, which is capable of seeing the principle of conditionality without obscuration (SA ad S 12.32/2:56).
- (3) As ultimate principle of the Dharma, or universal principle (D 14.1.13+15/2:8-10; M 58.11/-1:396; S 2:143 f).

Usage (1) is the most common in the Pali Suttas, (2) is rare, and three is probably the latest sense. However, we can easily see the Sanskrit term, *dharmadhātu*, as a natural philosophical development of the nascent idea in the early texts. Wallace then introduces the useful concepts of “relative vacuum” and “absolute vacuum.”

All appearances of external and internal space, time, matter, and consciousness emerge from the *dharmadhātu* and consist of nothing other than configurations of this absolute space. While the relative vacuum of the substrate can be ascertained by means of the cultivation of meditative quiescence [*śamatha*], the absolute vacuum of the *dharmadhātu* can be realized only through the cultivation of contemplative insight [*vipaśyana*].¹⁰¹ The mode of awareness with which one ascertains this absolute space is called *primordial consciousness (jñāna)*, which is the ultimate nature of all individual continua of consciousness.

The experiential realization of absolute space by primordial consciousness transcends all distinctions of subject and object, mind and matter, indeed, all words and concepts. Such insight does not entail the meeting of a subjective mode of consciousness with an objective space, but rather the nondual realization of the intrinsic unity of absolute space and primordial consciousness. The *dharmadhātu* and primordial consciousness are coterminous, nonlocal, and atemporal. While the *dharmadhātu* is the fundamental nature of the experienced world, primordial consciousness is the fundamental nature of the mind. But since the two have always been of the same nature, the view of the Great Perfection [Dzogchen] is not one of philosophical idealism, dualism,

¹⁰⁰ For more elaborate discussions of this theme, see B Alan Wallace, *The Taboo of Subjectivity: Toward a New Science of Consciousness*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000:62-67, 110-117; William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912/1976. (Wallace’s fn)

¹⁰¹ HH the Dalai Lama, *Dzogchen: The Heart Essence of the Great Perfection*, tr Geshe Thupten Jinpa & Richard Barron. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2000.

or materialism. All such distinctions between subject and object, mind and matter are regarded as mere conceptual fabrications. (Wallace 2006a:10 f; emphases added)

4.6 THE ILLUSION OF KNOWLEDGE. The focussed mind, for example, the mind in dhyana, is able to experience *bhavaṅga*, the substrate consciousness. For such a mind, however, the mental hindrances are only temporarily suppressed, and as such, the substrate consciousness, as “relative vacuum,” is experienced. However, when the primordial consciousness or direct knowledge (*jñāna*) is attained, all mental afflictions and obscurations are removed forever.

When you experience the substrate consciousness through meditative calm, you only realize the relative nature of personal consciousness. When you realize primordial consciousness, the range of your awareness is limitless. It is in this sense that the Mahayana speak of “samsara as nirvana, and nirvana as samsara,” that is, the ineffable unity of absolute space and primordial consciousness (called “the great perfection,” *Dzogchen*, in Tibetan), and often referred to as the “one taste” of all phenomena. It is also in this sense, this familiar state should be understood:

*Citta, pūrvaṅgamāś ca sarva, dharmāḥ | citte pariññāte sarva, dharmāḥ pariññātā bhavanti | ...
ap tu cittaṃ evāśya vaśaṃ gacchati | cittaṅśya vaśībhūtena sarva, dharmā vaśībhavanti ti ||*¹⁰²

All things are preceded by the mind. When the mind is comprehended, all things are comprehended...

When the mind is under control, all things are under control by the mind.

(Ratna, megha Sūtra)¹⁰³

The terms *relative vacuum* and *absolute vacuum* are not found in Buddhist literature, and are introduced into Buddhism by **Wallace** from modern physics, and for good reason:

I have borrowed these terms from modern physics, and in so doing I invite a comparison between scientific and Buddhist concepts of vacuum states of space and of consciousness. In physics, a **vacuum** is commonly defined as the lowest possible energy state of a volume of space, and this definition can be applied to numerous other systems, such as an electric charge embedded in space. I have taken this definition and applied it to consciousness. A *false vacuum* is one that is not utterly devoid of energy, but it is the lowest possible energy-state under present circumstances.¹⁰⁴ Such a vacuum has energy and structure and is therefore not perfectly symmetrical.

Any configuration of mass-energy, including light itself, is viewed by physicists as an excitation of empty space, or more accurately, as an oscillation of abstract field quantities in space, not an oscillation of space itself. The fluctuating masses in a vacuum are regarded metaphorically as “frozen energy,” and they cause a curvature of space, such that the distances between two points in space also fluctuate. Physicist **Henning Genz** writes in this regard, “Real systems are, in this sense, ‘excitations of the vacuum’—much as surface waves in a pond are excitations of the pond’s water... the properties of the physical vacuum define the possible excitations—the possible systems that can emerge from the physical vacuum... The vacuum in itself is shapeless, but it may assume specific shapes. In doing so, it becomes a physical reality, a ‘real world.’”¹⁰⁵

Scientists do not have a clear idea of *the true vacuum*—of whatever remains once they have removed from some well-defined space everything that the laws of nature permit them to take

¹⁰² Skt: http://www.sub.uni-goettingen.de/ebene_1/fiindolo/gretil/1_sanskrit/6_sastra/3_phil/buddh/sanss06u.htm.

¹⁰³ Cited in Śāntideva’s *Śikṣā, samuccaya* ch 6 (ed PL Vaidya, Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1961:68). See Śīkṣ: BR, Bendall & Rouse (trs) 1971:121 f. Cf Dh 1-2.

¹⁰⁴ “The false vacuum state of consciousness is known in Buddhist literature as the *bhavaṅga*, from Pali and Sanskrit, which is a kind of substrate consciousness.” (Wallace 2001b:7)

¹⁰⁵ Henning Genz, *Nothingness*, 1999:26. (Wallace’s fn)

away. The reason is that this depends on the laws of nature—all of them, including those that scientists have not yet discovered. In the frozen, or false, vacuum, quarks, electrons, gravity, and electricity are different, whereas in the perfect symmetry of the true, or melted, vacuum, which is devoid of any internal structure, they are undifferentiated. According to science writer **KC Cole**, “The closest we can probably come to imagining perfect symmetry is a smooth, timeless, featureless empty space—the proverbial blank slate, the utter silence. It can’t be perceived because nothing can change. Everything would be one and the same; everything would be the same, as far as we could tell, as nothing.”¹⁰⁶ (Wallace 2006a:14 f; emphases added)

Like water freezing into ice, the inflated vacuum (that is, expanding universe) freezes into the structure that gives rise to quarks, electrons, monomers (eg amino acids), polymers (eg DNA and proteins) and eventually us.¹⁰⁷ We can see here how remarkably close the views of the role of the true vacuum of physical space in the formation of the universe is to the Buddhist views of the relation between the absolute space of phenomena and the relative world of space and time, mind and matter.

This parallel between Buddhism and science is all the remarkable in the light of the fact that scientists have not yet discovered the true nature or origins of consciousness. **Wallace** explains:

The Scientific Revolution began with the assumption that an external God created the world prior to and independently of human consciousness. Physicists then set themselves the goal of perceiving that objective universe from a “God’s-eye” perspective and formulating its laws in terms of God’s own language, which they thought to be mathematics. Since *they were focused on the realm of objective space and its contents that exist independently of consciousness*, it was quite natural for them to marginalize the role of mind in nature; and their theories of the true and false vacuums naturally make no reference to consciousness.

Indeed, advocates of this mechanistic view have assumed from the outset that consciousness plays no significant role in the universe. As **Antonio Damasio** proclaims, “Understanding consciousness says little or nothing about the origins of the universe, the meaning of life, or the likely destiny of both.”¹⁰⁸ Such confidence is remarkable in [the] light of the fact that neuroscientists have not yet discovered the nature or origins of consciousness. In the meantime, many neuroscientists share what Damasio calls his “one goal and one hope,” namely, to formulate a comprehensive explanation for how the sort of neural patterns that can be currently described with the tools of neurobiology, from molecules to systems, give rise to states of consciousness.¹⁰⁹ Such researchers commonly assume that they already *know* that consciousness has no existence apart from the brain, so the only question to be solved is *how* the brain produces conscious states. This assumption is an instance of what historian **Daniel Boorstin** calls an “illusion of knowledge.” It is these, he proposes, and not mere ignorance, that have historically acted as the greatest impediments to scientific discovery.¹¹⁰

The significance of the vacuum states of physical space and of consciousness can hardly be overestimated. Physicist **John March-Russell** declares, “The current belief is that you have to understand all the properties of the vacuum before you can understand anything else.”¹¹¹ Physicists have not yet fathomed all the properties of the vacuum or all the laws of nature, but they have widely assumed that consciousness is irrelevant to the universe they are trying to understand. Insofar as the universe conceived by physicists exists independently of consciousness, Buddhists

¹⁰⁶ KC Cole, *The Hole in the Universe*, 2001:244. (Wallace’s fn)

¹⁰⁷ KC Cole 2001:177 f; cf H Genz 1999:312.

¹⁰⁸ Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, 1999:28.

¹⁰⁹ Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, 1999:322.

¹¹⁰ Daniel J Boorstin, *The Discoverers: A History of Man’s Search to Know His World and Himself*. New York: Vintage Books, 1985:xv.

¹¹¹ Cited in K C Cole, *The Hole in the Universe*, 2001:235.

may counter that such a universe is irrelevant to the world of human experience, in which consciousness plays a crucial role.

Neither the scientific nor the Buddhist view of the vacuum is complete. The scientific view of the universe has little to say about the origins, nature, or role of consciousness in nature. And the Buddhist view has no objective, quantitative means of examining vacuum states of space. Rather than viewing the modes of inquiry of these two great traditions as incompatible, it may be more fruitful to regard them as complementary. Like focusing two eyes on the same reality, with the integration of these two perspectives, we may discover a deeper and more encompassing vision than either tradition has achieved on its own. (Wallace 2006a:17-19; emphases added)

5 The consciousness process

5.1 TWO KINDS OF MIND. *Viññāna* has been variously translated as “bare sensation” or “pure consciousness,” but **Boisvert** argues that far from being “bare sensations devoid of any content” (1995:117), it is “probably the faculty needed for the cognition of pure percept, of sensation and of conceptualization as well” (1995:118). Consciousness here is best understood in reference to the theory of *citta, vīthi* (the mind-process), “found fully developed in the commentaries, in skeletal form in the Paṭṭhāna, and even alluded to in seed form in the Suttas.” (Harvey 1996:95)

In this, what is known by “eye-*viññāna*” is less that what is known eg by following “mind-*viññāna*” performing the function of “determining.” The first is visual awareness which discerns the presence of a visual object, and also discerns its basic components, labelled by accompanying *saññā*. The second is discernment operating at a more abstract level, in unison with accompanying *saññā* labelling the aspects so made out. (Harvey 1996:95)

According to the Theravāda Abhidhamma, there are, in terms of function, two basic modes of the mind or consciousness: the process mind or process consciousness (*vīthi, citta*) and the process-free mind (*vīthi, mutta*).¹¹² The function of **the process mind** (*vīthi, citta*) is called *vīthi, citta*, or the consciousness process (*viññāna, kicca*), or simply “**the conscious process**.” This is the mind that is actively perceiving sense-objects and reacting to them. We shall look at the process-free mind later [6].

The Abhidhamma Commentaries and the Visuddhi, magga (Vism 14) mention the following 14 functions in the consciousness process, namely, (1) rebirth-linking (*paṭisandhi*), (2) the life-continuum or “the subconscious”¹¹³ (*bhav’anga*), (3) advertent (*āvajjana*), (4) hearing, (5) seeing, (6) smelling, (7) tasting, (8) bodily sensing (touch), (9) receiving (*sampaṭicchana*), (10) investigating (*santīrana*), (11) determining (*voṭṭhapana*), (12) impulsion (*javana*), (13) registering (*tad-ārammaṇa*), and (14) dying (*cuti*). The Visuddhi, magga gives this example of the conscious process, which we will examine at in the main section below:

If the sense-object is weak, it merely reaches the stage of “impulsion” (*javana*), or of “determining” (*voṭṭhapana*). If it is very weak, then only a disturbance of the life-continuum occurs. The process of mind-consciousness itself, that is, without the involvement of the five physical senses, occurs thus: if the mind-object entering the mind door is distinct, then it passes through the stages of “advertence at the mind door” (*mano, dvārāvajjana*), the impulse stage and the registering stage, before finally sinking into the life-continuum stream.

¹¹² For a simple but instructive summary, see Gethin 1998:215-218.

¹¹³ This term is used in a Buddhist sense, not the modern or Freudian sense, both of which however may have certain similarities: see (6). See also Tao Jiang 2004.

THE COGNITIVE PROCESS

(Vism 14.115-124/458-460)
Slightly abridged & paraphrased¹¹⁴

115 ...when a visible object comes within the eye's range, there is impinging upon the eye-sense (*cakkhu, pasāda*) due to the visible object. Thereupon, due to the power of the impingement, there is a vibration [disturbance] (*calana*) in the life-continuum. Then, when the life-continuum ceases, the functional mind-element (*kiriya, mano, dhātu*) arises making same visible object (*ārammaṇa*), as if cutting off the life-continuum, and accomplishing the function of adverting (*āvajjana*). So, too, in the case of the ear, and so on.

116 When any one of the six kinds of objects comes within the range of the mind door, then, after the vibrating of the life-continuum, the functional mind-consciousness-element without root-cause¹¹⁵ arises accompanied by equanimity, as if cutting off the life-continuum, and accomplishing the function of adverting.

This is how the occurrence of the two kinds of functional consciousness should be understood as adverting.

117 Then, after the adverting at the eye-door, eye-consciousness arises, accomplishing the function of seeing in the eye-door and having the eye-sense as its physical basis. Likewise,

after the adverting at the ear-door, ear-consciousness arises,...

after the adverting at the nose-door, nose-consciousness arises,...

after the adverting at the tongue-door, tongue-consciousness arises, ...and

after the adverting at the body-door, body-consciousness arises, accomplishing the function of feeling (a touch)¹¹⁶ in the body-door and having the body-sense as its physical basis.

These comprise the wholesome resultant (consciousness) with respect to desirable and desire-neutral object-fields, and the unwholesome resultant with respect to the undesirable and desire-neutral object-fields.

This is how the occurrence of the ten kinds of resultant consciousness should be understood as seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and feeling (a touch).

118 From the words, "Eye-consciousness, having arisen and ceased, so that there next arises consciousness, mind, mentation, ... which is the appropriate mind-element..." (Vbh 88), we understand that next after eye-consciousness, etc, and receiving (*sampaṭicchana*) the same object-fields as they deal with, the mind-element arises as wholesome resultant next to a wholesome resultant (eye-consciousness, etc), and as [459] unwholesome resultant next to an unwholesome resultant (eye-consciousness, etc).

This is how the occurrence of the two kinds of resultant consciousness should be understood as receiving (*sampaṭicchana*).

119 From the words, "A mind-element, having arisen and ceased, too, there next arises consciousness, mind, mentation, ... which is the appropriate mind-consciousness element..." (Vbh 89), we understand that then a resultant mind-consciousness-element without root-cause arises investigating (*santīraṇa*) the same object-field as that received by the mind-element. When it is next to an unwholesome resultant mind-element, it is unwholesome resultant, and when it is next to a wholesome resultant (mind-element), it is either accompanied by mental pleasure in the case of a desirable object, or accompanied by equanimity in the case of a desire-neutral object.

This is how the occurrence of the three kinds of resultant consciousness should be understood as investigating (*santīraṇa*).

¹¹⁴ For further details & diagrams, see *Nimitta & Anuvyañjana* = SD 19.14.

¹¹⁵ "Without root-cause," *ahetuka*, ie without any of the 2 wholesome roots, non-greed (*alobha*), non-hate (*adosa*) and non-delusion (*amoha*).

¹¹⁶ "Feeling," *phusana*, the amplifier has been added so as not to confuse one with *vedanā*, "feeling."

120 Next after investigating, a functional mind-consciousness-element without root-cause arises accompanied by equanimity determining (*voṭṭhapana*) the same object-field.

This is how the occurrence of one kind of resultant consciousness should be understood as determining (*voṭṭhapana*).

121 Next after determining, if the visible object, etc, as object is great (*mahanta*), then six or seven impulsions (*javana*) occur with respect to the object-field as determined. These are among the eight kinds of sense-sphere wholesome, or the twelve kinds of unwholesome, or the nine remaining sense-sphere functional. This, firstly, is the way in the case of the five doors.

But in the case of the mind door, those same impulsions occur next after the mind-door adverting...

122 At the end of the impulsions, if the object is a very great one in the five doors, or is clear in the mind door, then in sense-sphere beings at the end of the sense-sphere impulsions, resultant consciousness occurs through any condition it may have obtained, such as previous karma, impulsion consciousness, etc, with desirable, etc, object. ...[460]... Though ready to occur with the life-continuum's object after the impulsions have ended, it nevertheless occurs making the impulsion's object its object. Hence it is called registration (*tad-ārammaṇa*, "having that as its object").

This is how the occurrence of eleven kinds of resultant consciousness should be understood as registration (*tad-ārammaṇa*).

123 At the end of the registration, the life-continuum recurs. When the life-continuum is again interrupted, adverting, etc, occur again, and then the conditions are present, the conscious continuity recurs as adverting, and next after adverting, there is seeing, etc, according to the law of consciousness,¹¹⁷ again and again, until the life-continuum of existence in one is exhausted. For the last life-continuum consciousness of all in one's existence is called death (*cuti*), so called because of the falling from that state...

124 And after death, there is rebirth-linking again, and after rebirth-linking, life-continuum. Thus the conscious continuity of beings who wander through states of being, destinations, stations of consciousness, and abodes of beings, recur without a break. But when one attains arhathood here, it ends with the ending of his death-consciousness.

— — —

5.2 SUMMARY OF THE CONSCIOUSNESS PROCESS.¹¹⁸ A simple consciousness process involves the functions of perceiving, receiving, and investigating an object, a process said to be performed by classes of rootless resultant consciousness (*vipāka-ahetuka, citta*). That is to say, the sense-data that arise at the mind-door have been determined by past karma. Whenever you see, hear, smell, taste or touch something that is desirable (*iṭṭha*) or pleasurable (*sukha*), you experience a result of previous wholesome consciousness. Whenever you see, hear, smell, taste or touch something that is undesirable (*aniṭṭha*) or painful (*sukha*), you experience a result of previous unwholesome consciousness. Such experiences are thus the result of your previous karma and beyond immediate control.

However, in each consciousness process, the mind has a choice as to how it will react to the experienced object. It is only in the final stage when the mind has chosen to enjoy, reject or ignore its object in some way that unwholesome or wholesome consciousness are activated and sows the seeds of future fruits. "In this way," remarks Gethin, "the Abhidharma in effect provides an exact small-scale analysis of the process of dependent arising." (1998:216)

We have already mentioned *bhavaṅga* ("existence-factor") as the "life-continuum" or "subconscious" [5.1]. It is the consciousness with which a being is born, and it is the state to which a being's consciousness returns during deep, dreamless sleep, fainting, coma, dhyana, and in between every consciousness

¹¹⁷ "The law of consciousness," *citta, niyāma*. This is one of the 5 natural laws (*niyāma*), ie those of (1) heat (energy) (*utu, niyāma*), (2) seeds (heredity) (*bīja, niyāma*), (3) karma (*kamma, niyāma*), (4) mental processes (*citta, niyāma*), and (5) nature (*dhamma, niyāma*) (DA 2:432; DhsA 272): see SD 5.7(2).

¹¹⁸ See Harvey 1995:155-168; Gethin 1998:216.

process. It is also the state that arises at the moment of conception, serving as a link (*paṭisandhi*) between one life and the next. Each being's *bhavaṅga* has unique characteristics, reproducing itself and defining the being. The function of the human *bhavaṅga* is performed by one of eight general classes of wholesome resultant consciousness.¹¹⁹ Like the mind-door consciousnesses mentioned above, these kinds of consciousness are the result of past karma. They are, however, much more complex, having the roots of non-greed (*alobha*), non-hate (*adosa*), and sometimes also wisdom (*amoha*).

Human birth is the result of one of these eight types of consciousness, arising from past wholesome karma, performed many lives ago, but more often it is a wholesome karma done in the last proximate life. The deciding factor is one death-thought moment (*cuti,citta*), but this is only a momentum of preceding mental state, and one has no control over it. At death, significant acts (good or evil) done during one's life tend to present themselves in the dying mind. Understandably, there is a common Buddhist belief that wholesome actions done at the time of dying, or the recall of some wholesome actions, is crucial to bring about a good rebirth.¹²⁰

6 The unconscious process

The key concept of the mind-process theory is the *bhav'āṅga*, which literally translates as “existence-factor” and is often rendered as “life-continuum” or “the subconscious.”¹²¹ The term “subconscious,” however, is a 20th-century psychological term, referring to that part of one's mind not usually accessible to the conscious process but powerfully influencing it. As the term is imprecise, some academics choose to use “preconscious,” however, as a psychoanalytic term to refer to “knowledge, emotions, images, etc, that are not momentarily consciousness but which are easily accessible.”¹²² Here, I generally use “unconscious” to refer to the nature of the latent tendencies (*anusaya*)¹²³ and related mental processes. Since, the *bhavaṅga* often juxtaposes itself to conscious states but is not itself conscious, perhaps the term *subconscious* would serve well to describe it, or sometimes even to define it.

The *bhavaṅga* has been described as “the resting state of consciousness which occurs uninterrupted in dreamless sleep, and which is momentarily reverted to in waking consciousness between each act of processing a sense-object.” (Harvey 1996:95). There is an allusion to the *bhavaṅga* in a passage in the **Mahā Hatthi,paḍōpama Sutta** (M 28):

27a ¹²⁴If, 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*),¹²⁵ then there is no appearance of that class of consciousness.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ According to **Abhidhammattha,saṅgaha**, these *kusala,vipāka-ahetuka,cittāni* are: (1) eye-consciousness accompanied by equanimity, (2) ear-consciousness..., (3) nose-consciousness..., (4) tongue-consciousness..., (5) body-consciousness..., (6) receiving consciousness accompanied by equanimity, (7) investigating consciousness accompanied by joy, and (8) investigating consciousness accompanied by equanimity. (Abhs:BRS 1.9/41 f)

¹²⁰ For examples of counseling of the dying, see **Dhānañjāni S** (M 97) = SD 4.9; **Anātha,piṇḍik'ovāda S** (M 143) = SD 23.9; **(Gati) Mahānāma S** (S 55.21/5:369-372) = SD 23.1; **Gilayāna S** (S 55.54/4:408-410); **Nakula S** (A 6.16/3:295-298) = SD 5.2; see also **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41) = SD 5.26; **Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 10.177/5:269-273) = SD 2.6

¹²¹ See Abhs:BRS 3.8/122-124. For a simple and useful summary, see Gethin 1998:215-223.

¹²² AS Reber, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, 1985. However, see Fig 2.2.

¹²³ See S 36.6.8b = SD 5.5 (3 kinds), M 18.8 (7 kinds) = SD 5.17, & SD 6.14 Introd (5).

¹²⁴ The **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18) has a similar analysis of the 18 elements (6 sense-organs + 6 sense-objects), beginning with: “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. What a person mentally proliferates is the source through which perceptions and notions due to mental proliferation impacts one regarding past, future and present forms cognizable through the eye.” (M 18.16/1:111 f)

¹²⁵ “Appropriate conscious engagement,” *tajjo samannāhāro hoti*, or “an appropriate act of attention on the part of the mind” (Jayatilleke, 1963:433). *Tajjo* (*tad + ja*), “this like,” appropriate; “engagement [of attention]” (*samannāhāra*) here is syn with *manasikāra*, “attention” (M 1:445; Vbh 321). Comy explains it here as attention arising in dependence on the eye and forms. It is identified with the “five-door adverting consciousness” (*pañca,dvāra,-*

27b If, friends, internally the eye is unimpaired [intact] and external forms come into its range, but there is no appropriate conscious engagement [attention], then there is no appearance of that class of consciousness.

27c If, friends, internally the eye is unimpaired [intact] and external forms come into its range, and there is an appropriate conscious engagement, then there is the appearance of that class of consciousness. (M 28.27/1:190) = SD 6.16

The above passage describes how consciousness (*viññāna*) and its accompaniments arise when there is an intact sense-organ, an appropriate sense-object within range, and appropriate attention (*samannāhāra*).¹²⁷

As already mentioned [5.1], there are two basic modes of the mind or consciousness: the process mind or process consciousness (*vīthi, citta*) and the process-free mind (*vīthi, mutta*). The mind that is process-free (*vīthi, mutta*) (that is, does not arise at any of the sense-doors) is resting in the inactive mode known as *bhav'āṅga*, is, as we have seen, sometimes translated as “the unconscious process” [5]. The *bhavaṅga* is a concept that evolved primarily in the Abhidhamma commentarial tradition to explain the continuity of consciousness and personal identity in the absence of a permanent self (which is denied by the *anattā* doctrine). “Between each active consciousness process the mind returns to a basic state of consciousness (*bhavaṅga*) that defines a being as an individual before emerging once more in response to some physical or mental stimulus.” (Gethin 1998:22)

The life-continuum thus flows on like a stream (*sota*) from one existence to the next; as such, it is called *bhavaṅga, sota* (the life-continuum stream). More commonly, however, it is called *bhavaṅga, citta* (existence-factor consciousness), and is the foundation of all experiences, both conscious and unconscious.

It retains the traces of all impression and sensations, and makes it possible to have recollections of these in the form of memories. At the beginning and end of each individual existence it is known as “rebirth-linking consciousness” (*paṭisandhi*) and “death consciousness” (*cuti, citta*) respectively. The concept of the *bhavaṅga* paved the way for later idealist trends and the evolution of the notion of the *ālaya, vijñāna* or “storehouse of consciousness.”

(Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism, ed Damien Keown, 2003)

An important problem that the *bhavaṅga* concept tries to solve is the moral problem: if there is no self, how is one responsible for one's actions? It provides some sort of “identity” in its continuity. Thus, instead of attributing the continuity of character traits and habitual tendencies to an “individual” (*pudgala*), as the Pudgala, vādins did,¹²⁸ or to a continuously present (but always changing) underlying state of mind, which the Sautrāntikas and later the Yogācārins tended to do, the Theravādins refer to a continually intervening state of mind.¹²⁹

vajjana, citta), which breaks off the flow of the life continuum (*bhavaṅga*) to initiate the process of cognition (MA 2:229). Even when a sense-object (external stimulus) comes within the range of the sense-organ, if attention is not directed towards the object (because one is occupied with something else), there is still no appearance of “the corresponding class of consciousness.” Here [27a], meaning that no eye-consciousness would arise. See Harvey 1996:95.

¹²⁶ “Class of consciousness,” *viññāna, bhāga*. Comy: This section introduces form derived from the 4 great elements. Derived form, according to the Abhidhamma analysis of matter, includes the 5 sense-faculties (*pasāda, rūpa*) and the first 4 kinds of sense-object, the tangible object being identified with the primary elements themselves (MA 2:229). This passage is qu at Kvu 620; cf Miln 56 ff. **Peter Harvey** renders *viññāna, bhāga* literally as “share of discernment [consciousness]” (1995:129-133), where he also argues against **N Ross Reat**'s rendition of it as “type of consciousness” (1987:19) and **REA Johansson**'s interpretation of the dependence of *rūpa* on consciousness (1979:32).

¹²⁷ **Harvey** says that this is in fact a reference to the *bhavaṅga* as “a mind ready-to-act (though it is replaced by the more active *cittas* which follow it in the ‘process of *cittas*’).” (1996:95).

¹²⁸ On *Pudgala, vāda*, see **Bhāra S** (S 22.22/3:25 f) = SD 17.14.

¹²⁹ See Gethin 1994.

7 How to really know the mind

7.1 THE TRUE NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS. From what we have discussed above, the mind (*citta*) evidently “rules all conscious activity.”¹³⁰ To date, even as far as science goes, there is no effective way to measure consciousness. We have various machines and methods of measuring what the brain does,¹³¹ but nowhere in the Buddha texts is the mind ever equated as or located in the brain. Buddhism certainly does *not* define the mind as “the activity of the brain.” In other words, the brain is not the mind, but is at best a sort of circuit board, through which some more physical aspects of consciousness operate.¹³²

According to **the Ānāpāna,sati Sutta** (M 118), in preparing for the breath meditation, one should first find a suitable place and sit in a comfortable posture so that one can keep one’s mind focused. In the first set of four aspects (the contemplation of the body), one simply directs one’s attention to the breathing process so that it becomes calm and focused. In the second set of four aspects (the contemplation of feelings), one enters into dhyana.

Only when one has reached the ninth stage of the sixteen steps of the breath meditation, a stage known as *citta,paṭisamvedī* (experiencing the mind) [Table 7.1], that one can truly say that one know the mind. That is, after emerging from dhyana, with a powerfully focused mind, one can then see the true nature of the mind. Only through such deep introspection, can one know the true nature of the mind, that whatever one experiences is often followed by a different type of experience, as illustrated in the fruit salad simile.¹³³ Because these “units” of experiences—of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking—immediately follow one another, it gives one an illusion of sameness and continuity.

However, with deep introspection or mindfulness, one will know that the mind-consciousness is always following behind each sense-experience. When one sees this, one then sees through the illusion of sameness and continuity of consciousness. Consciousness is like a sandy beach that looks continuous and compact, but on closer examination, one discovers that it is made up of discrete particles of sand. In fact, under magnification, one would even notice that there are spaces around each of the sand-particles. Nothing runs through the grains of sand. It is the same with water in a lake or a stream: it looks like there is a unified body or continuous flow. However, when one looks at the water molecules in an electron microscope, one can see that between there is nothing but only space separating them. And not only that, if one observe closely enough, one sees that they are all in rapid motion. Even so, one consciousness arises and then another disappears, and so on. **The Samudaya Sutta** (S 47.42) gives a succinct explanation of how consciousness arises and passes away:

2 Bhikshus, I will teach you the arising and the passing away of the four focusses of mindfulness.¹³⁴ Listen to it.

3 And what, bhikshus, is the arising of the body?

With the arising of food (*āhāra*),¹³⁵ there is the arising of the body (*kāya*).¹³⁶

With the ending of food, there is the ending of the body.

4 With the arising of contact (*phassa*),¹³⁷ there is the arising of feeling (*vedanā*).

With the ending of contact, there the ending of contact.

¹³⁰ Brahmavamso 2006:202 f.

¹³¹ See eg MRI, fMRI and PET at §1.3 nn.

¹³² On Where is the Mind? See **The Body in Buddhism** = SD 29.6a (3.2).

¹³³ See SD 17.8a(4.3).

¹³⁴ Here, *satipaṭṭhāna* clearly refers to the *objects* of mindfulness. On the practice, see **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** (D 22; M 10) = SD 13.

¹³⁵ The 4 kinds of food are: (1) material (edible) food (*kabaḷinkār’āhāra*), (2) contact (*phass’āhāra*), (3) volition (*mano,sañcetan’āhāra*), (4) consciousness (*viññāṇ’āhāra*) (D 3:228; M 1:48, 1:261; S 2:13, 48, 98-105; Vbh 401). See **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhāya S** (M 38.9-16/1:261) = SD 7.10 & **Āhāra S** (S 46.51/5:102-107) = SD 7.15.

¹³⁶ On the body, see **Dīgha,nākha S** (M 74.9/1:500) = SD 16.1. On the arising of the body (*kāya*), see **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhāya S** (M 38.26-29/1:261) = SD 7.10.

¹³⁷ On contact, see **Vedanā** = SD 17.3(3).

5 With the arising of name-and-form (*nāma,rūpa*),¹³⁸ there is the arising of mind (*citta*).¹³⁹
 With the ending of name-and-form, there is the ending of mind.

6 With the arising of attention (*manasikāra*), there is the arising of phenomena (*dhamma*).
 With the ending of attention, there is the ending of phenomena.¹⁴⁰ (S 47.42/5:184)

The 16 Steps of the Ānāpāna,sati Bhāvanā
 (Ānāpāna,sati Sutta, M 118/3:77-88) = SD 7.13

Physical preparations [17]

Finding a quiet place
 Sitting comfortable
 Setting up mindfulness

The 12 steps for getting into dhyana [mental absorption]

[Contemplation of the body] [18]

Step 1—Experiencing a long breath
 Step 2—Experiencing a short breath
 Step 3—Experiencing the whole breath (or whole body)
 Step 4—Calming the breath

[Contemplation of feelings: Entry into dhyana] [19]

Step 5—Arousing joy
 Step 6—Arousing happiness
 Step 7—Understanding mental functions
 Step 8—Calming the joy and happiness

[Contemplation of the mind]

Step 9—Experiencing the mind [20] [*where we really know the mind*]
 Step 10—Shining the *nimitta* [meditation sign]
 Step 11—Sustaining the *nimitta*
 Step 12—Freeing the mind

[Contemplation of dharmas]

The 4 steps to take after emerging from dhyana [21]

Step 13—Reflecting on impermanence (*anicca*)
 Step 14—Reflecting on fading away [of lust] (*virāga*)
 Step 15—Reflecting on cessation [of suffering] (*nirodha*)
 Step 16—Reflecting on letting go [of defilements] (*paṭinissagga*)

Table 7.1 The sixteen steps of breath meditation

¹³⁸ On name-and-form, see (Paṭicca,samuppāda) Vibhaṅga S (S 12.2.12) = SD 5.15 n & SD 5.17(3).

¹³⁹ Here, *citta* is syn with *viññāna* (consciousness), with *nāma,rūpa* as its condition, and the condition for the preceding, *vedanā* (feeling), too. *Citta* always arises based on *rūpa* (form), and in conjunction with contact, feeling, perception, volition, and attention (all constituents of *nāma*). In modern terms, this is “cognitive consciousness”: see Nagara S (S 12.65) = SD 14.2 Intro (2) & *Viññāna* = SD 17.8a(6).

¹⁴⁰ *Manasikāra,samudayā dhammānaṃ samudayā*. Comy says that the phenomena of the awakening factors arise through wise attention; the phenomena of the hindrances, through unwise attention; but all phenomena arise from contact. (SA 3:229)

The Samudaya Sutta shows the body is dependent on material food (*kabalīnkār'āhāra*), and also on contact (*phass'āhāra*), giving rise to feeling. Then, dependent on name-and-form, there is mind (*citta*), here, referring to consciousness (*viññāna*), more specifically, *cognitive consciousness*. While attention is the rudimentary cognitive process, it here refers to a volitional process of directing one's mind in identifying phenomena. The theme of the teaching is that all these processes are impermanent: they arise and end.

7.2 OUT OF THE FLOODS ONTO SAFE GROUND. One may understand the mind as the “knower,” and even regard it as being impermanent, and be reborn in the dhyanic realms. However, as long as one has not let go of the craving for existence (*bhava*), one would be reborn into this world again, and face suffering all over again. This is because one still takes the “knower” to be the self.

Only through deep introspection, either through mindfulness practice or after a dhyanic experience, one would be able to clearly see that the “knower” constantly arises and passes away, and as such it is not the self. This insight comes when one has learned to fully let go of the five physical senses and keep to just the sixth sense, the mind. In the profound stillness of the mind, away from the distractions of physical sense-objects, one sees that consciousness is just a series of discrete granular or fragmentary events.

The purpose of Buddhist mind-training is to learn gradually to let go of more and more consciousness. First, we let go of the distractions from the sense-doors; then we close the five physical sense-doors themselves (through samadhi), and then directly experiencing the mind through dhyana, one allows the mind-consciousness to cease. **Brahmavamso** explains this important process thus:

The whole purpose of these jhānas is to learn through practice, bit by bit, to let go of more and more consciousness. It's like slicing away at mind consciousness. Allowing consciousness to cease, by calming it, settling it, and allowing it to go to cessation. Then the consciousness completely ceases for long periods of time in what's called *nirodha-samapatti* (the attainment of cessation). This is the cessation of all that is felt and all that's perceived (*sañña-vedayita-nirodha*). Any person who experiences this attainment, they say, will be an arahant or an anagami afterwards. Why? Because they've seen the end of consciousness, they've touched that as an experience. (Brahmavamso 2001:5, digital ed)

Here, Brahmavamso uses the simile of the tadpole. As a tadpole in the water, it cannot understand what dry land is. As it grows into a frog and leaves the water for the first time, it still has some water on its back. It is wet and slimy but it knows what dry land is, and for the first time knows what dryness is.

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