CLEARING THE WAY

Resolving Misinterpretations of the Dhamma

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Contents

Preface

In my travels visiting monasteries and associating with diverse Theravāda Buddhist communities all over the world, I have been struck by the lack of awareness—even among some of its most committed practitioners—of how Buddhism and its core concepts evolved over time. While there are many explanations for this situation, the main reasons are a general lack of emphasis on textual study, a relative disdain for scholarly works, and the tendency to unquestioningly follow one's chosen tradition. This has no doubt resulted in the many misinterpretations that plague popular Buddhism today.

This motivated me to write about certain controversial or misunderstood concepts in Buddhism with excerpts from the Pāli Canon—the earliest known texts attributed to the Buddha—as my guide. This is the culmination of that effort—my attempt to help resolve some of the issues through a cohesive compilation of essays that dig into the implications of these rarely explored concepts and unravel some widely believed yet erroneous views.

Because of this, this book is primarily meant for those who have some awareness of core Buddhist ideas—not-self (*anattā*) and dependent co-arising (*paticcasamuppāda*) for instance—and are interested in a solid intellectual foundation of the Dhamma. Even though the insights that can be gleaned from investigating these ideas are applicable to everyone, for those lacking familiarity with them, it might be difficult to follow my arguments.

The whole of the *Dīgha, Majjhima, Saṃyutta* and *Aṅguttara Nikāyas* and the early texts of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* (*Dhammapada, Udāna, Itivuttaka, Sutta Nipāta, Theragāthā, Therīgāthā*) from the Pāli Canon are considered potential source material for what the Buddha said. I have also quoted some of the later texts of the tradition and more popular contemporary texts to provide proper context for my arguments, sometimes in agreement and other times for criticism. When doing so, my aim is solely to enlighten the reader on aspects of the Dhamma—not to malign others for speaking their minds. Causing unnecessary offense is not my intention.

My hope is that this text will provide you with a solid intellectual foundation on how to go about your practice, while pushing you to rethink your current interpretations on some familiar subjects. I have attempted to provide sources for the origins of my arguments as thoroughly as possible to show that my assertions have sufficient support. Any mistakes or misquotes, of course, are my own responsibility, and I apologize to the reader in advance.

Introduction

Buddhism has undergone significant alterations and corruptions over the centuries. This is partly due to the inevitable changes brought about by its cultural trappings, but mainly due to the human tendency to rely on faith and myth over reason and knowledge. Because of this, the scientific method has played a crucial role in unearthing what the historical Buddha most likely taught, a debt most native Buddhists are seldom ready to acknowledge. By devoting the first chapter to the history of discovery that was instigated by the colonial Europeans in the late 19ᵗʰ century through to the scholars of today, I hope to rectify this. Through this, I introduce the framework of the early Pāli Canon that is used throughout the book as the primary source of the Buddha's teachings. I quote its discourses liberally to help unravel the complexities of certain concepts and popular misinterpretations.

The intricacies of translating and interpreting the Pāli Canon is my next focus. I point out how the progressive nature of the path is ignored by most due to not knowing the proper context to understand seemingly conflicting passages in the Canon. Similarly, many translators ignore the active and experiential nature of the practice when translating important Pāli terms due to their inherent bias in wanting to find answers to questions of the nature of reality that the Buddha put aside.

I then focus on the teaching of not-self (*anattā*)—probably the most popular Buddhist concept while also being the most misunderstood. I start with the traditional interpretations before bringing their inadequacies to light. An alternative take is suggested that is more in keeping with the early texts while also being relevant to practice.

Dependent co-arising (*paticcasamuppāda*), while widely considered a complex subject, is often ignored because it is difficult to relate to practice. My novel take first unpacks its theoretical depth, then shows how its insights can be used to sharpen a practitioner's focus on the most appropriate path to follow for him or herself.

I end with an analysis of two major Theravāda meditation movements—the Burmese *vipassanā* movement and the Thai forest tradition. Before delving into their practices, I dig into how meditation is described in the texts by focusing on *jhāna* and body contemplation (*kāyagatāsati*). Using that as context, each technique and tradition is evaluated, and their overall merits compared.

What the Buddha (Most Likely) Said

Respecting Scholarly Research on the Chronology of Textual Development

Before proceeding to introduce and critically examine its concepts, it makes sense to think about what is considered Buddhism in the first place. Many people know that there are three major traditions that fall under this umbrella term—Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna, but what Buddhism was before these sects arose might be more of a mystery.

For a person in the Western world with an interest in learning about what the Buddha taught, how to proceed is not so straightforward. Your initial experience of Buddhism might have come at a popular meditation retreat such as Goenka *vipassanā*, where practice is emphasized with the assurance that it is based on the unadulterated teaching from the time of the Buddha himself. If not, you might have visited your nearest Buddhist temple or monastery. It seems logical to assume that the differences between traditions are merely cultural in nature, with the core teachings being the same.

In reality, what different traditions follow can diverge widely. The Zen temple you visit might discourage following a path of practice and instead give you a koan to reflect on. The local Thai monastery might have a schedule packed with chores with barely any formal instruction on practice. The Sri Lankan or Burmese temple might suggest that you need to study the Abhidhamma to understand Buddhist theory before even attempting meditation. Moreover, there is no telling whether the abbot of any given monastery or temple is following his own inclinations over the directives of his tradition—further complicating matters.

For someone living in a traditionally Theravāda Buddhist country like Sri Lanka, Thailand, or Myanmar, this might seem not to be an issue. Theravāda is considered the earliest surviving tradition, and the general claim is that the purity of the teaching has been preserved over millennia. However, when digging a little deeper into these claims, it is natural for some doubts to crop up. Popular Buddhism in these countries tends to focus on adhering to rites and rituals, and even when they do not, there is a tendency to unquestioningly follow or accept what a monk with great oratory skills claims as the true teaching.

Instead of just following a technique or teacher, or visiting a temple or monastery, you might think it is better to start answering this question of authenticity by reading about different traditions and their corresponding ancient texts. This seems the rational choice, but even here, books written by followers of a certain tradition are unlikely to put forth a completely unbiased account of its origins, due to the incentive to claim their source to be the Buddha himself.

Because of all this, for those attempting to discover what the Buddha actually said, it makes sense to at least inquire into the conclusions of decades of scholarly research on the history of Buddhism. This seems the best way to get a clearer view of what is attributable to the Buddha from the plethora of competing interpretations. There is also the added benefit of being able to understand how what is considered Buddhism today evolved over the ages.

Why This Matters

You might question the point of even trying to figure out what the Buddha said. Isn't the scientific evidence that mindfulness meditation is beneficial enough? What does it matter what a person who lived over two millennia ago supposedly said?

On the face of it, this is a legitimate question—today's world as we know it is almost unrecognizable from how it was even a few centuries ago. With technological progress providing us previously unfathomable conveniences and the scientific method helping us understand our physical world better than any other time in history, it might seem logical to focus on the present instead of dwelling on the past.

Despite the differences between the times, however, we are still dealing with the same problems of stress and suffering. And so, our decisions are still driven by an underlying impulse to search for ways to be free from that stress. With the Buddha being the source for the ancient wisdom that has provided us with techniques like mindfulness meditation, it follows that finding out his complete message has potential benefits to humankind at large.

When I first got interested in finding out more about Buddhism, the question I wanted to answer was: "What did the Buddha actually say?" This might seem a simple task if you are satisfied with whatever a popular book on Buddhism tells you. But being raised Buddhist, I had a sense that it was a bad idea to trust sources off-hand. It was not that I thought those writing books were intentionally attempting to distort what the Buddha said, but I wondered whether they themselves could be mistaken due to an unquestioning adherence to tradition or belief in their own teachers. If the truth is unchanging, and if the Buddha achieved this ultimate truth as he proclaimed, then the varying interpretations of the Buddha's teachings coming from different traditions cannot all be true.

So how would I make an honest attempt at finding out what the Buddha said? Is this even possible? It's true—there is no infallible method for finding out what a person who lived so long ago actually said. Because of this, there is a temptation to ignore historical research on this matter altogether and just trust your own meditation practice. After all, investigating your own subjective experience and coming to your own conclusions is supposedly the only genuine way to follow the Buddhist path. This sentiment finds some support from one of the most popular

statements attributed to the Buddha—the charter on free inquiry he makes to the Kālāmas:

> *"Now, Kālāmas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness'—then you should enter & remain in them."*[1]

Disciplines such as archaeology, epigraphy, and philology are methods of investigation that involve logical conjecture, inference, and probability. They also rely on ancient ruins and scripture to arrive at their conclusions. Therefore, I agree in principle that using them as standards of truth are inferior to the experiential knowledge attainable through the clarity of meditation. This, however, does not mean a seeker guided by reason should ignore the probabilistic suggestions of those disciplines—especially when you consider that the advice to the Kālāmas is itself sourced from the scriptures.

With this in mind, we will next follow the story of how the West discovered "Buddhism," and in the process sparked a renewed interest among native Buddhists in their inherited traditions. We will then explore the consensus scholarly opinion on the most reliable sources for the Buddha's teachings and its implications.

History of Buddhist Studies

Until the late 18th century, when Sir William Jones started finding clues of a religion distinct from Hinduism in the inscriptions on pillars and rocks in India, the Buddha's teachings were unknown outside of Asia. As evidence mounted in countries as diverse as Sri Lanka, Tibet, and Japan, the European colonial rulers allowed a band of enthusiastic amateurs the freedom to investigate the Indian subcontinent's lost past.

Among them, one James Prinsep took a major step in the development of this new field of Buddhist studies. He successfully deciphered the Prakrit language found in Sanchi and on pillars throughout India. Within a few months in 1837, with the assistance of another Brit—Greg Turnour, he cracked the code for the inscriptions at Sanchi stupa[2] and identified the author as king Asoka. Greg had previously translated the Dīpavaṃsa, a Sri Lankan chronicle of the island's past.

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[1] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 3:66*, p. 60
[2] Charles Allen. *The Buddha and the Sahibs: The Men Who Discovered India's Lost Religion*. John Murray. 2002, pp. 179–88

Asoka's edicts revealed the presence of Buddhism as a major religious movement across India just a few centuries after the Buddha. By connecting the names of Alexander the Great's successors referenced in the Girnar rock inscription[3] to reliable Greek sources, it became possible to confidently place Asoka's reign around 258 BCE.

In 1844, the French philologist Eugene Burnouf independently concluded that certain religions encountered by Europeans throughout Asia were in fact branches of a single tradition whose home was in India. By the late 19th century, the archaeologist Alexander Cunningham had discovered major Buddhist ruins in Rajgir, Nalanda, Shravasti, Vaishali, and Kushinagar with the help of newly translated travel records of the Chinese pilgrims Fa Hien (337–422 CE) and Xuanzang (602–664 CE). He was able to independently locate many of the sites referred to in the Pāli Canon, even though he had no access to it.

These archeological and epigraphical discoveries corroborated the stories in the ancient texts of a contemplative called the Buddha who lived in the distant past. This pushed scientifically-minded scholars of history to assume the serious study of the texts themselves.

Around the same time, the drive for a cohesive national identity distinct from the colonial powers led local Buddhist scholars in Sri Lanka to actively mobilize against the Christian authorities. This culminated in public debates between Buddhist monks and Christian missionaries. Migettuwatte Gunananda Thero won the climactic event in 1873—sparking a nationwide revival of Sri Lankan pride in its Buddhist traditions.

Inspired by reading about the proceedings of the debates, an American colonel named Henry Steel Olcott, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, would arrive in Sri Lanka, embrace Buddhism, and begin a campaign to establish Buddhist schools. The numbers of such schools in Sri Lanka rose from just 3 to 174 in the space of 23 years—with some surviving as top public schools to this day. In fact, some buildings of my own alma mater—the country's biggest Buddhist school—are named after members of the Theosophical Society.

During this time, Olcott toured the country and gave lectures to local groups with a young Anagārika Dharmapāla acting as his translator. By the time they attended the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago to represent Buddhism in 1893, Dharmapāla had become a Sinhala Buddhist leader and was convinced of the need for Buddhist reform in Sri Lanka. Over the centuries, Buddhist practice had steadily deteriorated in the main Theravāda countries, with less focus on meditation and more on ritualism with superstitious elements borrowed from Hinduism and other folk traditions.[4] The general public had practically no access to the ancient texts which were reserved for the monastic elites, who tended to spend their time on scholarly pursuits instead of applying its recommendations into practice. Therefore,

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[3] Ibid. pp. 188–9
[4] K.M. de Silva. *A History of Sri Lanka*, 2005, p. 121

most would lack the knowledge or the access to be able to read through a recension of the Pāli Canon.

With the Pali Text Society founded in England by T.W. Rhys Davids in 1881, the Pāli Canon had been published in the Roman script, and, over the next few decades, translated into English. Due to the efforts of pioneers like Rhys Davids and contemporary scholars like Bhikkhu Bodhi and Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, today it is easier for an English-speaker to read a quality translation of the Pāli Canon than it is for a native of a Theravāda Buddhist country like Sri Lanka or Thailand to read one in their own native language.

In Sri Lanka, for example, the attitude that the Pāli Canon is the avenue of scholars and monks has only started changing recently, with the advent of the Internet and growing awareness of the inferiority of translations in Sinhala due to either archaic, elitist, or overly simplistic language. This is quite a shame considering how close Sinhala is to Pāli as a language, but unsurprising since there is a general lack of interest in a historical perspective for the development of the Buddhist texts within the Theravāda Buddhist world. The popular sentiment is to consider all traditional texts to be authoritative in nature. Therefore, questioning their authenticity through critical analysis is considered to be almost blasphemous.

This is not to say that English translations are flawless, however. In some cases, the translators' existing philosophical biases seep through, resulting in skewed renditions that confuse more than enlighten. Thus, there are translations that show the influence of early Romantic thought[5] with ideas of interconnectedness, spontaneity, and ego-transcendence, and those that purge the texts of anything supernatural or otherwise deemed unscientific due to its conflict with the translator's scientific materialist leanings. We will explore some of the more subtle issues in modern translations in the next chapter.

Authenticity of Early Buddhist Texts

How can we be confident of the authenticity of the Pāli Canon in the first place? The Buddha lived from around 480 to 400 BCE according to scholarly estimates, and wrote nothing. His teachings were passed down orally for around four centuries before being committed to text in an environment of famine and political instability in Sri Lanka in the 1st century BCE. Due to the fear of losing monks who had memorized the teachings, a council was convened and the Pāli texts were written down for the first time on palm leaves.

Oral transmission might seem inherently unreliable in protecting the integrity of a vast body of teachings. If this were the case, it would follow that if two groups of monks were entrusted with the memorization of a collection of discourses and then

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[5] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Buddhist Romanticism*, pp. 6–11

their descendants had no contact with each other over many centuries, the result would be two quite different canons. However, this separation of groups actually occurred, but it did not result in the expected textual disparity.

Within a few centuries of the Buddha's passing, a group of monks charged with the task of memorization migrated from northeast India to Sri Lanka. Today, by comparing the discourses in Pāli preserved in Sri Lanka with a Chinese translation (called the Āgamas) of the now lost Sanskrit original preserved in northern India, we find an extraordinary degree of concordance. They are indisputably versions of the same original material. Therefore, we can conclude that the content common to the Pāli Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas most probably stem from a pre-sectarian period of early Buddhism. This gives us confidence that something close to the words found in these texts were initially spoken by the man himself.

The descriptions of the political climate around the time of the Buddha in the Pāli Canon are also in congruence with independent sources. The Greek historian Megasthenes visited the court of Asoka's grandfather Chandragupta (350-295 BCE)—the founder of the Mauryan empire—around a century after the Buddha. He described the capital Pāṭaliputta as an established city—in contrast to the obscure village it is depicted as in the early texts. The moderately sized urban centers at the time of the Buddha such as Rajgir and Vesāli are at stages of development between the purely agrarian setting described in the Upanishads and the massive cities of the Mauryan empire, further supporting the premise that the early Buddhist texts are authentic.[6]

These early Buddhist texts in the Pāli Canon do not refer to other Buddhist texts, while the former is referred to as the original source in all later textual work. This is further evidence that the Canon can be regarded as an integrated composition of what the Buddha most likely said. In fact, there are no consequential contradictions within these ancient texts, and so there is a loose consensus among specialists that they are authentic. Rupert Gethin, a distinguished professor of Buddhist Studies, considers the four main Nikāyas to be the common heritage of Buddhism and that "*it is extremely likely that at least some of these Suttas that come down to us are among the oldest surviving Buddhist texts and contain material that goes back directly to the Buddha.*"[7]

Richard Gombrich, another eminent scholar, is of the opinion that: "*the content of the main body of sermons, the four Nikāyas and of the main body of monastic rules … presents such originality, intelligence, grandeur and—most relevantly—coherence, that it is hard to see it as a composite work.*" In his words, they are "*the work of one genius.*"[8]

The point of attempting to establish the authenticity of the early Buddhist texts is not to prove that they are all true. To arrive at such an undeniable proof is beyond the capability of the scientific frameworks used in this investigation. Instead, what it

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[6] Bhikkhu Sujato & Bhikkhu Brahmali. *The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts*. 2017, p. 23
[7] Rupert Gethin. *Sayings of the Buddha: New Translations from the Pāli Nikāyas*. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford University Press, 2008, [3, XXI–XVIII]
[8] Richard Gombrich. *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*. The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices Series. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2006, [4, 21]

does give us is the confidence to put more weight to the teachings found in the earlier texts over what are later developments, especially in the face of any inconsistencies or contradictions between them.

Inconsistencies Within Theravāda

By understanding the chronology of textual development in Buddhism, we can begin to parse out where different ideas within traditions originated from. If we agree to the premise that Buddhism is the teaching of a single historical figure called the Buddha, and that the earliest known texts are most likely to correspond to what he taught, then it is incumbent upon us to at least acknowledge and recognize when conflicting and contradictory ideas are portrayed as being Buddhist.

While it is easy to find disparities between the early texts and later traditions like the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, even the Theravāda—the oldest surviving sect—is not immune to this issue. In fact, those within the tradition are arguably even more predisposed to hold to the view that the "pure" teaching is found within—resulting in a lack of investigative drive when evaluating its myriad texts.

Theravāda as a tradition considers the Tipitaka—or the three baskets of Sutta, Vinaya, and Abhidhamma—to be the core texts. The suttas consist of discourses said to be direct quotes of the Buddha, his disciples, and divine beings. The Vinaya is the monastic code of discipline, while the Abhidhamma is a systematization of the teaching as a philosophy. Of these, the Abhidhamma has played a pivotal role in shaping what we consider to be Theravāda today. This is because while the doctrine (*sutta*) and discipline (*vinaya*) are common to all Buddhist traditions and show remarkable consistency, the Abhidhamma of each tradition varies widely, with each having distinct conceptual elements not found elsewhere.

With the acknowledged importance of the Tipitaka, a vast literature of commentaries on these texts have been preserved. In many ways, these commentaries function as guides to understand the early texts and provide valuable context. That said, there are cases where the explanations of the commentaries contradict the source material.

Another hugely influential text that has in many ways defined what is considered orthodox Theravāda doctrine is the *Visuddhimagga*—a 5th century manual written by a monk named Buddhaghosa. While it sources the early texts liberally, it also pushes ideas that have taken the tradition in new directions. This by itself is not an issue, but when we see discrepancies between these texts and the suttas, it puts the onus on us to make a choice. Do we acknowledge the primacy of the discourses that are universally considered authentic and give them priority, or accept a later teaching because it fits with what we already believe to be Buddhism or seems to have some rational basis?

To investigate this further, let us consider concepts described in the Abhidhamma, commentaries, and the *Visuddhimagga* that are not found in the suttas. *Khaṇikavāda*, or the doctrine of momentariness, is mentioned in the *Visuddhimagga* and the commentaries to the Abhidhamma. The idea here is that all physical elements are constantly changing so rapidly that they are imperceptible to the untrained mind. This phenomenon can supposedly be experienced directly through deep meditation, with a corresponding insight into impermanence. The problem, however, is that this idea is nowhere to be found in the early Canon, where impermanence or inconstancy at the bodily level is described in terms of the disintegration of the body with aging and death. This is a reality that is much more apparent to us, even if we do not live our lives informed by the knowledge of this insight.

Another apocryphal development was the increasing focus over the centuries on theoretical and philosophical aspects of what insight entails. The section on insight in the *Visuddhimagga* is heavily theoretical in nature and clearly contrasts with the early Canon, where insight is described as more of a practice in manipulating perception. This issue is even more pronounced in Abhidhamma texts such as the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (Path of Discrimination), where the teaching is pushed in various philosophical and increasingly abstract directions. Questions such as what constitutes a person, and whether that entity exists in a "ultimate reality" or is empty of any essence are discussed in detail. This is despite the Buddha of the early Canon cautioning against such speculations as being unbeneficial and potentially dangerous. Instead, his focus was on practical meditation methods conducive to awakening.

The commentaries, while providing context for the early discourses, also sometimes introduce ideas that are not in the source material. One such popular idea—found in the commentaries to the *Dhammapada*—is that there is a "dry-insight" path to awakening that does not require the attainment of the deep concentration levels called *jhāna*. This is not supported in the Canon, however, where the eighth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path—right concentration (*sammā samādhi*)—is defined in terms of the *jhānas*.

We will dig deeper into the inconsistencies between the ideas of the later texts and the early Canon in the subsequent chapters. My goal here is not merely to show such discrepancies in theory, but to give a coherent explanation as to why holding to such conflicting teachings goes against the goal of Buddhist practice.

Being more than a couple of millennia away from the time of the Buddha, it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that we are left with fragmentary clues parsed and collated from the early Buddhist texts for what he said. By piecing these together, our task is to identify the path most appropriate to follow for our own benefit. On a more positive note, we are in a unique time in history, with widespread access to translations of the Pāli Canon and the recognition of its primary importance in identifying what the Buddha said. Because of this, we can find and

evaluate connections among discourses more accurately and in-depth. I will attempt to do just that when exploring some of its more complex ideas next.

Phenomenological Dhamma

On the Interpretation of Early Buddhist Texts

Principles of Hermeneutics

Whatever Dhamma & Vinaya I have pointed out & formulated for you, that will be your Teacher after my passing.[9]

As Buddhists, it is our duty to follow the Buddha's advice on the day of his final unbinding (*parinibbāna*) to take the doctrine and discipline (*dhammavinaya*) he laid out as our teacher. As we have established, this means taking the early discourses as our primary guide.

To do this properly, however, is easier said than done. While you can read quality translations of the Pāli Canon, it does not necessarily follow that you know whether a certain teaching is applicable to your life, or if you interpreted it as it was intended. The Buddha was aware of this danger, and he warned his disciples to proceed with care when attempting to interpret his words:

Monks, these two slander the Tathāgata. Which two? He who explains a discourse whose meaning needs to be inferred as one whose meaning has already been fully drawn out. And he who explains a discourse whose meaning has already been fully drawn out as one whose meaning needs to be inferred.[10]

Unfortunately, he does not give explicit examples for each type of teaching. So how are we to be sure that we are not misguided in our interpretations of the texts? This depends on our own powers of discernment (*paññā*), but the Buddha did formulate some useful guidelines:

If, on making them stand against the suttas and tallying them against the Vinaya, you find that they don't stand with the suttas or tally with the Vinaya, you may conclude: 'This is not the word of the Blessed One; this monk has misunderstood it'—and you should reject it. But if, on making them stand against the suttas and tallying them against the Vinaya, you find that they stand with the suttas and tally with the Vinaya, you may conclude: 'This is the word of the Blessed One; this monk has understood it rightly.'[11]

This implies that when we are confronted with a discourse that explains a teaching in a way that seems to contradict another discourse, we should step back

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[9] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 1: An Anthology from the Dīgha Nikāya, DN 16*, p. 265

[10] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 2:24*, p. 16

[11] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 1: An Anthology from the Dīgha Nikāya, DN 16*, p. 244-5

and take a broader view of the whole Canon. We can then identify all related discourses and find out whether there is a consensus among the majority. For instance, if it is possible to infer the meaning of a teaching in a way that contradicts with the meaning that is fully drawn out in most other discourses, we should go by the latter interpretation. The same is true when we assume the meaning is fully drawn out when it is primarily inferred instead.

All this may seem obvious, but in practice, not accounting for this guideline has led to significant misinterpretations of the Buddha's words. Two of these—not-self and dependent co-arising—will be the focus in the next chapters, but first, we will focus on how this has resulted in an ignorance of the progressive and active natures of the path.

Levels of Understanding

The Buddhist path is a gradual practice, and each of us are at different stages. This observation has important implications on evaluating the relevance of a discourse to our own practice.

For instance, the Buddha might be addressing a non-returner on the verge of arahantship in one discourse, while advising a householder on how to live a good lay life in another. While distinguishing between such discourses might not be that difficult, in some cases, misinterpreting the context of terms used has resulted in distorted views of the nature and goal of the path.

To recognize the intended audience for a discourse, a good framework to follow is the one utilized by the Buddha himself, where he identifies various levels of practitioners. "Uninstructed worldling" (*assutavā puthujjana*) describes a typical run-of-the-mill person who has no knowledge of the teaching, and he or she is contrasted with one who is instructed—generally identified at least as a follower (*sāvaka*) who has taken refuge in the Buddha.[12] Similarly, the trainee (*sekha*)—who is at least a stream-enterer but not yet an arahant—is distinguished from the adept, who is beyond training (*asekha*) and has achieved the ultimate goal.

The significance of these distinctions becomes evident when comparing how a single teaching or concept is explained in differing levels of depth in different discourses. For instance, the term world (*loka*) is used to refer to what is physical and "out there"—as we commonly understand it—in interactions the Buddha has with those unfamiliar with his teachings. When instructing a more discerning disciple, the Buddha defines the world to be within the "*fathom-long body, with its perception*

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[12] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 8:26*, p. 468

and intellect."[13] Elsewhere, he states that the term also applies to the disintegrating six inner and outer sense bases and their corresponding experiences.[14]

Similar contrasting definitions and explanations for terms—like form, self, existence, and karma to name a few—are found throughout the discourses. How are we to make sense of their differences?

We do this by recognizing that through progress in practice, we develop a deeper and more subtle understanding of our experience. Analyzing these progressive levels shows how the practice directs one's focus increasingly within oneself. The practitioner begins by focusing on his or her own body as opposed to the world outside. With deeper insight, even notions of the body or self are relinquished, and experience is focused on directly. This leads to the phenomenological view of experience, where phenomena are directly focused on as they arise and pass away, without the question of their existence.[15] This is the backdrop in which the mind attains a level of right view that culminates in the ultimate goal.

Term	*Puthujjana* (**Worldling**)	*Sāvaka*[16] (**Follower**)	*Sekha* (**Trainee**)	*Asekha* (**Adept**)
World (*loka*)	Physical and "out there" (AN 4:45), as eternal or not eternal (MN 63)	Within this fathom-long body, with its perception & intellect (AN 4:45)	The six inner and six outer sense bases, with their corresponding types of consciousness (SN 35:82)	The dimension where the world ceases is experienced (SN 35:117)
Form (*rūpa*)	Born from parents, nourished with food (DN 2)	Earth, water, fire, wind, and their derivations (SN 22:56)	As what is sensed internally as hard, watery, fiery, windy, and spatial (MN 140)	Freed from classification of form (SN 44:1)
Self (*attā*)	World or aggregates regarded as self (MN 22)	Your own self is your own mainstay (Dhp 160)	"I am" in regard to the aggregates is not overcome, but "I am this" is not assumed (SN 22:89)	The conceit "I am" uprooted (AN 9:1), the mind is devoid of I-making or my-making (AN 7:46)
Actions and results (*kamma*)	Lack of belief in actions and results (DN 2)	Actions have results (MN 117), 'I am the owner of my actions' (AN 5:57)	Action as intention (AN 6:63), intention as fabrication and not regarded as yours (SN 22:57, SN 22:59)	Intention without action and results (AN 3:34)
Existence (*atthitañca*)	Constant aggregates (SN	Inconstant aggregates (SN	Question does not occur when	Exists, does not exist, both does & does not

[13] Ibid. AN 4:45, p. 132

[14] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya,* SN 35:82, pp. 368-9

[15] Ibid. SN 12:15, p. 110

[16] Technically, the *sāvaka* is still a *puthujjana*, the difference being that he/she is instructed (*sutavā*).

	22:94)	22:94)	origination and passing away is seen clearly (SN 12:15)	exist, neither exists nor does not exist, all do not apply (SN 22:86)

Each level needs to be thoroughly understood with insight for one to be able to evaluate the subsequent level in depth and not just in a superficial manner. You might successfully apply the perception of inconstancy (*aniccasaññā*) on the experience of solidity of the body during an intensive meditation retreat, but because of not thoroughly investigating and understanding the prerequisite levels, this "insight" may be fleeting, and might not make a significant impact in your life afterwards.

This is one of the main issues with meditation techniques that thrust practitioners to a supposed advanced level of meditation—paying attention to the elemental properties of the body, for instance—without the prior foundational insights into the insubstantiality of the physical world and the body. Such issues will be explored in more detail in the last chapter.

It should be noted that as a practitioner develops in the practice and attains deeper levels of understanding, he or she would not lose the ability to view experience in grosser terms. Instead, there is an awareness of the progressive levels of understanding, and that once knowledge at a certain level is mastered, further progress in the path requires investigation at a more subtle level.

On the other hand, just because a practitioner has some insight into experience at a certain level does not necessarily mean that he or she has achieved the attainment corresponding to that same level. For instance, you might temporarily consider the world to be the same as experience at the six sense bases, but still not have eradicated the fetters required to gain stream-entry and thus be designated a trainee (*sekha*).

Acknowledging that there are levels to the path does not mean that the more superficial levels are somehow not "true" compared to the deeper levels achieved later. All levels are plausible ways of viewing experience, with the deeper levels only accessible to those with more skill in the practice and subtler awareness of the causes of stress and suffering (*dukkha*).

Understanding this clarifies why the traditional idea of conventional and ultimate realities is inconsistent with the early Buddhist texts. The motivation to make such a distinction comes from the desire to describe reality, but when it is accepted that there are progressive levels to insight, it becomes clear that the wise course is to further investigate experience instead. Each of the modes of viewing experience prior to attaining arahantship—from the level of the uninstructed worldling onwards—requires applying the teaching appropriate to reach the next stage. This means that being satisfied with some description of reality would be a hindrance to further progress, being akin to ignoring the Buddha's prescribed medication and merely imagining what it would be like to be cured of the disease of *dukkha* instead.

The importance of this point is made stark when considering two seemingly contradictory discourses. In one, questions of existence and non-existence are said to not occur to a practitioner if the world is viewed "*with right discernment,*" and in another, the Buddha states that he agrees with "*the wise*" in saying inconstant aggregates do exist.[17,18] How can these opposing claims be reconciled? It is through understanding that the insight unique to the Buddha—over and above others he deemed wise—is that such ontological questions are abandoned once the causal origination and passing away of phenomena are seen clearly. Without being aware of the progressive levels of the path, this supposed discrepancy can result in confusion, or the misguided view that the discourses are inconsistent in some way.

Path of Action

I teach a doctrine of [action], a doctrine of deeds, a doctrine of energy.[19]

Modern philosophers might characterize the Buddha's statement regarding the inconstancy of the aggregates as an adherence to the view—found in process philosophy—that all of reality is of the nature to change.[20] However, the Buddha does not subscribe to such a strict description of reality even when making metaphysical claims. This is because by definition, the ultimate goal of the path is not subject to change. You are only measured or classified by the aggregates if you stay obsessed with them, so by not holding to the view that reality is wholly composed of the aggregates, we keep the door open for our potential to reach a goal beyond the aggregates.[21]

Nevertheless, the terminology used in process metaphysics can inform how we translate certain Pāli terms. Usually, we identify enduring substances—"things"—in our experience first, with their nature to change acknowledged as an inherent property after the fact. Viewing experience as a conglomeration of processes reverses this premise, with phenomena—a term that has ephemeral connotations—being primary, and "things" being what we mentally construct out of them. Therefore the most appropriate translation for *dhamma* is "phenomena" and not "thing"—as it is sometimes rendered.[22]

The aggregates, although lacking any inherent substance, are nevertheless what our experience is constituted of.[23] Paradoxically, however, to reach Nirvana—the end of action—we must still use these same aggregates as raw material to actively

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[17] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 12:15*, p. 110
[18] Ibid. SN 22:94, p. 323-4
[19] Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya*, AN 3:137, p. 364
[20] Noa Ronkin. *Early Buddhist Metaphysics: The Making of a Philosophical Tradition*, 2005, p. 72
[21] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 22:36*, p. 209
[22] Sujato Bhikkhu. *Aṅguttaranikāya: Numerical Discourses*, AN 3:136
[23] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 22:79*, p. 282

construct the path.[24] The more skilled and further along the path we are, the more sensitive to actions at the phenomenological level—the level of experience—we will be.

Recognizing the insubstantiality of experience (*aniccā*) and that skillful action (*kusala kamma*) is necessary to progress in the path is important to keep in mind when interpreting the discourses. To translate terms used to describe the experiential level accurately, we must first understand that the Buddha is focused on elucidating the path instead of describing ultimate reality.

However, this tends not to be the case in modern translations and thus is a glaring issue. The main reason for this is that most who come to Buddhism are seeking answers to questions that the Buddha actively put aside. Examples include questions on what exists and what does not, and what is real and what is illusory. By this, we lose sight of the fact that the Buddha only taught what was "*connected with the goal.*"[25]

Take for example *bhava*—commonly translated as "existence" or a similar variant.[26,27] This is influenced by the traditional interpretation of its position in the dependent co-arising formula, where it is related to one's future life. Informed by this static view of the causal process, *bhava* is translated as existence, instead of a word that gives a more active connotation like "becoming."[28] Using "existence" immediately creates a conflict in that the actual Pāli term that means existence is *atthitañca*, and so two distinct terms with different meanings are translated as the same word. This is due to a lack of appreciation for the active nature of the path.[29,30]

The inadequacy of using "existence" as the translation for *bhava* is made even more apparent when translations of its verb form—*bhavanti*—are evaluated. Since the context of its use in the texts makes it nonsensical to render it as "exist," those same translators revert to using "become" instead, introducing an inconsistency that results in an unnecessary convolution.[31,32]

The influence of the questions that the translator brings to the practice is further exemplified in how the common stock phrase *yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassanā* is rendered. By misconstruing the path—focusing on what arises and passes away in your experience—for the supposed goal: seeing things in accordance with reality, the phrase is translated as "knowledge and vision as it really is." This ignores how *bhūta* is actually the past participle of *bhavati*, making "knowledge and vision as it has come to be" the more accurate rendition. Instead of a claim about what is real, the phrase is about seeing what occurred in experience with clarity.

[24] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 44*, pp. 327
[25] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 56:31*, p. 644
[26] Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 12:2*, p. 535
[27] Sujato Bhikkhu. *Saṃyuttanikāya: Linked Discourses*, SN 12:2
[28] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 12:2*, p. 121
[29] Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 12:15*, p. 544
[30] Sujato Bhikkhu. *Saṃyuttanikāya: Linked Discourses*, SN 12:15
[31] Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 3:1*, p. 165-6
[32] Sujato Bhikkhu. *Saṃyuttanikāya: Linked Discourses*, SN 3:1

Pāli term	As reality (substance)	As an experience or action (process)
dhamma	Thing	Phenomenon
bhava	Existence	Becoming
yathā bhūta	As it really is	As it has come to be
dhātu	Element	Property
saṅkhāra	Formation	Fabrication

By perceiving experience phenomenologically, dependent co-arising (*paticcasamuppāda*) can be understood with insight. The knowledge gained is on the nature of action itself, and how our intentions construct our experience of the world. Dependent co-arising is such a difficult teaching to understand partly because of this, since it is essential that you are familiar with experience at the phenomenological level for investigation to lead to insight.

This is done by applying the noble truths to evaluate our experience and actions, focusing on the question of *dukkha*, how it comes about, and how it can be eradicated. By developing skill in our actions, we can observe the cause-and-effect relationship between mental phenomena and how they shape our experience. Increasing our sensitivity to this process leads us to the end of action itself.

Understanding Not-Self

Anattā as a Practice instead of a Position

Anattā, one of the core concepts of Buddhism, is commonly understood to mean that what we consider the self does not actually exist. Our lack of understanding of this is supposedly the root of our delusion.

I attempt here to explain why this is a misinterpretation of what the Buddha meant using the discourses from the early Pāli Canon as my primary source. I show the practical nature of the not-self teaching, its subtleties, and the dangers of holding on to a metaphysical position of the non-existence of a self.

The View of No-Self

If you were to pick up an introductory book on Buddhism, you would most likely read about a central teaching common to all the different traditions called *anattā*—a Pāli term usually translated as no-self or selflessness. In brief, *anattā* supposedly means that what we consider to be the self—or the soul—does not actually exist. Walpola Rahula, one of the preeminent scholar monks of the 20th century, puts this front and center in his popular book *What the Buddha Taught*: *"Buddhism stands unique in the history of human thought in denying the existence of such a Soul, Self or Ātman."*[33]

Considering the widespread acceptance of this understanding of *anattā*, it seems fair to accept it at face value as a quintessential Buddhist teaching. In the interest of being thorough, however, let us dig deeper to find the roots of this interpretation. Walpola Rahula Thera hints at his source with this quote:

> *Mere suffering exists, but no sufferer is found;*
> *The deeds are, but no doer is found.*[34]

This is from the *Visuddhimagga*, a famous meditation manual from the 5th century.[35] It is a text traditionally understood to be written by Buddhaghosa Thera—a scholar monk who, more than anyone else, is responsible for establishing what is considered orthodox Theravāda Buddhism today. The quote above can be found in seminal texts like Ñāṇatiloka Thera's *Word of the Buddha*[36] and even more recent books like Ajahn Brahm's *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*.[37]

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[33] Walpola Rahula. *What the Buddha Taught*, p. 51
[34] Ibid. p. 26
[35] Bhandantācariya Buddhaghosa. *The Path of Purification—Translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli*, Chapter XVI, p. 529
[36] Ñāṇatiloka Thera. *Word of the Buddha*, p. 40
[37] Ajahn Brahm. *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond: A Meditator's Handbook*, p. 218

A similar claim is made in the post-canonical text *Milindapañha*, where an exchange between the Bactrian king Menander—who lived around 160 BCE—and the monk Nāgasena is recorded:

Even so is it for me, lord, because of … form, feeling, perception, [fabrication] and consciousness that 'Nāgasena' exists as a denotation, appellation, designation, as a convention, merely as a name. But on the ultimate level, there is no person here.[38]

Here Nāgasena does not explicitly state that there is no self, but his distinction of levels eventually led to the traditional teaching of two levels of truth: conventional (*sammuti*) and ultimate (*paramattha*). Adherents of this distinction—which is incidentally nowhere to be found in the early texts—claim that when the Buddha is talking about a self, he is talking in a conventional way. On the ultimate level, no self exists.

What do the *Visuddhimagga* and *Milindapañha* use as their source? Both texts quote a passage from the Pāli Canon as validation:[39]

What? Do you assume a 'being,' Māra?
Do you take a position?
This is purely a pile of fabrications.
    Here no being
    can be pinned down.

Just as when, with an assemblage of parts,
there's the word,
    chariot,
even so when aggregates are present,
there's the convention of
    a being.[40]

On a cursory glance, it might seem that the nun Vajirā here agrees with the no-self view when she claims that there is no "being" (*satta* in Pāli.) This is a misinterpretation, however, since *being* is defined elsewhere in the Canon as one who has craving for the aggregates (*khandha*—form, feeling, perception, fabrications, consciousness):

"To what extent is one said to be 'a being'?"
"Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for form, Rādha: when one is caught up there, tied up there, one is said to be 'a being.'
Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for feeling… perception… fabrications…

[38] I.B. Horner. *Milinda's Questions (Milindapañha)—Vol. 1*, pp. 37–8
[39] Bhandantācariya Buddhaghosa. *The Path of Purification—Translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli*, Chapter XVIII, p. 612
[40] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Samyutta Nikāya, SN 5:10*, p. 67

Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for consciousness, Rādha: when one is caught up there, tied up there, one is said to be 'a being.'"[41]

This shows that Vajirā is claiming arahantship with her statement, because *being* is only applicable in conventional terms once all craving is abandoned. However, the Theravāda tradition conflated this *being* with the self and eventually adopted the position that what we call the self is a mere convention, with it not existing in the ultimate sense. This is exemplified by one of the chants (*yathā paccayaṁ pavatthamānaṁ...*) popular in Therāvada monasteries to this day, in which the "person" is claimed to be *nissatto*—not a being. Here reciters are effectively claiming arahantship, even though the actual sentiment is that disavowing *being* is equivalent to letting go of self-identity.

Logical inference is used to support this position, with the proposition that what we consider the self is merely an amalgamation of aggregates. Since the aggregates are inconstant (*anicca*), it follows that the self in reality does not exist. This idea that the non-existence of the self is a natural conclusion that can be drawn from the impermanence of the aggregates originates from the common belief that the Buddha defined the self as the permanent and unchanging essence of a person's identity. This is thought to have been the prevailing view of his time—found in the Upanishads—and he is said to have primarily formulated the teaching of not-self as a response.

The Upanishads themselves (for example, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, *Chāndogya*, and *Maitrī*) are inconsistent, however, with statements positing the self to be permanent and unchanging as well as claims that it is possessed of form and finite—and thus impermanent.[42] In the Pāli Canon, the Buddha refutes all such self-views, without involving himself with questions of self-existence:

> *To what extent, Ānanda, does one not delineate when not delineating a self? ... one does not delineate that 'My self is possessed of form and finite.' Or, ... 'My self is possessed of form and infinite.' ... 'My self is formless and finite.' ... 'My self is formless and infinite.'*[43]

Stepping back from this in-depth investigation into the roots of the no-self view, it seems wise to evaluate the Canon broadly as a whole. In keeping with the Great Standards discussed in the previous chapter, it is appropriate to consider what most discourses related to not-self propound as the Buddha's own sentiment. If the non-existence of the self is a central teaching, we can expect a vast number of discourses stating this unequivocally.

But there is no such majority. In truth, there is not even a single discourse that explicitly makes this claim—quite shocking considering the vastness of the

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[41] Ibid. SN 23:2, p. 282-3
[42] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *First Things First: Essays on the Buddhist Path*, p. 85
[43] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 1: An Anthology from the Dīgha Nikāya, DN 15*, p. 155

literature. If this teaching is as central as is suggested in the popular books, shouldn't the earliest sources give corroborating evidence?

When we dig into the actual references to not-self in the discourses, what we find is that the vast majority (98%+) recommend *perceiving* the aggregates, sense bases, properties, phenomena, or views as not-self.[44] *Anattā* is taught as a practice to do in relation to them, instead of as the answer to an ontological question. The few discourses that do not explicitly state this are nevertheless in line with this practical interpretation.

Not-Self as a Practice

It is enlightening to contrast the traditional interpretation of the aggregates and self with how the Buddha actually recommends regarding the aggregates. In the following example, a monk confuses the not-self teaching to mean that there is no self—by assuming the aggregates to be what he is and thus veering towards annihilationism. To resolve this misunderstanding, the Buddha focuses on an oft-repeated sequence of evaluation, where he guides the monk to question in such a way as to show how defining the aggregates as "what I am" is unworthy:

> *Now at that moment this line of thinking appeared in the awareness of a certain monk: "So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?"*
>
> *Then the Blessed One, realizing with his awareness the line of thinking in that monk's awareness, addressed the monks ...*
> *"What do you think—Is form constant or inconstant?"—"Inconstant, lord."—"And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?"—"Stressful, lord."—"And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am?'"*
> *"No, lord."*
> *"... Is feeling ... Is perception ... Are fabrications ... Is consciousness ..."[45]*

This is how the not-self teaching has practical application in the path—as a perception (*saññā*) to be used strategically instead of a metaphysical view of the existence or non-existence of the self. The purpose is to alleviate your suffering and stress (*dukkha*) through discerning how the aggregates are unfitting to take up as your own.

Elsewhere, the Buddha advises against measuring yourself in terms of the aggregates because it leads to classifying yourself—thus limiting your potential:

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[44] For an analysis of not-self-related references in the Pāli Canon, check the Appendix, *Self and Not-self References in the Pāli Canon*

[45] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 109*, pp. 488–9

If one stays obsessed with form, lord, that's what one is measured by. Whatever one is measured by, that's how one is classified.
If one stays obsessed with feeling … perception … fabrications … consciousness …

But if one doesn't stay obsessed with form, lord, that's not what one is measured by. Whatever one isn't measured by, that's not how one is classified.
If one doesn't stay obsessed with feeling … perception … fabrications … consciousness …[46]

For those who are yet to reach full awakening, the propensity to fabricate a self around their experience is still present, and so it is imperative to understand how views dependently co-arise (*paticcasamuppannaṃ*) and are inconstant (*aniccā*). The task then is to use appropriate attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) to regard what arises as stressful and unworthy of taking as who you are or what you have. This is best exemplified in the example of Anāthapiṇḍika, a lay disciple of the Buddha, conversing with a group of wanderers:

When this had been said, the wanderers said to Anāthapiṇḍika the householder, "We have each & every one expounded to you in line with our own positions. Now tell us what views you have."

"Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress[ful]. Whatever is stress[ful] is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. This is the sort of view I have."

"So, householder, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress[ful]. You thus adhere to that very stress, submit yourself to that very stress."

"Venerable sirs, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. Having seen this well with right discernment as it has come to be, I also discern the higher escape from it as it has come to be."[47]

It is even more revealing to contrast the aforementioned popular verse from the *Visuddhimagga* with what is considered the Buddha's first utterances after his awakening:

Through the round of many births I roamed
*   without reward,*
*   without rest,*
seeking the house-builder.
*   Painful is birth*

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[46] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 22:36*, p. 209
[47] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10:93*, p. 503

again & again.

House-builder, you're seen!
You will not build a house again.
All your rafters broken,
the ridge pole destroyed,
gone to the Unformed, the mind
has come to the end of craving.[48]

His metaphorical use of the term 'house-builder' shows that the practice is geared towards undermining our tendency to build a "house"—a self—around our experience. This process is called 'I-making' and 'my-making' (*ahaṇkāra mamaṇkāra*) in the discourses and is only completely relinquished on reaching full awakening—arahantship. This is a crucial point that has been lost over time by the tradition in its zeal to avoid taking on a self-view.

Letting go of what has been brought into being is how the teaching of not-self is put into practical use.[49] The perception of not-self (*anattasaññā*) eventually unravels the entire process of self-making, culminating in full awakening:

When a monk's awareness often remains steeped in the perception of not-self in what is stressful, his heart is devoid of I-making & my-making with regard to this conscious body and externally with regard to all themes, has transcended pride, is at peace, and is well-released.[50]

In seeing six rewards, it's enough motivation for a monk to establish the perception of not-self with regard to all phenomena without exception. Which six? 'I won't be fashioned in connection with any world. My I-making will be stopped. My my-making will be stopped. I'll be endowed with uncommon knowledge. I'll become one who rightly sees cause, along with causally-originated phenomena.'[51]

Self-Identification View

In the only place in the Canon where the Buddha is directly asked of the existence or non-existence of the self, he remains silent and refuses to answer the question:

As he was sitting there he asked the Blessed One [the Buddha]: "Now then, Venerable Gotama, is there a self?"
When this was said, the Blessed One was silent.

"Then is there no self?"

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[48] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Dhammapada: A Translation, Dhp 153–4*, p. 53
[49] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Itivuttaka: This was said by the Buddha, It 49*, p. 37
[50] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 7:46*, p. 342
[51] Ibid. AN 6:104, pp. 326–7

A second time, the Blessed One was silent.[52]

When asked by his attendant Ānanda afterwards as to the reasons behind his silence, the Buddha describes the dual views of eternalism (*sassatavāda*) and annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*) as the ideological traps that result in taking a position:

If I—being asked ... if there is a self—were to answer that there is a self, that would be conforming with those ... who are exponents of eternalism [the view that there is an eternal, unchanging soul]. If I—being asked ... if there is no self—were to answer that there is no self, that would be conforming with those ... who are exponents of annihilationism [the view that death is the annihilation of consciousness].[53]

It is important to note here that the Buddha is answering Ānanda's specific question, while still not giving a categorical answer to the question of self-existence. To understand the reasons behind his silence, we must consider how he answered questions, and why he considered some questions unworthy of an answer:

There are these four ways of answering questions. Which four? There are questions that should be answered categorically [straightforwardly yes, no, this, that]. There are questions that should be answered with an analytical answer [defining or redefining the terms]. There are questions that should be answered with a counter-question. There are questions that should be put aside.[54]

From this, the traditional interpretation that the self does not exist because the aggregates are inconstant can be understood as an attempt to give an analytical answer to a question that the Buddha put aside. Why did the Buddha put that question aside? Because those questions lead to suffering and stress (*dukkha*). Views such as "I have a self" or "I have no self" arise from inappropriate attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*):

This is how he attends inappropriately: 'Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what was I in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I be in the future?' Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the immediate present: 'Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where is it bound?'

As he attends inappropriately in this way, one of six kinds of view arises in him: The view 'I have a self' arises in him as true & established, or the view 'I have no self' ... This is called a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. Bound by a fetter of views, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person is not freed from birth, aging, & death,

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[52] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 44:10*, p. 412
[53] Ibid. SN 44:10, p. 412
[54] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 4:42*, p. 131

from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. He is not freed, I tell you, from suffering & stress.

...

He attends appropriately, 'This is stress' ... 'This is the origination of stress' ... 'This is the cessation of stress' ... 'This is the way leading to the cessation of stress'. As he attends appropriately in this way, three fetters are abandoned in him: self-identification view, doubt, and grasping at habits & practices.[55]

Instead of getting mired in a 'thicket of views' (*diṭṭhigahana*) of self, no self, or their variations—the recommendation is to consider that which arises as stress (*dukkha*), and its passing away as the cessation of stress.[56] From this, it is clear that the Buddha's advice was to put the question of self-existence aside. Instead, by not assuming a self around your experience, self-identification view (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*) does not come about:

"Lord, how does self-identification view no longer come about?"

"There is the case, monk, where a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones ... doesn't assume form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form. He doesn't assume feeling to be the self ... doesn't assume perception to be the self ... doesn't assume fabrications to be the self ... He doesn't assume consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness."[57]

In practical terms, this is borne out in how you should evaluate your experience. The Buddha describes the thought process of the annihilationist no-self view explicitly (*"I will not be"*),[58] which contrasts with the advised method of evaluation (*"It will not be... What is, what has come to be, that I abandon."*)[59]—albeit subtly at first glance. On closer comparison, it is possible to discern an underlying assumption of a self in the annihilationist way of evaluation (*"I will not be"*). The practitioner with right view practices to let go of what has arisen without an adherence to such an identity view.

Some might consider the idea of two levels of truth as merely a roundabout way of stating that at the ultimate level, an arahant has let go of the fetter of conceit (*māna*), and so stopped fabricating a self around his or her experience. Therefore, saying that there is no self at the ultimate level, although being an unfortunate and technically incorrect way of expression, might be argued as not falling into wrong view (*miccā diṭṭhi*). The popular interpretation is clearly different from this perspective, however, where nothing short of right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*) is understood in terms of the metaphysical position that there is no self. This contrasts with the

[55] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 2*, p. 15

[56] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 12:15*, p. 149

[57] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 109*, p. 487

[58] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 22:81*, p. 239

[59] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 106*, p. 476

actual goal of the path—release from all suffering. In other words, this mistakes the path for the goal: believing that if you were to merely see things as they are—view all things as lacking a self—you would be awakened.

This is an attempt to clone awakening (or more accurately, your idea of how the awakened mind sees things) by forcing the mind to believe your interpretation of the result of stream entry rather than focusing on its causes: applying the four noble truths and fulfilling their duties. Unsurprisingly, this latter focus on comprehending suffering, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path aligns with the actual canonical definition of right view.

The Role of Conceit

One of the repercussions of this misinterpretation of *anattā* is the conclusion that it is equivalent to selflessness—the idea that putting others above yourself is admirable and a sign of spiritual maturity. For Westerners, there is an undoubted Christian influence for this idea, with selflessness considered an ideal to strive for. While qualities such as generosity (*dāna*) and compassion (*karunā*) are encouraged in Buddhist practice as stepping-stones to deeper practice, they are developed for one's own benefit, even with the acknowledged benefits to others. This is illustrated by howe the Buddha recommends one should regard being generous:

> *Having given this, not seeking his own profit, not with a mind attached (to the reward), not seeking to store up for himself, nor (with the thought), 'I'll enjoy this after death,'*
> *—nor with the thought, 'Giving is good,'*
> *—nor with the thought, 'This was given in the past, done in the past, by my father & grandfather. It would not be right for me to let this old family custom be discontinued,'*
> *—nor with the thought, 'I am well-off. These are not well-off. It would not be right for me, being well-off, not to give a gift to those who are not well-off,'*
> *—nor with the thought, 'Just as there were the great sacrifices of the sages of the past, … in the same way this will be my distribution of gifts,'*
> *—nor with the thought, 'When this gift of mine is given, it makes the mind serene. Gratification & joy arise,'*
> *—but with the thought, 'This is an ornament for the mind, a support for the mind'.*[60]

This prioritization of the development of your own mind is even more explicitly laid out elsewhere:

> *Just as a firebrand from a funeral pyre—burning at both ends, covered with excrement in the middle—is used as fuel neither in a village nor in the wilderness: I tell you that this is a simile for the individual who practices neither for his/her own benefit nor for that of others. The individual*

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[60] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 7:49*, pp. 347–8

who practices for the benefit of others but not for his/her own is the higher & more refined of these two. The individual who practices for his/her own benefit but not for that of others is the highest & most refined of these three. The individual who practices for his/her own benefit and for that of others is, of these four, the foremost, the chief, the most outstanding, the highest, & supreme.[61]

This is in stark contrast to what would be considered selflessness. How should we understand this seeming selfishness? It is through understanding that the Buddhist path is one where each individual is tasked with developing his or her own mind, with an acknowledgment of the limited time available, considering the ever-approaching calamities of aging, illness, and death. In this context, focusing on assisting others over yourself is akin to attempting to save a drowning person while being claimed by the flood yourself. It is better for both parties if you reach steady ground first.

The perception of not-self should similarly be regarded in terms of developing your mind. It is used as a value judgment along the path—applied to relinquish your grosser attachments by trading for the more subtle, with increasingly subtle applications the further along the path you are. This explains why the Buddha uses self-terminology in positive terms in many instances in the Canon to encourage qualities such as independence, self-worth, and personal responsibility:

Your own self is your own mainstay,
for who else could your mainstay be?
With you yourself well-trained,
you obtain the mainstay hard to obtain.[62]

And what is the self as a governing principle? There is the case where a monk, having gone to a wilderness, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, reflects on this: 'It is not for the sake of robes … almsfood … lodgings, or for the sake of this or that state of [future] becoming that I have gone forth from the home life into homelessness. Simply that I am beset by birth, aging, & death; by … stress … [and I hope,] "Perhaps the end of this entire mass of suffering & stress might be known!" Now, if I were to seek the same sort of sensual pleasures that I abandoned in going forth from home into homelessness—or a worse sort—that would not be fitting for me.' So he reflects on this: 'My persistence will be aroused & not lax; my mindfulness established & not confused; my body calm & not aroused; my mind centered & unified.' Having made himself his governing principle, he abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is unblameworthy, and looks after himself in a pure way.[63]

Relying on conceit (*māna*) to motivate yourself with the acknowledgement that it is to be abandoned eventually is explicitly sanctioned—showing the strategic and gradual nature of the path:

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[61] Ibid. AN 4:95, p. 147
[62] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Dhammapada: A Translation, Dhp 160*, pp. 55–6
[63] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 3:40*, pp. 38–9

The thought occurs to him, 'The monk named such-and-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered & remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having known & realized them for himself in the here & now. Then why not me?' Then, at a later time, he abandons conceit, having relied on conceit. 'This body comes into being through conceit. And yet it is by relying on conceit that conceit is to be abandoned.'[64]

These examples show that the Buddha considered the act of fabricating a self around experience as having practical usage in the path. This being the case, the traditional doctrine that the self does not exist makes practitioners who do not claim mere conventional usage out to be liars, since they would be using a beneficial fiction when using self-terminology. In truth, the Buddha never makes a distinction between two types of self, with his focus always on the sense of self—which is used in the path in subtler forms before being abandoned completely at arahantship.

This clarifies why even for a non-returner (*anāgāmi*—the third stage of awakening), a lingering conceit of 'I am' is present, even though such an individual would not assume any of the aggregates to be who he or she is:

In the same way, friends, it's not that I say 'I am form,' nor do I say 'I am other than form.' It's not that I say, 'I am feeling ... perception ... fabrications ... consciousness,' nor do I say, 'I am something other than consciousness.' With regard to these five clinging-aggregates, 'I am' has not been overcome, although I don't assume that 'I am this.'

Friends, even though a noble disciple has abandoned the five lower fetters [non-return], he still has with regard to the five clinging-aggregates a lingering residual 'I am' conceit, an 'I am' desire, an 'I am' obsession. But at a later time he keeps focusing on the phenomena of arising & passing away with regard to the five clinging-aggregates: 'Such is form, such its origin, such its disappearance. Such is feeling ... Such is perception ... Such are fabrications ... Such is consciousness, such its origin, such its disappearance.' As he keeps focusing on the arising & passing away of these five clinging-aggregates, the lingering residual 'I am' conceit, 'I am' desire, 'I am' obsession is fully obliterated.[65]

As a practitioner develops further in the path, he or she becomes experientially aware of even the subtle stress associated with the process of self-making, and how its abandoning would result in peace. This is what opens the door to the end of the path where the obsession with conceit (*mānānusaya*) is eradicated, and even the thought "I am" ceases to occur:

Now, Ven. Upasena's I-making, my-making, & obsession with conceit had already been well rooted out for a long time, which is why the thought did not occur to him that "I am the eye" or "The eye is mine," ... "I am the intellect" or "The intellect is mine."[66]

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[64] Ibid. AN 4:159, p. 166
[65] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, SN 22:89, pp. 258–9
[66] Ibid. SN 35:69, p. 296

People are intent on the idea of
        'I-making'
and attached to the idea of
        'other-making.'
Some don't realize this,
nor do they see it as an arrow.
But to one who,
having extracted this arrow,   sees,
(the thought) 'I am doing,' doesn't occur;
'Another is doing' doesn't occur.

This human race is possessed by conceit,
               bound by conceit,
               tied down by conceit.
Speaking hurtfully because of their views
they don't go beyond the wandering-on.[67]

In this way, it is important to keep in mind that the purpose of the path is the eradication of all suffering as opposed to merely seeing things as inconstant, stressful, and not-self. Not-self is a tool to be used, when appropriate, until it has done its work. The goal is to achieve release, and to do so you must eventually let go—not just of craving—but even right view, and the path itself. Until then, while walking along the path, confusing the goal with the path can be a huge obstacle.

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[67] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Udāna: Exclamations, Ud 6:6*, p. 111

Decoding Dependent Co-arising

A Pragmatic Approach through the three Ways of Vision

Deep is this dependent co-arising, and deep its appearance. It's because of not understanding & not penetrating this Dhamma that this generation is like a tangled skein, a knotted ball of string, like matted rushes & reeds, and does not go beyond the cycle of the planes of deprivation, woe, & bad destinations.[68]

Dependent co-arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), or dependent origination as it is more popularly known, is arguably the most complex concept found in the Pāli Canon. Scholars and practitioners have proposed various interpretations in their attempts at understanding its intricacies. These include the traditional, three-lifetime interpretation expounded by Buddhaghosa Thera in the *Visuddhimagga*,[69] and more contemporary ideas by commentators like Ñāṇavīra Thera,[70] Kaṭukurunde Ñāṇananda Thera,[71] and Ajahn Ṭhānissaro.[72]

All the existing interpretations point to the discourses as evidence, but—as I will explain—fail to reconcile the many variations of dependent co-arising renditions found in the Canon. They also mainly focus on understanding dependent co-arising from a theoretical standpoint, and lack a clear and pragmatic framework that practitioners can apply to their meditation to penetrate it in the here-and-now (*sandiṭṭhika*).

Ignorance is the first factor in a majority of instances where the dependent co-arising formula is found in the Pāli Canon. However, there are a considerable number of instances where it starts with the six sense bases or name-and-form as well.[73] Therefore, a framework of dependent co-arising based on the Pāli Canon must give a satisfactory explanation for the variant ways it is defined. None of the existing popular interpretations do so.

It is with this in mind that I propose a framework that gives a coherent explanation for the different versions of dependent co-arising and provides a clear path of practice derived from that. This framework, which I call the three "ways of vision," demonstrates how dependent co-arising is far from some obscure concept in Buddhist theory, but is in fact central to the strategies we need to develop to see the Dhamma.

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[68] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 1: An Anthology from the Dīgha Nikāya, DN 15*, p. 148

[69] Bhandantācariya Buddhaghosa. *The Path of Purification—Translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli*, Chapter XVII, pp. 600–1

[70] Ñāṇavīra Thera. *Notes on Dhamma, A Note on Paticcasamuppāda*, 1960-1965, pp. 13-38

[71] Kaṭukurunde Ñāṇananda Thera. *The Law of Dependent Arising: The Secret of Bondage and Release*, p. 11

[72] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *The Shape of Suffering: A Study of Dependent Co-arising*, pp. 15-73

[73] For an analysis of dependent co-arising-related references in the Pāli Canon, check the *Appendix, Dependent Co-arising References in the Pāli Canon*

These three ways of vision—as a framework for understanding how dependent co-arising connects to our practice—are principally derived from the Riddle-Tree discourse (*kiṃsuka sutta*) in the Saṃyutta Nikāya. In it, a monk asks his peers how one's vision is purified, and each monk gives him a different reply:

> *A certain monk went to another monk and, on arrival, said to him, "To what extent, my friend, is a monk's vision said to be well-purified?"*
> *"When a monk discerns, as it has come to be, the origination & passing away of the six media of sensory contact … "*
>
> *The first monk, dissatisfied with the... answer to his question, went to still another monk and, on arrival, said to him, "To what extent, my friend, is a monk's vision said to be well-purified?"*
> *"When a monk discerns, as it has come to be, the origination & passing away of the five clinging-aggregates … "*
>
> *The first monk, dissatisfied …*
> *"When a monk discerns, as it has come to be, the origination & passing away of the four great elements [earth, water, wind, & fire] … "*[74]

The inquiring monk, confused by the different replies, goes to see the Buddha. The Buddha uses the simile of the riddle tree—a tree that can be described differently at various times due to seasonal changes—to illustrate how each monk talked of different means for purifying one's vision which were all valid.

It is these three themes: discerning the origination and passing away of the six media of sensory contact (*phassāyatana*, or *saḷāyatana*), the five clinging-aggregates (*upādānakkhandha*, or *khandha*), and the four great elements or properties (*mahābhuta*, or *dhātu*), that I refer to as the three ways of vision. This differentiation of methods is also found elsewhere in the Canon,[75] with each presented as a separate mode of investigation.[76]

As for what it means to purify one's vision, the Buddha equated[77] that with seeing the Dhamma and the attainment of stream-entry (*sotāpanna*)—the first stage of spiritual awakening. Elsewhere, it is said that *"whoever sees dependent co-arising sees the Dhamma; whoever sees the Dhamma sees dependent co-arising."*[78] Therefore, the three ways of vision can be thought of not only as three methods to attain stream-entry, but also as three frameworks to understand dependent co-arising.

As we will see, the ways of vision have an even deeper relationship to dependent co-arising. We will find evidence that every practitioner has a specific method that is most appropriate to them based on the comparative strength of their *samatha*

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[74] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Samyutta Nikāya, SN 35:204*, p. 340
[75] Ibid. SN 22:57, p. 225
[76] The way of the aggregates corresponds to the mode of investigation in terms of dependent co-arising in SN 22:57, since the discourse is given within the context of the aggregates, as well as being part of the aggregates collection (*khandha saṃyutta*).
[77] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *The Shape of Suffering: A Study of Dependent Co-arising, SN 12:27*, p. 17
[78] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 28*, p. 168

(tranquility) and *vipassanā* (insight) skills. But before we do this, we will first delve deeper into the various links of the dependent co-arising process and the centrality of one in particular: contact.

The Centrality of Contact

All phenomena (*dhamma*) are said to originate through contact (*phassa*),[79] and so it makes sense to focus on it when trying to discern the origination and passing away of the sense bases, the aggregates, or the properties. The centrality of contact is also evident when considering how it is the prerequisite for feeling (*vedanā*), intention (*cetanā*), and perception (*saññā*), with consciousness (*viññāna*) being conjoined with the others:

> Contacted, one feels. Contacted, one intends. Contacted, one perceives.[80]

> Feeling, perception, & consciousness are conjoined... For what one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one cognizes.[81]

It follows that the presence of any of the above phenomena means that the others are also present, and the absence of one means the others are not present as well. This is the principle called "this/that conditionality" (*iddapaccayatā* in Pāli, "*When this is, that is... when this isn't, that isn't.*"), which is how dependent co-arising functions.[82] The centrality of contact is further supported by how it underlies the origination of all the aggregates:

> From the origination of nutriment comes the origination of form ...
> ... From the origination of contact comes the origination of feeling ...
> ... From the origination of contact comes the origination of perception ...
> ... From the origination of contact comes the origination of fabrications ...
> ... From the origination of name-&-form comes the origination of consciousness.[83]

Contact is a nutriment that form depends on,[84] and name—defined below—also includes contact. This shows why we must pay attention (*manasikāra*) to the point of contact to understand dependent co-arising, and why phenomena "*come into play through attention.*"[85]

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[79] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10:58*, pp. 479–80
[80] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 35:93*, pp. 307–8
[81] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 43*, p. 317
[82] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Udāna: Exclamations, Ud 1:3*, pp. 33-4
[83] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 22:56*, pp. 220–1
[84] Ibid. SN 12:64, p. 145
[85] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10:58*, pp. 479–80
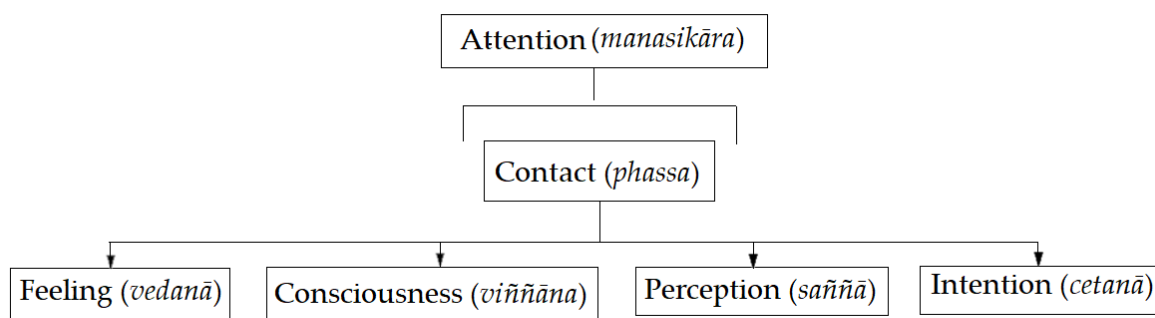
Now we will look at the typical formulation of dependent co-arising, including the definitions given for name-&-form (*nāmarūpa*), consciousness, fabrications (*saṅkhārā*), and ignorance (*avijjā*):

From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications. From fabrications … comes consciousness. From consciousness … comes name-&-form. From name-&-form … come the six sense media. From the six sense media … comes contact. From contact … comes feeling. From feeling … comes craving. From craving … comes birth. … then aging & death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering.

…

And which name-&-form? Feeling, perception, intention, contact, & attention: This is called name. The four great elements, and the form dependent on the four great elements: This is called form. This name & this form are called name-&-form.

And which consciousness? These six are classes of consciousness: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, intellect-consciousness. This is called consciousness.

And which fabrications? These three are fabrications: bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications, mental fabrications. These are called fabrications.

And which ignorance? Not knowing stress, not knowing the origination of stress, not knowing the cessation of stress, not knowing the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: This is called ignorance.[86]

The constituents of bodily, verbal, and mental fabrications are mentioned elsewhere:

"But what are bodily fabrications? What are verbal fabrications? What are mental fabrications?"
"In-&-out breaths are bodily fabrications. Directed thought & evaluation are verbal fabrications. Perceptions & feelings are mental fabrications."[87]

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[86] Ibid. SN 12:2, pp. 101–2
[87] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 44*, p. 267
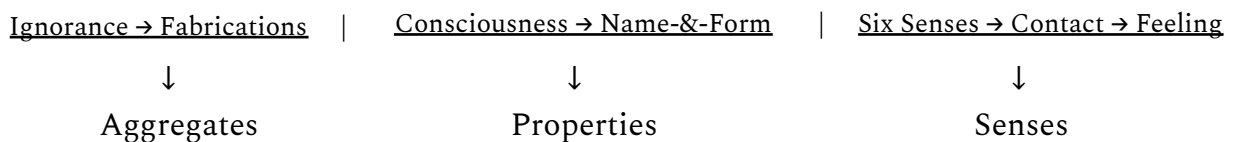
Feeling precedes craving (*tanhā*) and follows contact in the formula, but also appears within name-&-form as well as fabrications (as a mental fabrication). Attention, which is a constituent of name, is also connected to ignorance. This is because ignorance is effectively the same as inappropriate attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*)—the opposite of attending to experience appropriately ("*He attends appropriately, This is stress … the origination of stress … the cessation of stress … the way leading to the cessation of stress.*")[88]

It is also interesting to consider the etymological roots of the Pāli term for appropriate attention. '*Yoni*' means the place of origin or birth.[89] *Yoniso manasikāra* would then literally mean 'attention at the place of origin.' This would be attention at the point of contact itself—where all phenomena originate.

These are crucial points to remember since there are multiple cases in the dependent co-arising formula where one or more phenomena are missing while others are explicitly mentioned. In those cases, the missing factors must therefore be implicit. This is because as we have seen, certain phenomena arise simultaneously. Therefore, consciousness, contact, and intention are implicit at the fabrications factor, and attention, consciousness, intention, and perception are implicit between the contact and feeling factors.

By recognizing the three locations where contact is effectively present in dependent co-arising, we can identify three distinct "ways of vision." Contact under name-&-form would correspond to the "way of the properties," since name-&-form is the only link in the formula where the properties (*dhātu*) are explicitly mentioned. Similarly, contact adjacent to the six sense media corresponds to the "way of the senses." Lastly, as will be explained later, fabrications include each of the aggregates, and so corresponds to the "way of the aggregates."

This correspondence between the ways of vision and specific locations in dependent co-arising is significant because it clarifies the practical process to break free from it. This is done by separating the factors in the process prior to the craving factor into the three aforementioned ways of evaluating experience:

Ignorance → Fabrications		Consciousness → Name-&-Form		Six Senses → Contact → Feeling
↓		↓		↓
Aggregates		Properties		Senses

In other words, to eradicate craving and unravel the process of dependent co-arising, there are three different options. These are:

The way of the aggregates (*khandha*), which could be listed as:
Ignorance → fabrications → consciousness → … → craving → … → suffering.

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[88] Ibid. MN 2, p. 16
[89] Kaṭukurunde Ñāṇananda Thera. *The Miracle of Contact*. 2016, p. 8

The way of the properties (*dhātu*), or:
Consciousness ↔ name-&-form → craving → ... → suffering.

And the way of the senses (*saḷāyatana*):
Six sense media → contact → feeling → craving → ... → suffering.

Each way of vision explicitly or implicitly includes attention, consciousness, contact, feeling, perception, and intention. Now we will dig deeper into each in more detail, using sources from the Canon for support.

The Way of the Senses: *Samatha* & *Vipassanā* In Tandem

The traditional interpretation of dependent co-arising separates the factors of the typical formulation into three lives—past, present, and future. Ignorance and fabrications are said to be karma—intentional action—of the previous life that results in consciousness, name-&-form, six sense media, contact, and feeling in the present life. Craving, clinging (*upādāna*), and becoming (*bhava*) are the karma of the present life, which results in birth (*jāti*) in the next life.

Ignorance → ... → Six Sense Media → Contact → ... → Becoming → Birth → ... → Suffering

| Past Life | Present Life | Future Life |

Fabrications—through an alternative definition found in some places—are defined as being meritorious (*puññābhi*), demeritorious (*apuññābhi*), or imperturbable (*āneñjābhi*). These correspond to the quality of a person's karma that results in consciousness at that level.[90] Karma and consciousness hindered by ignorance —the first factor—are described elsewhere as prerequisites for renewed becoming in the future,[91] so fabrications can be regarded as the previous life's karma.

In the Great Causes discourse[92] (*mahānidāna sutta*), there is an explicit mention of consciousness descending into a mother's womb as a condition for name-&-form to take shape. Elsewhere, the six-sense media are described as old karma and actions tied with craving called new karma,[93] suggesting that the traditional interpretation effectively takes the way of the senses as the method to unravel dependent co-arising in the present life. While it is useful to familiarize ourselves with how dependent

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[90] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 12:51*, p. 137
[91] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 3:77*, p. 84
[92] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 1: An Anthology from the Dīgha Nikāya, DN 15*, p. 153
[93] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 35:145*, p. 324
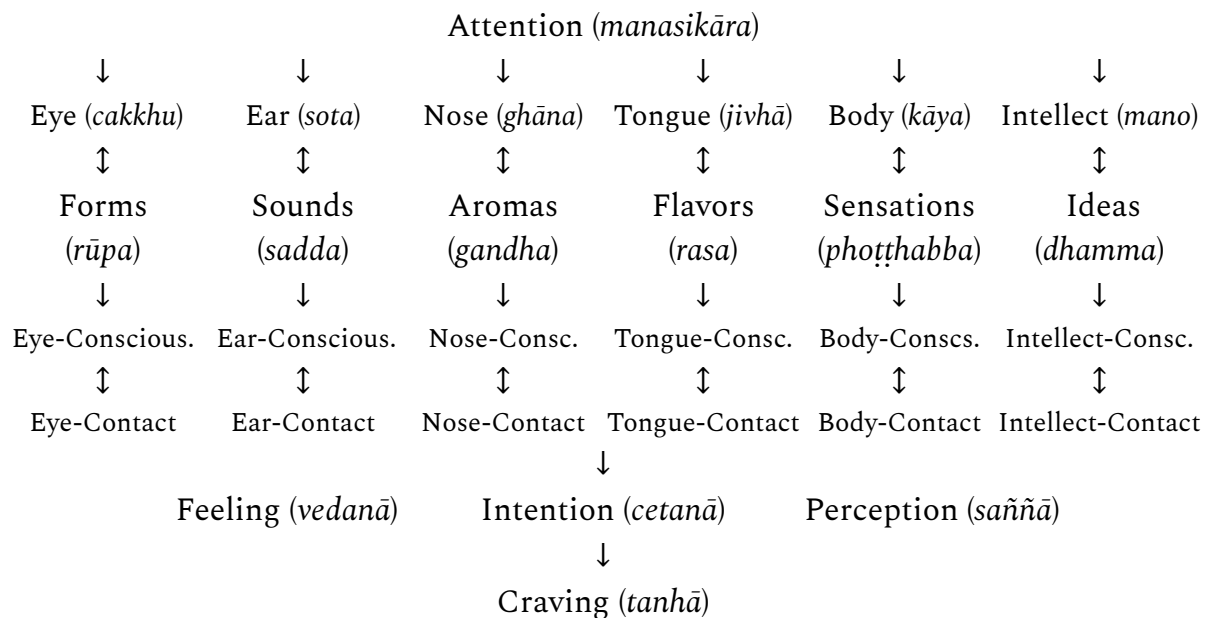
co-arising shows how rebirth occurs, since the Dhamma is realized in the present moment, that will be our focus here.

The most common formulation of dependent co-arising in the discourses describes its unraveling starting from ignorance. This is impossible to do in the present moment if the traditional understanding is adopted, since ignorance represents action done in a past life. Instead, a less common variation of the formula which begins with six sense media[94] would apply for the way of the senses:

Six Sense Media → Contact → Feeling → Craving → ... → Suffering

From the discourses referenced previously, it is now possible to visualize the process involved in the way of the senses:

Attention (*manasikāra*)

↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Eye (*cakkhu*)	Ear (*sota*)	Nose (*ghāna*)	Tongue (*jivhā*)	Body (*kāya*)	Intellect (*mano*)
↕	↕	↕	↕	↕	↕
Forms (*rūpa*)	Sounds (*sadda*)	Aromas (*gandha*)	Flavors (*rasa*)	Sensations (*phoṭṭhabba*)	Ideas (*dhamma*)
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Eye-Conscious.	Ear-Conscious.	Nose-Consc.	Tongue-Consc.	Body-Conscs.	Intellect-Consc.
↕	↕	↕	↕	↕	↕
Eye-Contact	Ear-Contact	Nose-Contact	Tongue-Contact	Body-Contact	Intellect-Contact

↓

Feeling (*vedanā*)   Intention (*cetanā*)   Perception (*saññā*)

↓

Craving (*tanhā*)

The Great Six Sense Media discourse (*mahāsaḷāyatanika sutta*) mentions that the way of the senses involves insight and tranquility developed together ("*for him these two qualities occur in tandem: tranquility & insight.*")[95] This is a key point since this is one of three ways—the other two corresponding to the remaining ways of vision as we will see—in which insight and tranquility can be developed according to the other discourse that mentions this in the Canon.[96]

Sense restraint (*indriya saṃvara*) is a precursor to insight at the level of the six-sense media and is clearly a relevant practice for this method:

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[94] For specific references, check the Appendix, *Dependent Co-arising References in the Pāli Canon*
[95] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 149*, p. 626
[96] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 4:170*, p. 173

On seeing a form with the eye, do not grasp at any theme or variations by which—if you were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail you ...
On hearing a sound with the ear ...
On smelling an aroma with the nose ...
On tasting a flavor with the tongue ...
On feeling a tactile sensation with the body ...
On cognizing an idea with the intellect ...[97]

Considering how sense restraint is a stepping stone[98] to deeper practice in the gradual path (*anupubbapaṭipadā*), however, this practice is clearly not exclusive to the way of the senses. This is confirmed by how mindfulness immersed in the body (*kāyagatāsati*)—which is common to all the ways of vision—is described as a prerequisite for stable sense restraint.[99]

The way of the senses seems to distinguish itself by how the practice of sense restraint is pushed to its limits. Attaining stream-entry with this method involves applying the perception of not-self (*anatta*) with reference to the six-sense media, which leads to the cessation of self-identification.[100,101] Through this, the origination and passing-away of contact at the six sense bases is experienced, resulting in the first stage of awakening:

Six Sense Media → ~~Contact~~ → ~~Feeling~~ → Craving → ... → Suffering

While concentration[102] is necessary for this insight, scant detail is given in the Canon on the level required. Because of this, whether concentration at the level of *jhāna* is required for the first stage of awakening with this method is unclear.

For full awakening, it can be inferred that this practice is developed to a level where the perception of not-self is applied immediately at sensory contact, stopping any possibility of new becoming:

In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two.[103]

[97] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 35:127*, p. 322
[98] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 1: An Anthology from the Dīgha Nikāya, DN 2*, p. 98
[99] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 35:206*, p. 346
[100] Ibid. SN 35:74, p. 296
[101] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 148*, pp. 779-80
[102] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 35:99*, p. 313
[103] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Udāna: Exclamations, Ud 1:10*, p. 37

Eradicating ignorance results in the cessation of the six-sense media, which is the experience of Unbinding (*nibbāna*) that lies outside of the six senses:

Now from the remainderless fading & cessation of the six sense media comes the cessation of contact. From the cessation of contact comes the cessation of feeling ... the cessation of craving ... the cessation of clinging ... the cessation of becoming ... the cessation of birth ... then aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair all cease. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of stress & suffering.[104]

~~Six Sense Media → Contact → ... → Suffering~~

Note that practitioners who attain Unbinding with the way of the senses still retain the six sense bases that are the results of past life actions even though they have severed any attachment to them. These are only abandoned completely at death.

The way of the senses is the path to follow for those with similar levels of skill in both tranquility and insight practice. Since what the six sense bases refer to is immediately apparent even to the uninitiated, this might be the most accessible method for the average practitioner. However, sense restraint requires the insight to recognize which mental qualities are skillful, so this is by no means an easier route to follow.

The Way of the Aggregates: *Samatha* Preceding *Vipassanā*

<u>Ignorance → Fabrications → Consciousness → ... → Suffering</u>

Present Life   Future Life

The way of the aggregates corresponds to the most frequently found formulation of dependent co-arising in the Pāli Canon.[105] By evaluating the advanced states of mental stillness called *jhāna*, it is possible to understand how this method can be followed.

The *jhāna* sequence goes from the four form *jhānas* then the four formless attainments, before culminating in the cessation of perception and feeling (*saññāvedayitanirodha*). There is an obvious connection of this progression to fabrications in dependent co-arising when you consider what ceases at each step of the process:

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[104] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 12:12*, p. 109
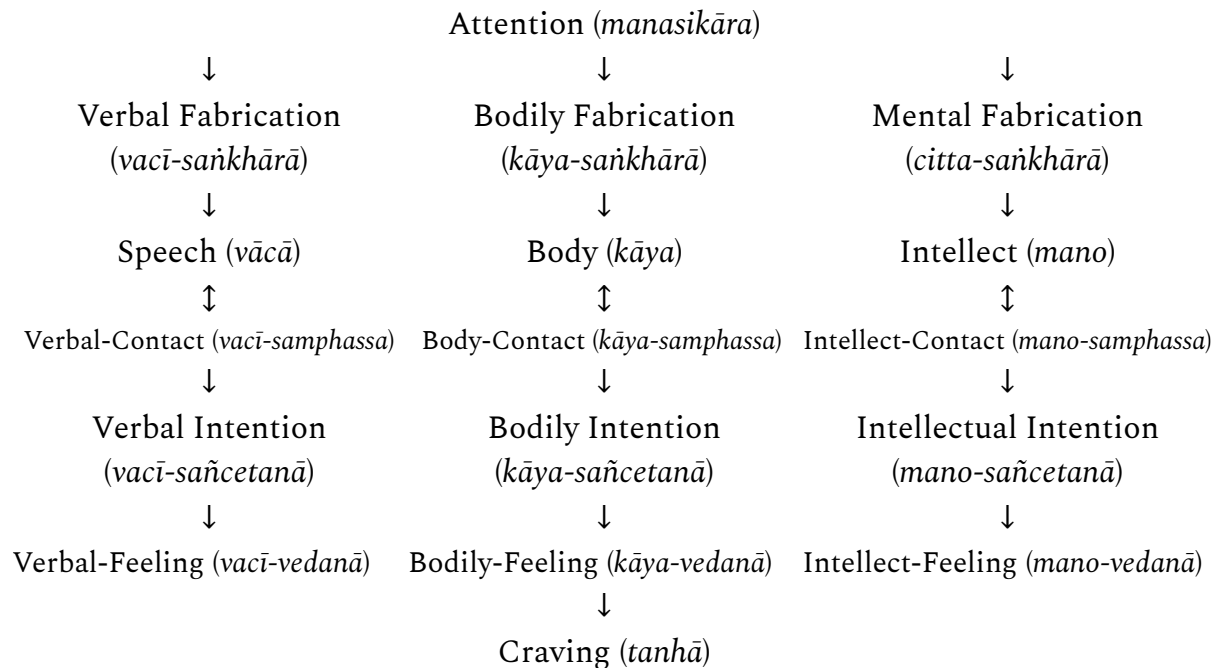[105] For specific references, check the Appendix, *Dependent Co-arising References in the Pāli Canon*

"But when a monk is attaining the cessation of perception & feeling, which things cease first: bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications, or mental fabrications?"

"When a monk is attaining the cessation of perception & feeling, friend Visākha, verbal fabrications cease first, then bodily fabrications, then mental fabrications."[106]

Passing through the *jhāna* sequence involves the sequential cessation of each group of fabrications. Verbal fabrications (*vacī-saṅkhārā*) cease upon entering the second *jhāna*, bodily fabrications (*kāya-saṅkhārā*) on entering the fourth *jhāna*, and mental fabrications (*citta-saṅkhārā*) on entering the cessation of perception and feeling.[107]

This cessation-attainment (*nirodha-samāpatti*)—another term used for the cessation of perception and feeling—corresponds to experiencing the passing away of the five clinging-aggregates.[108] Of these, the fabrication aggregate is defined in terms of intention (*"These six bodies of intention—intention with regard to form, … sound, … smell, … taste, … tactile sensation, … ideas: these are called fabrications."*)[109] Elsewhere, intention is divided into its bodily, verbal and intellectual aspects, each corresponding to bodily, verbal and mental fabrication (synonymous with intellectual fabrication—*mano-saṅkhārā*).[110]

Now it is possible to visualize the process involved in the way of the aggregates:

Attention (*manasikāra*)

↓	↓	↓
Verbal Fabrication (*vacī-saṅkhārā*)	Bodily Fabrication (*kāya-saṅkhārā*)	Mental Fabrication (*citta-saṅkhārā*)
↓	↓	↓
Speech (*vācā*)	Body (*kāya*)	Intellect (*mano*)
↕	↕	↕
Verbal-Contact (*vacī-samphassa*)	Body-Contact (*kāya-samphassa*)	Intellect-Contact (*mano-samphassa*)
↓	↓	↓
Verbal Intention (*vacī-sañcetanā*)	Bodily Intention (*kāya-sañcetanā*)	Intellectual Intention (*mano-sañcetanā*)
↓	↓	↓
Verbal-Feeling (*vacī-vedanā*)	Bodily-Feeling (*kāya-vedanā*)	Intellect-Feeling (*mano-vedanā*)

↓

Craving (*tanhā*)

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[106] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 44*, p. 268

[107] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 9:31*, p. 425

[108] When transitioning from the fourth jhāna to the dimension of infinite space (*ākāsañcāyatana*), form is relinquished. As consciousness occurs with contact, which itself is a prerequisite of feeling and perception, it follows that at the cessation-attainment the consciousness aggregate is let go temporarily.

[109] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 22:57*, p. 224

[110] Ibid. SN 12:25, p. 124

A meditator who is skilled enough in concentration practice to reach the cessation-attainment experiences the passing away of the clinging-aggregates. When returning from that meditative state, the origination of the clinging-aggregates that had previously ceased is experienced. This way, the practitioner discerns their origination and passing-away—achieving the first stage of awakening:

Ignorance → ~~Fabrications~~ → Consciousness → ... → Suffering

Since it involves reaching *jhāna*, the way of the aggregates corresponds to the method in which tranquility (*samatha*) precedes insight (*vipassanā*). Therefore, it would be most appropriate for those who are more skilled at calming and concentrating the mind than investigating the nature of fabrications.[111] That concentration is the preliminary focus for the method finds some support in the discourses:

Develop concentration, monks. A concentrated monk discerns in line with what has come into being. And what does he discern in line with what has come into being? The origination & disappearance of form. The origination & disappearance of feeling... perception... fabrications. The origination & disappearance of consciousness.[112]

The question arises whether such an advanced level of concentration like the cessation-attainment is necessary to achieve even the first stage of awakening when following the way of the aggregates. If that were true, this method would seem inaccessible to the typical practitioner. This is in fact not the case, with even concentration at the level of the first *jhāna* deemed sufficient to evaluate experience in terms of the aggregates:

There is the case where a monk, quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, ... not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness ...
...
Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents.[113]

This suggests that the level of *jhāna* required is dependent on the discernment (*paññā*) of the meditator, with a less subtle state of concentration acceptable with a higher degree of discernment. If both are present at a sufficient degree, the

[111] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 4:170*, p. 173
[112] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 22:5*, p. 248
[113] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 9:36*, pp. 437-8

ignorance that makes the meditator cling to the aggregates is eradicated, resulting in a dimension outside body, speech, and intellect:

> *Now, ignorance is bound up in these things. From the remainderless fading & cessation of that very ignorance, there no longer exists the body on account of which that pleasure & pain internally arise. There no longer exists the speech … the intellect on account of which that pleasure & pain internally arise. There no longer exists the field, the site, the dimension, or the issue on account of which that pleasure & pain internally arise.*[114]

<h3 style="text-align:center">~~Ignorance → Fabrications → Consciousness → … → Suffering~~</h3>

There are hints in the discourses that the way of the aggregates has a connection with mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*). Aside from the instances we have already referenced related to dependent co-arising and *jhāna*, the popular rendering of the breath meditation method is one of the few other instances where bodily and mental fabrications are mentioned in the Canon. Here, these fabrications are said to be progressively calmed (*passambhi*), aligning with their cessation (*nirodha*) at distinct levels of *jhāna*. This is confirmed elsewhere where calming bodily fabrication is equated with entering the fourth *jhāna*.[115] All the stages of concentration including the cessation-attainment are accessible with breath meditation, with the Buddha himself stating that he used this method:

> *He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.'*
> *…*
> *… He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming mental fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming mental fabrication.'*
> *…*
> *"I myself, monks, before my awakening, when I was still an unawakened bodhisatta, often dwelt in this (meditative) dwelling. While I was dwelling in this (meditative) dwelling, neither my body nor my eyes were fatigued, and the mind—through lack of clinging—was released from effluents.*[116]

Elsewhere, the Buddha states that he attained full awakening after first entering the cessation-attainment.[117] Consider also his first two sermons: the discourse on Setting the Wheel of Truth in Motion (*dhammacakkappavattana sutta*), and the discourse on the Not-Self Characteristic (*anattalakkhana sutta*) are both given in the context of the five clinging-aggregates. All this evidence points to the *bodhisatta* himself following the way of the aggregates to achieve release.[118]

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[114] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 12:25*, p. 124
[115] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10:20*, p. 570
[116] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 54:8*, pp. 490–1
[117] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 9:41*, p. 554
[118] It should be noted that this seems to contradict another discourse (SN 12:65), where the dependent co-arising that the Buddha discovered on his own full awakening begins with name-&-form and consciousness instead of

In the Buddha's time, there were already contemplatives—like his early teachers Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta—that lived in forest settings and achieved higher levels of *jhāna* through tranquility (*samatha*) practice. This is probably why his most common formulation for dependent co-arising starts with the two factors—ignorance and fabrications—pivotal to this method.

All this is compelling evidence: the way of the aggregates is most appropriate for those who have an affinity towards calming the mind through *samatha* practice.

The Way of the Properties: *Vipassanā* Preceding *Samatha*

<u>Consciousness ←→ Name-&-Form → Six Sense Media → … → Suffering</u>

Present Life   Future Life

There is an alternative version of the dependent co-arising formula described in multiple locations in the Canon that starts with name-&-form and consciousness dependent on each other.[119] In some cases this version also omits the six sense media:

> *From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form.*
> *…*
> *From name-&-form as a requisite condition comes consciousness. … If consciousness were not to gain a foothold in name-&-form, would a coming-into-play of the origination of birth, aging, death, and stress in the future be discerned?*[120]

The prominence given to name-&-form and consciousness suggests that this formulation has a connection to the way of the properties (*dhātu*). Form in name-&-form is the only place in the dependent co-arising formula where the properties are explicitly mentioned. Also, unraveling the interplay between consciousness and name-&-form is the crux of the method detailed in the Analysis of Properties discourse (*dhātuvibhaṅga sutta*).[121]

It details a training in discernment where each of the properties (earth—*paṭavi*, water—*āpo*, fire—*tejo*, wind—*vāyo*, space—*ākāsa*) are evaluated in terms of their associated body parts and felt sense. For instance, the earth property is sensed as whatever is hard, solid, and sustained. Next, they are regarded as being unworthy of taking up as one's own ("*This is not mine, this is not what I am, this is not my self.*") This results in the mind discarding them, allowing the practitioner to arrive at consciousness itself ("*There remains only consciousness: pure & bright.*")

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ignorance. However, being the Buddha and thus the teacher of devas & human beings (*satthā devamanussānaṁ*), it could be argued that he would have unique understanding of all ways to the ultimate goal.

[119] For specific references, check the <u>Appendix, *Dependent Co-arising References in the Pāli Canon*</u>

[120] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. <u>*Handful of Leaves, Volume 1: An Anthology from the Dīgha Nikāya*, DN 15</u>, pp. 153–4

[121] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. <u>*Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya*, MN 140</u>, pp. 591–2

Discarding the properties from the mind is equivalent to experiencing their passing away, and when returning from that their origination is experienced. This aligns with the way of the properties described in the Riddle Tree discourse.

Consciousness ↔ Name-&-~~Form~~ → Craving → ... → Suffering

Once the meditator discards the properties from the mind, the physical sense of the body is relinquished, and as a result physical feeling is abandoned as well. What remains is mental feeling (*"And which are the two feelings? Physical & mental."*),[122] experienced through contact at the intellect.[123]

Abandoning the properties leads directly to the fourth *jhāna*: *"There remains only equanimity: pure & bright, pliant, malleable, & luminous."*[124] This is clear because the fourth *jhāna* is equated with *"purity of equanimity,"*[125] and is a stepping stone to the formless attainments described as possible options at this stage in the discourse. Therefore, the way of the properties corresponds to the method where insight precedes tranquility,[126] since the earlier discernment practice of perceiving the properties as not-self leads to this state of concentration.

With the obstacle of form absent, this stage provides the necessary platform to drop passion for intellectual intention (*mano-sañcetanā*) and unravel dependent co-arising altogether.[127]

Now it is possible to visualize the process involved in the way of the properties in more detail:

<div align="center">

Attention (*manasikāra*)

↓   ↓

Earth, Water, Fire, Wind, Space   Consciousness

(*paṭavi, āpo, tejo, vāyo, ākāsa*)   (*viññāna*)

↕   ↕

Body-Contact (*kāya-samphassa*)   Intellect-Contact (*mano-samphassa*)

↓   ↓

Physical Feeling (*kāyika-vedanā*)   Mental Feeling (*cetasika-vedanā*)

↓   ↓

Bodily Intention (*kāya-sañcetanā*)   Intellectual Intention (*mano-sañcetanā*)

↓   ↓

Craving (*tanhā*)

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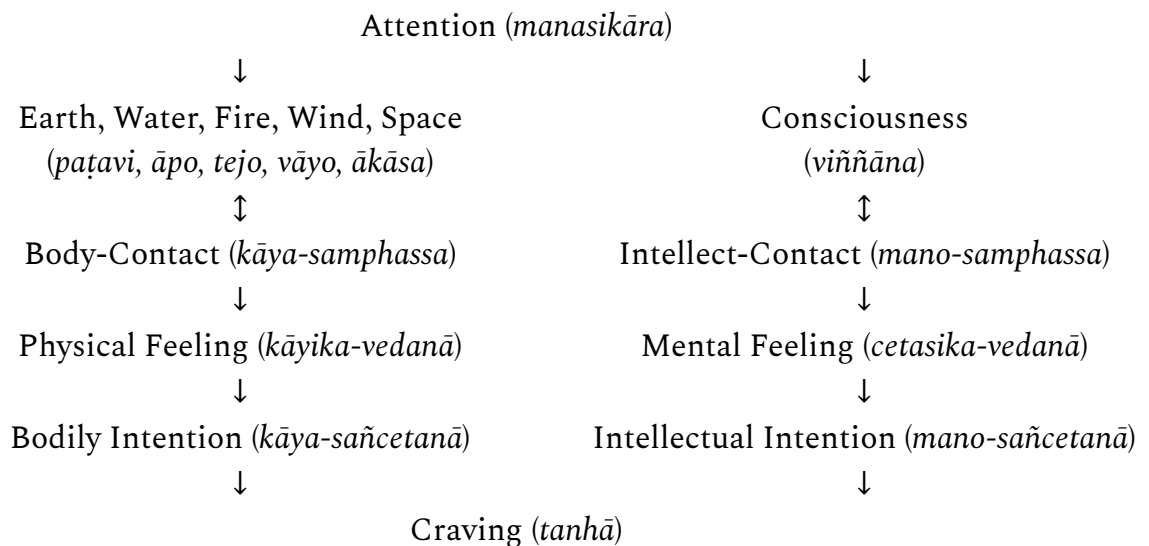
[122] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 36:22*, p. 357

[123] Ibid. SN 48:38, p. 468

[124] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 140*, p. 593

[125] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 4:123*, p. 158

[126] Ibid. AN 4:170, p. 173

[127] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 12:64*, p. 146

The practitioner then reaches "consciousness without surface" (*viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ*), which is independent of name-&-form, outside of the consciousness aggregate, and equivalent to full-awakening:

> *Consciousness without surface,*
> > *without end,*
> > *luminous all around:*
> *Here water, earth, fire, & wind*
> > *have no footing.*
> *Here long & short*
> > *coarse & fine*
> > *fair & foul*
> > *name & form*
> *are all brought to an end.*
> *With the cessation of consciousness*
> > *each is here brought to an end.*[128]

~~Consciousness ⟷ Name-&-Form → Six Sense Media → … → Suffering~~

Those who are more skilled at insight than tranquility meditation can achieve the concentration required for awakening by focusing on the body and its corresponding properties this way. However, this requires the skill to visualize and mentally isolate the body as its constituent parts and properties. These are then regarded as being unworthy of ownership, leading to relinquishment, calm, and clarity.

Comparisons and Conclusions

That dependent co-arising can be viewed in three separate ways involving the present moment and multiple lives shows why the Buddha described it as a deep teaching. It might be hard to fathom how such varied frameworks can all point to the same goal. How are we to reconcile the differences between the ways of vision?

We do this by understanding that each approach is valid within its appropriate context—at its relevant level of experience. For instance, analyzing experience in terms of the aggregates is accessible upon reaching *jhāna*, while perceiving the body as its constituent parts with insight is the basis for the framework of properties.

If the ways of vision and their connections to dependent co-arising and a practitioner's insight-tranquility (*samatha-vipassana*) predilection were so important, why did the Buddha himself not explicitly focus on them? This is a valid point, and based on historical evidence, it is clear that a practitioner does not need to understand such theoretical detail to follow the path.

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[128] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 1: An Anthology from the Dīgha Nikāya, DN 11*, p. 135

The Buddha might not have detailed these connections partly because explaining dependent co-arising to his disciples this way might have been unwieldy if only done verbally as was the case at the time. Also, he had the skill to suggest the path of practice most appropriate to a practitioner directly without adding unnecessary theoretical depth. It is important to note here that "seeing" the process in action is different from analyzing it theoretically. Experientially understanding how a single link leads to the next in the causal chain through meditation practice is how the entire process is unraveled altogether.

So then why focus on theoretical understanding at all? Because there is confusion among practitioners about how to conceptually understand dependent co-arising. As a result, some end up getting tied up in conflicting interpretations, while others ignore the subject altogether thinking it to be overly complicated or irrelevant. While I agree that understanding the theory in this way is not required for those with clarity on how to go about their practice, for others, it can provide the confidence to pursue more unconventional methods that are deemphasized in the present day, but supported in the discourses.

My hope is that by conceptually understanding the three ways of vision, practitioners will be able to focus on the theme that best suits them—aggregates, sense bases, or properties. By doing so, they can avoid unnecessary confusion and find clarity in the direction to proceed in the path.

Another question that might arise is whether focusing on a specific method means that you can ignore practices recommended in other methods. For example, if you are pursuing the way of the aggregates, is it possible to focus exclusively on mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*) and ignore the contemplation of the unattractive (*asubha*) which is a focus of the way of the properties? What if you are following the way of the properties—can you ignore breath meditation altogether? Evidence from the Canon suggests that the ways of vision are a means to prioritize your practice on a primary theme, with the other themes still kept in hand as tools to be used when necessary:

> *He should develop (contemplation of) the unattractive so as to abandon lust. He should develop goodwill so as to abandon ill will. He should develop mindfulness of in-&-out breathing so as to cut off distractive thinking. He should develop the perception of inconstancy so as to uproot the conceit, 'I am.'*[129]

Therefore, instead of reducing the number of meditation themes you focus on, the clarity afforded by following a specific way of vision is that when relating to your experience, you can focus on just one of the frameworks: the sense bases, aggregates, or properties. This way, you avoid overcomplicating your practice by unnecessarily combining different frameworks when evaluating your experience.

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[129] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 9:1*, p. 415

All ways of vision have aspects in common with each other. Mindfulness immersed in the body (*kāyagatāsati*) is essential for all three, with the difference lying in the emphasis given to different techniques within its domain. For instance, there seems to be a connection between mindfulness of breathing and the way of the aggregates. Similarly, attending to body parts and properties is emphasized in the way of the properties. *Jhāna* is required for full awakening with all methods. That said, it seems not to be required for the first stage of awakening with the way of the properties. It is necessary with the way of the aggregates, and unclear if it is with the way of the senses.

By acquiring a nuanced understanding of dependent co-arising and how it ties in with the gradual path in this way, practitioners can free up their mental resources and focus on developing what is most relevant for their progress along the path.

Meditation: Theories, Techniques, and Traditions

A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Meditation

Jhāna and the Importance of Joy

All phenomena have concentration as their presiding state.[130]

Before delving into some contemporary methods, we will first explore how meditation practice is described in the early discourses. An oft-quoted goal of meditation in the Pāli Canon that is deemphasized today is *jhāna*—a heightened state of mental stillness and joy. This pleasure is said to be beyond the normal sensual pleasures we are accustomed to. This is pointed out by the Buddha when he compares the pleasure he can reach through meditation with what is accessible to a king:

"Can King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha—without moving his body, without uttering a word—dwell sensitive to unalloyed pleasure for seven days & nights?"
"No, friend."
...
"Now, I ... can dwell sensitive to unalloyed pleasure for ... seven days & nights. So what do you think? That being the case, who dwells in greater pleasure: King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha or me?"[131]

The Buddha instructs his disciples to devote themselves to the pleasures of *jhāna*, and if outsiders accuse them of being devotees of such pleasure, to agree to that claim.[132] This is because that alternative pleasure is necessary to let go of our attachment to sensual pleasures:

Even though a disciple of the noble ones has clearly seen as it has come to be with right discernment that sensuality is of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks, still—if he has not attained a rapture & pleasure apart from sensuality, apart from unskillful qualities, or something more peaceful than that [first jhāna or higher]—he can be tempted by sensuality.[133]

Elsewhere it is mentioned that full awakening is dependent on the mental sustenance provided by at least the first *jhāna*: *"I tell you, the ending of the effluents*

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[130] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10:58*, pp. 479–80
[131] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 14*, p. 86
[132] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 1: An Anthology from the Dīgha Nikāya, DN 29*, p. 362
[133] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 14*, p. 82

depends on the first jhāna."[134] This should not come as a surprise, since the eighth factor of the noble eightfold path—right concentration (*sammā samādhi*)—is always defined in terms of *jhāna*.[135] While mindfulness practice is popularly portrayed as being distinct from *jhāna* practice, the early discourses state that the former is actually what leads to the latter ("*In a person of right mindfulness, right concentration [comes into being].*")[136]

So why am I focusing on pointing out the necessity of something seemingly so obvious? Because in traditional Theravāda and some popular meditation techniques of today, the necessity of *jhāna* in the path is questioned and disputed, and at worst, discouraged and disparaged. One of the reasons for this is the unfortunate fact that in Theravāda Buddhist countries, meditation practice as it is recommended in the early texts has deteriorated through the ages. With this lack of knowledge, there is an incentive to paint the path as navigable without such practice, or to suggest that the higher fruits of the path are inaccessible to us mere mortals now.

Nowadays, the reasons seem less to do with a general lack of information and more to do with misinformation and disinformation. Some teachers—in good faith—are unquestioningly spreading the misinformed views of their teachers, while others—in bad faith—are willfully distorting and selectively interpreting the Canon to attack dissenting views. This is arguably the reason for the prominence of the Abhidhamma and commentaries and the guild-like mentality that has arisen around them, with those who have specialized in such esoteric knowledge held in high regard.

This perversion of the teachings has resulted in a focus on the supposed dangers of *jhāna*—that you are likely to get hooked on the pleasure and lose sight of the path. This is the basis for the view that you only need to develop just enough concentration to develop insight, instead of achieving mastery of the former as the discourses recommend.

It should be noted, however, that what is traditionally understood as *jhāna* is heavily influenced by the *Visuddhimagga*. In it, *jhāna* is defined as a form of one-pointed absorption on a single object with no awareness of the body. This contrasts with the definition found in the early discourses, where mindfulness of the body is present, and awareness is open, unified, and not absorbed in some sort of tunnel vision. In fact, the Canon states that it is possible to be in the fourth *jhāna* while walking—quite impossible if *jhāna* is understood as a singularly absorbed state.[137] The *Visuddhimagga* goes onto define distinct levels of *samādhi*—*khaṇika* (preparatory), *upacāra* (access), and *appanā* (fixed)—as sufficient alternatives to *jhāna* for the purpose of liberation. This is done without reconciling how *jhāna* is defined differently in the discourses from the absorption it criticizes.[138]

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[134] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 9:36*, p. 437

[135] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 45:8*, p. 419

[136] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10:103*, p. 632

[137] Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 3:63*, pp. 274-5

[138] Kumāra Bhikkhu. *What You Might Not Know About Jhāna and Samādhi*, pp. 11-23

These differences in definition probably crept up over time, with the term *jhāna* co-opted by practitioners of other traditions and losing its early Buddhist meaning in the popular narrative. Given how the early discourses are now easily accessible and can be used as our primary guide, it is high time to revert to the original meaning of *jhāna*.

Developing *jhāna* has also fallen by the wayside due to the view that it involves a different type of meditation—*samatha* or tranquility—from what the Buddha taught, which was *vipassanā* or insight. To unravel the roots of this misinterpretation, it is useful to delve into the story of the Buddha's own struggle for awakening.

After Gotama the Sākyan renounced the worldly life and chose the life of a contemplative, he trained under two renowned sages of his time—Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. He learned how to reach the highest formless attainments (the dimensions of nothingness and neither perception nor non-perception) with their guidance, but left seeking his own path after concluding that these did not lead to the deathless.[139]

After practicing harsh austerities for a time with scant reward, Gotama then reevaluated his practice and remembered the time he reached the first *jhāna* as a child. This memory makes him question his reticence to pursue *jhāna*, and so he reverts to his former practice with renewed vigor and consequently achieves full awakening:

> *But with this racking practice of austerities I haven't attained any superior human state, any distinction in knowledge or vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to awakening?'*

> *I thought: 'I recall once, when my father the Sākyan was working, and I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, then—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities—I entered & remained in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. Could that be the path to awakening?' Then there was the consciousness following on that memory: 'That is the path to awakening.' I thought: 'So why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality, nothing to do with unskillful qualities?'[140]*

The traditional interpretation of this account is that the Buddha discarded the meditation practices he learnt from his previous teachers—since they only involved tranquility—and forged his own method of insight meditation. There are multiple issues with this point of view, however.

The crucial point that is missed—probably because it shows his fallibility before becoming the Buddha—is that Gotama made a mistake. He goes off on his own after surmising that the formless attainments he learnt were not the path. He does not realize that they could be used as a basis for insight before going through years of

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[139] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 26*, p. 145
[140] Ibid. MN 36, p. 207

self-mortification. Even though he was eventually inspired by his childhood experience of the first *jhāna*, he could have used the concentration attainments he learnt from his past teachers for awakening as well. This is exemplified by the many discourses where the formless attainments are mentioned as valid means to achieve the goal of the path:

> *I tell you, the ending of the effluents depends on the dimension of the infinitude of space. … There is the case where a monk—with the complete transcending of perceptions of form … —enters & remains in the dimension of the infinitude of space. He regards whatever phenomena there … as inconstant, stressful, … , not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: 'This is peace, this is exquisite—the pacification of all fabrications; the relinquishing of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.'*
> *Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents.*[141]

Another point in support of this is that after his awakening, the Buddha was inclined to teach his past teachers before anyone else, since they had "little dust in their eyes"—only needing the nudge from his insight into the four noble truths.[142] If they were far away from the goal, the Buddha would not have made such a statement.

It is important to evaluate the Buddha's teaching on suffering in the context of his awakening. He claims to have achieved a state of unchanging and undying happiness that is incomparable to transient feelings of sensual pleasure. By this, he is asking us to adopt a higher standard for our happiness and not be satisfied with the typical piecemeal offerings we pursue. This is apparent from the many analogies he uses to portray the inherent stress involved in our everyday pursuit of happiness:

> *In the same way, Māgaṇḍiya, … sensualities at present are painful to the touch, very hot & scorching; but when beings are not free from passion for sensualities—chewed up by sensual craving, burning with sensual fever—their faculties are impaired, which is why, even though sensualities are actually painful to the touch, they have the skewed perception of 'pleasant.'*[143]

While *jhāna* was crucial to the Buddha's pursuit of awakening, how is such an advanced level in meditation relevant to our practice? By recognizing the potential pleasure that can be accessed from its development, we can intuitively understand how it is possible to renounce the more worldly pleasures with which we are so enamored. On top of that, if our meditation practice is dry and joyless, this is a fair warning that we should explore further to rectify that situation. Finding a sense of joy in meditation would greatly complement a long-term life of renunciation. By neglecting *jhāna*, we are sabotaging our potential to achieve something greater. Considering all this, it should come as no surprise that the Buddha identified a lack

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[141] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 9:36*, pp. 438–9
[142] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 26*, p. 145
[143] Ibid. MN 75, p. 378

of respect for concentration as one of the reasons why "*the true Dhamma does not last a long time.*"[144]

Body Contemplation: Manipulating Perception for Insight

All phenomena have discernment as their surpassing state.[145]

While whether tranquility (*samatha*) practice is required to progress in the path remains disputed by some, insight (*vipassanā*) practice being quintessentially Buddhist is universally accepted. Even so, there are conflicting interpretations regarding what exactly insight meditation is, with the popular understanding being that it involves mindfulness of the impermanent nature of phenomena in the present moment. Although this has some merit, the discourses provide a more nuanced view of *vipassanā*:

> *The individual … should approach an individual who has attained insight into phenomena through heightened discernment and ask him: 'How should fabrications be regarded? How should they be investigated? How should they be seen with insight?'*[146]

The actions recommended in these questions—"regard," "investigate," "see"—show that *vipassanā* involves more than merely being mindful of the process of change. Instead, it talks of "heightened discernment" which relates[147] to the knowledge of what is skillful.[148] This means that practicing insight requires a more inquisitive mindset, whereby any thoughts, feelings, or perceptions that arise in the mind are evaluated on their skillfulness before being engaged with. In other words, it is about applying the principles of the four noble truths to our experience. While this does eventually involve directly focusing on the inconstancy of all phenomena, my focus here will be insight practices that pave the foundation for that, but are often neglected. With this in mind, we will now explore the different techniques of body contemplation (*kāyagatāsati*, or mindfulness immersed in the body) recommended in the discourses.

In the discourse on Establishing Mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna sutta*), attending to the breath is initially described, followed by being aware of postures and actions, visualizing parts of the body (*kaya-vibhāga*), evaluating it in terms of the properties (*dhātu*), and finally, visually analyzing its disintegration as a corpse (*sarīraṃ*

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[144] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 7:56*, p. 350
[145] Ibid. AN 10:58, pp. 479–80
[146] Ibid. AN 4:94, p. 146
[147] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 117*, p. 638
[148] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Samyutta Nikāya, SN 46:51*, p. 530

sivathikāya). Of these, the visualization techniques tend to be discouraged or avoided altogether nowadays, with the argument that they involve imagining what is not already there in experience and so go against "seeing things as they are"—what we are told mindfulness meditation is all about.

To understand the purpose of such contemplations, consider the first and second noble truths. We cause ourselves stress and suffering (*dukkha*) due to our craving (*tanhā*). This seems clear enough if you have ever seen the behavior of toddlers or addicts. What is not so well understood, however, is the extent to which this applies to our normal everyday experience.

Consider this hypothetical example: you are meditating on the breath and reach a state of calm. A mental image of a person that you find attractive comes up in your mind. Is it a good idea to engage and get involved?

Typically, we only investigate these moments superficially. You might ask yourself what the harm of seeing where that perception leads is. It's true that a lot of our happiness depends on getting what we want, or more accurately, acquiescing to thoughts of greed that spring up in our minds.

In the Buddhist perspective, however, pursuing such a perception of beauty is compared to the pursuit of what dies. In the quest for the deathless, it is a roadblock. Why? Because the physical body that is the object of attraction here is subject to decay and death. Even though it is perceived as beautiful, underneath the skin lies the same flesh and bones found in all humans. So pursuing that which decays trains your mind to "feed" on what is unskillful—further distancing it from the potential of reaching a state of undying peace. On top of that, by pursuing that attractive image in your mind, you are relinquishing your meditation theme which was your source of mental nourishment up to now. This is where the theme of unattractiveness (*asubha*) which involves visualizing body parts comes in handy:

> *And what is the perception of unattractiveness? There is the case where a monk ponders this very body—from the soles of the feet on up, from the crown of the head on down, surrounded by skin, filled with all sorts of unclean things: 'There is in this body: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, muscle, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, membranes, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, gorge, feces, gall, phlegm, lymph, blood, sweat, fat, tears, oil, saliva, mucus, oil in the joints, urine.' Thus he remains focused on unattractiveness with regard to this very body.*[149]

By training yourself to *perceive* the unattractive side of the human body, you are not as controlled by attractive mental images. By doing this, you gain more autonomy over your actions. You start seeing the whole picture instead of just the beautiful side we are predisposed to see. This is why the perception of the unattractive (*asubha saññā*) is called a "non-perversion of perception" (*na-saññā-vipallaso*) connected to right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*):

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[149] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10:60*, pp. 481–2

'Unattractive' with regard to the unattractive is a non-perversion of perception, a non-perversion of mind, a non-perversion of view …
… seeing … the unattractive as unattractive.
Undertaking right view,
*   they transcend all stress & suffering.*[150]

Is this an encouragement to be aversive of the body? Not if you understand the nature of perception. Whether the human body is inherently attractive or unattractive is beside the point. What is relevant is that perceiving the body as unattractive is a useful tool, and it is used strategically to guard against and eradicate—both aspects of ardency (*ātappa*)—thoughts of greed in your mind.

Most mindfulness meditators are unaware of these themes of reflection, or if they are, avoid them because of their unpleasantness or because they assume them to be unnecessary. If you are interested in the deathless, however, these themes are important tools of the trade. Even if you do not plan to fully commit to Buddhist practice and live a monk's life, having these skills handy can prove useful in avoiding choices that are detrimental in the long-term but attractive in the immediate moment. This is because the contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body is specifically helpful in overcoming lust:

When a monk's awareness often remains steeped in the perception of the unattractive, his mind shrinks away from the completion of the sexual act, bends away, pulls back, and is not drawn in, and either equanimity or loathing take a stance.[151]

Now at that time dissatisfaction had arisen in Ven. Vaṅgīsa. Lust invaded his mind …
"With sensual lust I burn.
My mind is on fire."
…
"From distorted perception
your mind is on fire.
Shun the theme of the beautiful
accompanied by lust.
…
Develop the mind
—well-centered & one—
in the unattractive,
through the unattractive."[152]

Due to this application, there is a popular view that the theme of the unattractive and related practices are for those whose mental defilements (*kilesa*) are strong and

[150] Ibid. AN 4:49, pp. 133-134
[151] Ibid. AN 7:46, p. 338
[152] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Samyutta Nikāya, SN 8:4*, p. 83

require powerful antidotes.[153] This is an explanation finding its roots in the *Visuddhimagga*, where such contemplations are said to be suitable for those with "greedy temperaments" (*rāgacarita*).[154] However, this is only one of the benefits attributed to developing the unattractive in the Canon, where it is described as the method to abandon sense desire (*kāmacchanda*)— a primary hindrance of meditation ("*There is the theme of unattractiveness. To foster appropriate attention to it: This is lack of food for the arising of unarisen sensual desire, or for the growth & increase of sensual desire once it has arisen.*")[155]

As humans we are strongly attached to sensual pleasure, so a mere play of perception is unlikely to stop us indefinitely. There would need to be an alternative sustenance for the mind, and that is where tranquility (*samatha*) meditation comes in. By providing a pleasure outside of the physical senses, it supports the development of insight (*vipassanā*) by contemplating the nature of the body. Therefore, even when sensual desire (*kāma-rāga*) as a fetter is completely eradicated at non-return (*anāgāmī*)—the third level of awakening, the desire for form (*rūpa-rāga*) and formless (*arūpa-rāga*) remain.

Once thoughts of sensual desire are eradicated or suppressed temporarily, reflecting on the body's inevitable disintegration and death through the corpse contemplations allow practitioners the ability to stop identifying with the body as who they are. Training in this perception of not-self (*anattā*) helps eradicate conceit (*māna*)—a subtler level of defilement:

> *And further, lord, as if he were to see a corpse cast away in a charnel ground—one day, two days, three days dead—bloated, livid, & festering, he applies it to this very body, 'This body, too: Such is its nature, such is its future, such its unavoidable fate' …*
>
> *…*
> *When reflected and developed it leads to uprooting the conceit 'I am.'*[156]

By manipulating our perception this way, these visualization techniques of contemplation give us a depth of understanding of the nature of the body and the way things are. Therefore, it is advisable to at least have a basic training in these techniques regardless of whether your preferred path is primarily based on insight—like the way of the properties as discussed in the previous chapter—or not.

[153] Ṭhānissaro, Bhikkhu. *On the Path, Right Mindfulness, Chapter 8*, p. 352
[154] Bhandantācariya Buddhaghosa. *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)—Translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli*, Chapter III, p. 121
[155] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 46:51*, p. 436
[156] Sujato Bhikkhu. *Aṅguttaranikāya: Numbered Discourses, AN 6:29*, p. 465

The Burmese *Vipassanā* Movement

Many popular meditation techniques have originated from the Theravāda Buddhist circles of Myanmar. Of them, the Mahāsī and Pa Auk methods have significant followings, but none match the widespread reach of the technique popularized by S.N. Goenka. I will focus on the pros and cons of this method here. Since there are similarities among all Burmese meditation techniques due to their adherence to the ideas found in the Abhidhamma, commentaries, and the *Visuddhimagga*, some of the conclusions from this analysis will apply to them all.

In my travels visiting forest monasteries in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and the United States, there has been one constant. Many serious non-native practitioners (monks or otherwise) were first exposed to meditation at a 10-day "vipassanā" course—a lay movement popularized by a charismatic Indian businessman with an affable nature. A Japanese former banana farmer in Australia, a Chilean making a documentary about Buddhism while traveling through Southeast Asia, a French ascetic monk in Thailand who was a former consultant in a large multinational company. The common thread tying all of them together was that they first experienced the benefits of meditation through attending one of these 10-day courses.

Even though I had known about Goenka meditation retreats for some time, I was a bit of a skeptic. The main reason for this was how the technique was portrayed as *the* original form of practice passed down by the Buddha himself, and preserved by a select few monks in Myanmar. This seemed an obvious distortion—a clear salesman's pitch—because the technique clearly had connections with the later commentarial tradition. The other reason was how those who practiced it were strongly advised to avoid "mixing" it with other techniques, resulting in an unwarranted fear among newcomers of exploring meditation further. I felt that those who were susceptible to being easily convinced were in danger of stalling their progress due to this strict guideline.

Having personally participated myself, this is not to say, however, that the technique and the course have not had a significant positive influence. In my experience, those who were open-minded enough to investigate other meditation techniques were most likely to gain the benefits of learning the method while avoiding its downsides. The course itself is well organized, with the time for meditation maximized and disciplined practice emphasized.

We will now compare Goenka's vipassanā technique—using quotes from a book prepared under his guidance and with his approval—with how meditation is taught in the Pāli Canon.

For the first three days of the course, a form of tranquility (*samatha*) meditation is taught, where the practitioner is told to focus on the breath at the tip of the nose,

bringing it back to it when the mind wanders away.[157] This is a standard method, and has general support in the discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing (*ānāpānasati sutta*). After the first three days, the focus then shifts entirely to what is called insight (*vipassanā*) meditation. This involves focusing on the body at the level of feeling, regarding any sensation with equanimity regardless of how gross or subtle, pleasurable or painful it may be. The task is to avoid reacting with craving when any pleasure is experienced, and aversion when pain is felt. To counter the natural tendency to react in this way, the practitioner is told to view feelings as impermanent. By this you break the vicious reactionary cycle of mentally exaggerating and compounding the feelings that you experience.

As described in the previous chapter, insight preceding tranquility is a plausible method to develop the path—what I call the way of the properties (*dhātu*). Since the primary focus of the Goenka method is insight, is it suggesting something similar?

The focus of the technique is the systematic and dispassionate observation of physical sensations, which is explained as the way we experience reality itself.[158] While at first glance, it seems that sensations are defined in terms similar to how feeling (*vedanā*) is described in the discourses, its meaning in the context of the technique is more related to properties—the experience of tightness (earth property), fluidity (water), heat (fire), motion (wind). In this way, the Goenka method does align with the way of properties to some degree.

However, the method clearly diverges in how it relates to the body. It bypasses the initial practice of visualizing body parts described in the discourse on the Analysis of Properties (*dhātu vibhaṅga sutta*), and jumps directly to attending to the properties. Afterwards, the body itself is viewed as a mere play of physical sensations. The teaching of inconstancy (*anicca*) is then applied to those sensations, with the notion that nothing remains beyond a single moment. The conclusion is that there is nothing that can be clung to, and so nothing that can be called "I" or "mine."[159] This is how the *anattā* teaching is understood within the framework of the technique.

There are several problems with this view. To start off, not-self (*anattā*) is misunderstood to be an ontological teaching instead of a strategy. In other words, it is misinterpreted as a description of reality instead of a practical tool to unravel what we consider to be reality. This is apparent when you consider how the body itself is ignored when the perception of inconstancy is applied. Since the visualization of body parts, death reflection, or corpse contemplation are not done preliminarily, the practitioner of this method will not have experiential awareness of the nature of the physical body to decay, disintegrate, and die.

This results in a lack of understanding of the drawbacks of clinging to the body and how it is not worthwhile to take up as one's own (" ... *is it fitting to regard what is*

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[157] William Hart. *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation as Taught by S.N. Goenka.* Pariyatti. Kindle Edition, Kindle Location 1290
[158] Ibid. Kindle Location 1604
[159] Ibid. Kindle Location 1668

inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am?'") [160] Because of this, the attachment to the body remains. This is arguably why the Goenka method only results in a state of equanimity instead of the much more profound experience described in the discourses of the physical properties being wholly discarded from the mind.

When the way of the properties is properly followed, it is supposed to lead to an experience devoid of form—consciousness with no sense of the body. The not-self teaching is to be applied to the body in this way, enabling you to understand feeling. Bodily feeling only arises again when returning from that experience and contact with the body is made again. This shows the dependent nature of feeling, leading to the experiential understanding of dependent co-arising (*paticcasamuppāda*):

> *In dependence on a sensory contact that is to be felt as pleasure, there arises a feeling of pleasure. When sensing a feeling of pleasure, one discerns that 'I am sensing a feeling of pleasure.' One discerns that 'With the cessation of that very sensory contact that is to be felt as pleasure, the concomitant feeling—the feeling of pleasure that has arisen in dependence on the sensory contact that is to be felt as pleasure—ceases, is stilled.'*
> *In dependence on a sensory contact that is to be felt as pain ...*
> *In dependence on a sensory contact that is to be felt as neither pleasure nor pain ...* [161]

Now contrast the above excerpt from the early discourses to how the Goenka method explains insight into the way things are:

> *Every moment the subatomic particles of which the body is composed arise and pass away. Every moment the mental functions appear and disappear, one after another. Everything inside oneself, physical and mental, just as in the world outside, is changing every moment ... Every particle of the body, every process of the mind is in a state of constant flux. There is nothing that remains beyond a single moment ...* [162]

There seems to be no relation between the two. This clear disparity is explained by the dual concepts of subatomic particles (*kalāpa*) and the mind moment (*cittakkhana*), which are central to the Goenka method. *Kalāpa* is the idea that matter is constituted of subatomic particles observable directly through deep meditation. The source for this idea is the doctrine of *paramānuvāda*, or atomism, which was a later scholastic development not found in the pre-Buddhaghosa Theravāda tradition. [163] This concept is probably a major reason for the popularity of the method, since it seems to correlate with the nature of physical reality propounded by mid-20th century physicists like David Bohm. This has led to the misguided view that Buddhism anticipated such scientific discoveries:

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[160] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 109*, p. 488
[161] Ibid. MN 140, pp. 591–2
[162] William Hart. The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation as Taught by S.N. Goenka. Pariyatti. Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 1663–9
[163] David Kalupahana. *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*, 1976, p. 100

'The physicists' conception of the divisibility of matter into elementary particles and atoms is remarkably paralleled by the Buddhist view of material ultimates (rupa dhatus) and bundles of them (rupa kalapas). Besides, even the scientists' size of the atom was foreshadowed by the Buddha's estimate of the size of a rupa kalapa...[164]

One of the problems with these pseudoscientific claims is that there is no evidence in the early discourses of such a teaching. Although parallels can be made to later Abhidhamma philosophies, this is hardly conclusive evidence since the Abhidhamma and its related commentaries are home to many divergent theories. One of them paralleling modern physics can be seen as mere coincidence.

More importantly, there is the more obvious practical issue that the problem of suffering (*dukkha*) that the Buddha's path is intended to overcome is not resolved merely through an accurate understanding of physical reality. Experiencing a state of constant flux does not result in mental liberation.

The other major idea within the movement—that everything is in a constant state of change—is based on the doctrine of moments (*khanavada*), where the concept of the "mind moment" or *cittakkhana* is theorized:

The lifespan of a citta is termed a "mind moment." This is a temporal unit of such brief duration that according to the commentators, in the time that it takes for lightning to flash, or the eyes to blink, billions of mind moments can elapse. In turn, each mind moment consists of three sub-moments—arising (uppada), presence or standing (thiti), and dissolution (bhaṅga). Within the breadth of a mind moment, a citta arises, performs its momentary function, then dissolves.[165]

The Goenka method claims that it can bring you to this state of dissolution or *bhaṅga*, where "*the apparent solidity of body and mind dissolves, and we experience the ultimate reality of matter, mind, and mental formations: nothing but vibrations, oscillations, arising and vanishing with great rapidity.*"[166] This teaching is absent in the early discourses and finds its roots in the Abhidhamma and its commentaries.[167] As we concluded in the first chapter, these later developments can hardly be considered the word of the Buddha.

The method also has no clear explanation on the extent to which *samatha* should be developed. Focusing on *jhāna* is actively discouraged, although the criticism seems to be directed towards the popular *Visuddhimagga*-based trance-like state—a definition not found in the discourses.

What does this all mean for someone that has found the Goenka method to be beneficial? By bringing up its issues I am not suggesting that it should not be

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[164] W.J. Jayasuriya. *The Psychology and Philosophy of Buddhism*, p. 155
[165] Bhikkhu Bodhi. *A Comprehensive Guide to the Abhidhamma*, p. 156
[166] William Hart. *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation as Taught by S.N. Goenka*. Pariyatti. Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 2104–5
[167] David Kalupahana. *Buddhist Encyclopaedia*, Vol. IV, p. 239

practiced. Instead, it seems wise to view it as a stepping-stone for deeper practice and not as the sole technique that should be pursued.

Long-term practitioners of the method develop more equanimity in their day-to-day lives, allowing them to manage ephemeral emotions with more ease. The course format also helps develop strong endurance and patience when meditating in the sitting posture—essential for those looking for long-term progress in the path.

By keeping in mind the purpose of Buddhist practice—finding an end to stress and suffering—those trained in the Goenka method can use its foundation as a springboard to develop further in the path. What is required is developing an investigative mindset and being open-minded about other modes of practice.

The Thai Forest Tradition

Unlike the Burmese meditation movements, the Thai forest tradition does not have a specific meditation technique that its followers subscribe to. The attitude to meditation is much more "freestyle:" what is important is whether a certain technique results in calm and clarity—not its minute details. Practitioners are to experiment and develop their own method, even if it means tinkering with the recommendations of their teacher.

That said, there are specific themes that are deemed indispensable: tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) both need to be developed to a high degree, and the focus is body contemplation (*kāyagatāsati*). This is borne out by how the pioneer of the tradition—Ajahn Mun—is said to have practiced:

His samādhi practice steadily progressed, infusing his heart with tranquility. At the same time, he intensified the development of wisdom [discernment—paññā] by mentally dissecting the different parts of the body, while analyzing them in terms of the three universal characteristics of existence: that is to say, all are impermanent [aniccā], bound up with suffering [dukkhā], and void of any self [anattā].[168]

One technique that has almost universal approval within the tradition is the meditation word "*buddho.*" By mentally reciting this word repetitively, it is said that extraneous thoughts are relinquished, and the mind arrives at a state of tranquility. This method is connected to the recommendation to recollect the Buddha (*buddhanussati*) found in the discourses. *Buddho* is an epithet for the Buddha and one of his nine qualities. This is not how *buddho* is used in the Thai tradition, however, where it is developed similar to a mantra.

This shows a departure from the Canon, where using words as mantras is not mentioned. However, some teachers consider this technique to only be a preliminary

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[168] Ācariya Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno. *Venerable Ācariya Mun Bhūridatta Thera, A Spiritual Biography—Translated by Bhikkhu Dick Sīlaratano*, 2011, p. 41

step. For instance, Ajahn Dtun—a renowned disciple of Ajahn Chah—considers *buddho* repetition to be a stepping-stone to mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*), with the former developed because the latter may be too subtle to focus on at the beginning stages of practice.

The tradition distinguishes itself by how body contemplation is considered equivalent to *vipassanā* practice up to the state of non-return (*anāgāmi*). Visualizing the nature of the body to disintegrate is recommended regardless of whether a practitioner has achieved a sense of tranquility from *samatha* practice or not, suggesting that the way of the properties (*dhātu*) is the focus of the tradition. This is borne out in the story of Ajahn Thate, who is advised by Ajahn Mun to focus on investigating the unattractiveness and inconstancy of the body even though he had already achieved states of tranquility in his practice:

> When I had the opportunity to ask advice from Ven. Ajahn Singh, he recommended that I concentrate my contemplation much more on the non-beautiful, loathsome aspects of the physical body. He told me to focus there until I could see its rotting away and decay and the final disintegration into the four properties. I broke in with my misgivings: "Surely when the mind has already let go of form [*rūpa*] and only name [*nāma*] remains, isn't going back to bodily form too coarse an object of contemplation?" Well, at that point, he really made a loud noise, charging that already I was boasting of reaching supernormal attainments.
>
> The truth is that I had never—right from the very beginning of my meditation practice—been skilled in examining the loathsomeness of the body [*asubha*]. That's the truth. In my meditation practice I had always gone straight to focusing on the mind. I had deduced that because the defilements arise in the mind, if the mind doesn't venture outwards into disturbance but remains well set in a peaceful state, all the things of the world are left in their purity.
> …
> [Ajahn Mun:] "In your investigating, never allow the mind to desert the body for anywhere else. Whether or not it appears to be clearing and becoming more lucid, don't retreat from fixing your investigation there. You can examine the body's loathsomeness, or view it as made up from elements [properties—*dhātu*] …. Any of these methods can be used. But you really must fix your investigations within these, including all the four bodily postures."[169]

After using the mental recitation of *buddho* as a means of achieving a state of calm, Ajahn Mun himself developed the perception of bones (*aṭṭhi*) through contemplating a corpse. This resulted in a strong state of *samādhi*:

> … he saw a "nimitta" [sign], sometimes of himself, dead in front of him, sometimes of a corpse in front of him … Then he took that sign which had appeared before him as an indicator of the way his meditation practice should go from then on by defining it as being loathsome [*paṭikūla*] in various ways, according to where his greatest skill in sati [mindfulness] and paññā [discernment] lay. He would sometimes define it as breaking down and decomposing until all that was left of it

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[169] Ajahn Thate. *The Autobiography of a Forest Monk—Translated by Bhikkhu Ariyesako, Chapters 18–9*, pp. 77-104

was a skeleton; then he would define the bones as separate from each other, scattered about right in front of him.

…

… his mind concentrated down to reach the basic level of concentration in complete absorption and rested there for a long time, lasting for hours before withdrawing. As soon as his mind had withdrawn, he went on doing the same forms of practice as before.[170]

One of the issues in analyzing the teachings of the Thai Ajahns (teachers) is the inconsistency in the terminology they use to describe their practice. The tradition heavily emphasizes practice over study, and as a result, the vocabulary used by some meditation masters can be confusing to an outsider who tries to connect it with the texts. This is a primary reason for some of the misunderstandings between traditions. When a word means something different for different people, this is unsurprisingly quite possible.

This is important to keep in mind when analyzing the descriptions of the liberated mind (*citta*) given by monks within the Thai forest tradition. The mind freed from the aggregates (*khandha*) is deemed to be equivalent to Unbinding (*nibbāna*). Monks of other traditional Theravāda communities sometimes consider this to be a questionable assertion.

Part of the confusion stems from how the meaning of the word *citta* has become lost in translation. Some say that it means mind, others that it means heart, and some others that it means something entirely different. For example, one of the pioneering Western monks of the tradition—Ajahn Paññāvaḍḍho, claimed that it does not mean mind as we think of it, but something else entirely.[171] Thai Ajahns do not corroborate this, however, since they deem 'mind' to be a suitable term for *citta*, with heart a synonym:

Actually these two words have the same meaning. The Pali word is citta. Sometimes we use the word 'mind' and sometimes the word 'heart'. We are just making use of conventional language. Some may use the word 'mind' and others the word 'heart', but they are talking about the same thing.[172]

The subsequent claim that the liberated *citta* is one and the same as *nibbāna* can seem dubious since the early discourses do not make such an explicit statement.[173] That said, there is support for the claim that the mind is what is liberated, given the stock phrase used to describe the attainment of arahantship by a group of monks:

[170] Ācariya Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno. *Paṭipadā: Venerable Ācariya Mun's Path of Practice—Translated by Ācariya Paññāvaddho*, pp. 553–7

[171] Ajahn Dick Sīlaratano. *Uncommon Wisdom: Life and Teachings of Ajahn Paññāvaḍḍho*, p. 246

[172] Ajahn Dtun. *This is the Path*, 2017, p. 11

[173] Ācariya Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno. *Arahattamagga Arahattaphala: The Path to Arahantship—Translated by Bhikkhu Sīlaratano*. 2012, p. 100

And while this explanation was being given, the minds [cittāni] of the ... monks, through lack of clinging, were released from effluents.[174,175]

This suggests that *citta* tends to be used in the discourses as something distinct from the aggregates. While the discourses do sometimes use the terms *citta*, *mano*, and *viññāṇa* as synonyms, when all instances of their usage are considered, *citta* is primarily used to denote what is liberated.

Part of the controversy is the suggestion that there is some sort of consciousness even after awakening. Some have deemed that an impossibility since by definition, the consciousness aggregate is abandoned at that stage.[176] The discourses themselves have some support for equating *nibbāna* with a 'consciousness without surface' (*viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ*) which is *"not experienced through the allness of the all."*[177] Here the "all" (*sabba*) is equivalent to the six sense bases and their corresponding types of consciousness.[178] In this way, *viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ* is defined to be outside of the consciousness aggregate since the latter is tied to the sense bases. This lends some support to the idea that some sort of awareness remains in the *nibbāna* dimension.

Regardless, resolving the intricacies of what *nibbāna* entails is best left to those who have arrived or are on the cusp of arriving there in practice. The prospect of resolving this matter in a universally acceptable manner with a theoretical argument is unlikely.

Let's now consider how the tradition regards the practice of *jhāna*. The term itself is not commonly used, partly because the pioneers were influenced by the *Visuddhimagga*, where terms like *upacāra samādhi* (access concentration) and *appaṇā samādhi* (absorption concentration) are preferred.[179] However, there is no consensus within the tradition on whether these states correspond to *jhāna*—with some deeming *appaṇā samādhi* as being equivalent to the first *jhāna*, others to the fourth, and some others as neither. Nevertheless, instead of a suggestion that *jhāna* is unnecessary for awakening like in the Burmese tradition, there is an acknowledgement that achieving and mastering such a state is no small endeavor.

When comparing these two meditation movements, the practices of the pioneering Ajahns of the Thai forest tradition seem to align better with the recommendations of the early discourses of the Pāli Canon. However, since the Thai tradition is not a monolithic group with a single consensus technique, it is difficult to broadly assess the efficacy of its practices. This is not the case with the Goenka method, which has a strong focus on discipline, endurance, and establishing a foundation for practice, but lacks an emphasis on body contemplation (*kāyagatāsati*) and *jhāna*.

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[174] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Samyutta Nikāya, SN 22:59*, p. 279
[175] Ibid. SN 35:28, p. 359
[176] Bhante Sujato. *Nibbana is not viññāna. Really, it just isn't*, 2011
[177] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 49*, p. 419
[178] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Samyutta Nikāya, SN 35:23*, p. 291
[179] Ācariya Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno. *Wisdom Develops Samādhi: A Guide to the Practice of the Buddha's Meditation Methods—Translated by Ācariya Paññāvaddho*. 2005, p. 16

In contrast, the Thai tradition has not ignored these areas, even with no concerted effort among its practitioners to align with what the texts say. This makes the recommendations and claims of some of its teachers quite compelling. This is because they have arrived at these conclusions through an emphasis on practice, instead of attempting to practically corroborate a theoretical understanding of the texts.

Appendix

Self and Not-self References in the Pāli Canon

Not-self (anattā)				Not me, Not what I am, Not my self (netaṃ mama nesohamasmi na me so attā)				Not-self Perception (anattasaññā)		I-making & my-making (ahaṅkāra mamaṅkāra)
Views (diṭṭhi)/General	Aggregates (khandha)	Sense Bases (salāyatana)	Phenomena (dhammā)	Views (diṭṭhi)	Aggregates (khandha)	Properties (dhātu)	Sense Bases (salāyatana)	On the stressful (dukkhe)	General	
										SN 18:13
MN 2	MN 35	MN 148	MN 35	MN 8	MN 22	MN 28	MN 144	DN 33	DN 33	SN 18:14
AN 4:49	MN 109	SN 35:1	SN 22:90	AN 10:93	MN 35	MN 140	MN 148	SN 46:78	DN 34	SN 21:2
Tha 19	SN 22:11	SN 35:2	SN 44:10		MN 62	MN 62	SN 35:1	AN 5:72	AN 5:62	SN 22:71
	SN 22:14	SN 35:3	AN 3:137		MN 109	AN 4:177	SN 35:2	AN 5:305	AN 5:304	SN 22:72
	SN 22:15	SN 35:4	AN 7:18		SN 12:70		SN 35:3	AN 6:35	AN 6:112	SN 22:82
	SN 22:16	SN 35:5	Dhp 279		SN 18:13		SN 35:4	AN 6:142	AN 7:624	SN 22:91
	SN 22:17	SN 35:6	Tha 15:1		SN 18:14		SN 35:5	AN 7:48	AN 9:1	SN 22:92
	SN 22:20	SN 35:9			SN 22:8		SN 35:6	AN 7:49	AN 9:3	SN 22:124
	SN 22:21	SN 35:12			SN 22:15		SN 35:54	AN 7:625	AN 10:57	SN 22:125
	SN 22:42	SN 35:34			SN 22:16		SN 35:55	AN 9:16	AN 10:59	SN 28:1
	SN 22:45	SN 35:61			SN 22:17		SN 35:70	AN 9:93	AN 10:60	SN 28:2
	SN 22:46	SN 35:125			SN 22:45		SN 35:167	AN 10:56	AN 10:238	SN 28:3
	SN 22:55	SN 35:128			SN 22:46		SN 35:168	AN 10:237	Ud 4:1	SN 28:4
	SN 22:59	SN 35:132			SN 22:49		SN 35:169			SN 28:9
	SN 22:68	SN 35:147			SN 22:59		SN 35:170			SN 35:52
	SN 22:72	SN 35:155			SN 22:71		SN 35:171			AN 3:32
	SN 22:76	SN 35:158			SN 22:72		SN 35:172			AN 3:33
	SN 22:77	SN 35:163			SN 22:76		SN 35:173			AN 7:49
	SN 22:79	SN 35:166			SN 22:77		SN 35:174			Ud 6:6
	SN 22:82	SN 35:167			SN 22:79		SN 44:7			
	SN 22:85	SN 35:168			SN 22:82					
	SN 22:90	SN 35:169			SN 22:91					
	SN 22:143	SN 35:170			SN 22:92					
	SN 22:144	SN 35:171			SN 22:118					
	SN 22:145	SN 35:172			SN 22:119					

	SN 22:149	SN 35:173		SN 22:124					
	SN 23:17	SN 35:174		SN 22:125					
	AN 7:100	SN 35:177		SN 24:31					
		SN 35:180		SN 24:32					
		SN 35:187		SN 44:2					
		AN 7:96		AN 3:134					
		AN 10:60		AN 4:181					
		AN 11:25							
		AN 11:461							

As Metaphysically Not-self		
Aggregates (*khandha*)	**Sense Bases (*salāyatana*)**	**Phenomena/Views (*dhammā/diṭṭhi*)**
SN 22:21	SN 35:9	AN 3:137
SN 22:59	SN 35:12	MN 22
SN 22:68	SN 35:34	AN 4:49
SN 22:72	SN 35:35	
SN 22:85	SN 35:61	
SN 22:90	SN 35:125	
SN 22:143	SN 35:128	
SN 22:144	SN 35:147	
SN 22:145	SN 35:155	
SN 23:17	SN 35:158	
	SN 35:163	
	SN 35:166	
	SN 35:177	
	SN 35:180	
	SN 35:187	
	MN 148	

Type	Count	Percentage
Not-self (*anattā*)	72	41%
Not me, Not what I am, Not my self (*netaṃ mama nesohamasmi na me so attā*)	58	33%
Not-self perception (*anattasaññā*)	26	15%
I-making & my-making (*ahaṅkāramamaṅkāra*)	20	11%
Total	*176*	*100%*
As Metaphysically Not-self	29	16%
Existence/Non-existence of the self (Ontological)	0	0%

Type	Sutta Count	Percentage
Aggregates (khandha)	60	46%
Sense Bases (saḷāyatana)	54	42%
Phenomena (dhammā)	7	5%
Properties (dhātu)	4	3%
Views (diṭṭhi)	3	2%
General	2	2%
Total	*130*	*100%*

Dependent Co-arising References in the Pāli Canon

Ignorance (*avijjā*) Fabrications (*saṅkhāra*) Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) Name-&-Form (*nāmarūpa*) Sense Bases (*saḷāyatana*) Contact (*phassa*) Feeling (*vedanā*) Craving (*taṇhā*)	Sense Bases (*saḷāyatana*) Contact (*phassa*) Feeling (*vedanā*) Craving (*taṇhā*)	Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) Name-&-Form (*nāmarūpa*) Sense Bases (*saḷāyatana*) Contact (*phassa*) Feeling (*vedanā*) Craving (*taṇhā*)
MN 9*	MN 148	SN 12:39*
MN 38	SN 12:12	SN 12:58*
MN 115	SN 12:24	SN 12:59
SN 12:1-10	SN 12:43-45	SN 12:65
SN 12:11*	SN 12:52-57*	SN 12:67
SN 12:13-14*	SN 12:60	DN 14
SN 12:15-18	SN 35:106-107	DN 15*
SN 12:20-22	SN 35:113	AN 3:62*
SN 12:23*		
SN 12:27		
SN 12:28-30*		
SN 12:33*		
SN 12:34-37		
SN 12:41-42		
SN 12:46-51		
SN 12:61		
SN 12:68-70		
SN 12:71-81*		
SN 12:82-83*		
SN 12:84-93		
SN 55:28		

AN 10:92		
Ud 1:1-3		

Discourses denoted with a * do list the dependent co-arising formula they are grouped into, but may have an unconventional way of denoting it or have slight differences (like missing a single node.)

Formula Variant	Sutta Count	Percentage
Ignorance (*avijjā*) Fabrications (*saṅkhāra*) Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) Name-&-Form (*nāmarūpa*) Sense Bases (*saḷāyatana*) Contact (*phassa*) Feeling (*vedanā*) Craving (*taṇhā*)	63	72%
Sense Bases (*saḷāyatana*) Contact (*phassa*) Feeling (*vedanā*) Craving (*taṇhā*)	16	18%
Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) Name-&-Form (*nāmarūpa*) Sense Bases (*saḷāyatana*) Contact (*phassa*) Feeling (*vedanā*) Craving (*taṇhā*)	8	9%
Total	*87*	*100%*

Glossary

English—Pāli

action: *kamma*

appropriate attention: *yoniso manasikāra*

awakening: *bodhi*

awareness-release: *cetovimutti*

cessation: *nirodha*

consciousness: *viññāna*

not-self: *anatta*

origination: *samudaya*

passing away: *nirodha*

perception: *saññā*

phenomenon: *dhamma*

property: *dhātu*

contemplative: *samaṇa*

discernment: *paññā*

discernment-release: *paññāvimutti*

dispassion: *virāga*

goodwill: *mettā*

intention: *cetanā*

release: *vimutti*

self-identification: *sakkhāya*

sensuality: *kāma*

skillful: *kusala*

stream-entry: *sotāpatti*

tranquility: *samatha*

Aggregate: *Khandha.* Any of the five types of phenomena that serve as objects of clinging and as bases for a sense of self: form, feeling, perception, mental fabrications, and consciousness.

Becoming: *Bhava.* A sense of identity within a particular world of experience—a process that begins within the mind and that allows for physical and mental birth on any of three levels: the level of sensuality, form, and formlessness.

Clinging: *Upādāna.* Takes four forms: to sensuality, to habits & practices, to views, and to theories about the self.

Effluent: *Āsava.* Four qualities—sensuality, views, becoming, and ignorance—that "flow out" of the mind and create the flood (*ogha*) of the round of death & rebirth.

Fabrication: *Saṅkhāra.* Literally means "putting together", and carries connotations of jerry-rigged artificiality. It is applied to physical and to mental processes, as well as to the products of those processes. Various words and phrases have been suggested as renderings, such as "formation", "determination", "force", and "constructive activity". However, "fabrication", in both of its senses, as the process of fabrication and the fabricated things that result, seems the best equivalent for capturing the connotations as well as the denotations of the term.

Fetter: *Saṃyojana.* The ten fetters that bind the mind to the round of death and rebirth are (1) identity views, (2) uncertainty, (3) grasping at habits and practices, (4) sensual passion, (5) irritation, (6) passion for form, (7) passion for formlessness, (8) conceit, (9) restlessness, and (10) ignorance.

Inconstant: *Anicca.* The usual rendering is "impermanent". However, the antonym of the term, *nicca*, carries connotations of constancy and reliability; and as anicca is used to emphasize the point that conditioned phenomena are unreliable as a basis for true happiness, this seems a useful rendering for conveying this point.

Obsession: *Anusaya.* Usually translated as "underlying tendency" or "latent tendency". These translations are based on the etymology of the term, which literally means, "to lie down with". However, in actual usage, the related verb (*anuseti*) means to be obsessed with something, for one's thoughts to return and "lie down with it" (or, in our idiom, to "dwell on it") over and over again.

Stress: *Dukkha.* Traditionally translated in the commentaries as, "that which is hard to bear," is notorious for having no truly equivalent word, but stress—in its basic sense as a strain on body and mind, seems as close as it can get. In the Canon, dukkha applies both to physical and to mental phenomena, ranging from the intense stress of acute anguish or pain to the innate burdensomeness of even the most subtle mental or physical fabrications.

Unbinding: *Nibbāna.* Because it is used to denote not only the Buddhist goal, but also the extinguishing of a fire, it is usually rendered as "extinguishing" or, even worse, "extinction". However, a closer look at ancient Indian views of the workings of fire shows that people of the Buddha's time felt that a fire, in going out, did not go out of existence but was simply freed from its agitation and attachment to its fuel. Thus, when applied to the Buddhist goal, the primary connotation of nibbana is one of release and liberation. According to the commentaries, the literal meaning of the word nibbana is "unbinding", and as this is a rare case where the literal and contextual meanings of a term coincide, this seems to be the ideal equivalent.

Pāli—English

Arahant: A "worthy one" or "pure one;" a person whose mind is free of defilement and thus not destined for further rebirth. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples.

Dhamma: (1) Event, action, (2) a phenomenon in and of itself, (3) mental quality, (4) doctrine, teaching, (5) unbinding (although there are passages describing unbinding as the abandoning of all dhammas).

Jhāna: A heightened state of mental stillness involving a sense of joy and ease.

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