

# A Mind Revealed

by

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Sabbadānam dhammadānam jināti.  
The gift of Dhamma surpasses all other gifts.

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## **Translator's Foreword**

A Mind Revealed contains translated discourses of the Dutiyadvayam sutta given by Venerable Dhammajīva to the resident monks and yogis at the Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya.

Although relatively concise in comparison to the other detailed teachings of the Buddha, the Dutiyadvayam sutta is comprehensive in its analysis of sensory consciousness, its causality, operation and cessation. It is helpful in its discussion of sensory contact, its associated feelings and their dependent origination and cessation.

Sensory consciousness is of course a theoretically complex exposition of the Buddha's teachings. It is conceptually challenging and technically subtle to the unenlightened mind. In this book however, Venerable Dhammajīva, brings the analysis to one's own breath and meditation practice. He emphasizes the benefits of commencing this theoretically complex understanding with an awareness of body-consciousness – how sensory consciousness could be observed by noting the breath and its contact with the body. He asks us, practicing yogis, to observe the sensations experienced through this contact, be it a coarseness, a coolness, a heat, an inward gush or an outward release – all being manifestations of sensory contact. Gradually, we are instructed to progress, with continuous awareness of the breath to a point where the breath, that was once perceivable, disappears. Through this process, he aims to explain the causality and dependent origination of sensory contact, its associated feelings, perception and their cessation. These instructions are supported by Venerable Dhammajīva's lucid and direct style of teaching.

Anyone sitting in the audience when this meditation master imparts his wisdom would know the inspiration that he can instil in one's heart. His straightforward candour, his strict discipline and adherence to the vinaya, his dedication and generosity towards his students and the simple magnetism of his presence is impossible to translate into the words contained in this book. However, it is hoped that at least a glimpse of his detailed understanding of the Buddha's wisdom, which he himself has tested through direct and dedicated practice, is conveyed in this translation.

You will note that some Pāli terms remain in their original form. This has been done to introduce a precision of meaning that is only available in the Buddha's teachings. However, a glossary of some of these terms has been included. Whilst the translation attempts to impart the necessary meaning that has been conveyed in the Sinhalese medium, some of the discussion has been omitted to preserve the flow of the editing process.

(October, 2008)

## ***About the Author***

Venerable Uda Eriyagama Dhammajīva has been a meditation master for over eleven years and is presently the Chief Resident Teacher of the Meetirigala Nissarana Vanaya, a monastery in the strict forest tradition in Sri Lanka. It is one of Sri Lanka's most respected meditation monasteries. It was founded in 1968 and was led under the guidance of the great Venerable Matara Sri Naṇarāma Mahāthera.

Venerable Uda Eriyagama Dhammajīva also spent several years of training under Ovadācāriya Sayādaw U. Panditābhivamsa, a leading Burmese meditation master who follows the lineage of the great Venerable Mahāsi Sayadaw.

Venerable Uda Eriyagama Dhammajīva is fluent in Sinhalese, English and Burmese and has translated many meditation guide books from Burmese to English and to Sinhalese. He is also the author of numerous books in both English and Sinhalese languages.

## Chapter 1

### **Causality of Sensory Consciousness**

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa  
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa  
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Dvayaṃ bhikkhave, paṭicca viññāṇaṃ sambhoti  
Kathaṅca, bhikkhave dvayaṃ paṭicca viññāṇaṃ sambhoti  
Cakkhuṅca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ  
Cakkhu aniccāṃ vipariṇāmi aññathābhāvi  
Rūpā aniccā vipariṇāmino aññathābhāvino  
Itthetaṃ dvayaṃ calaṅceva vyayaṅca aniccaṃ  
vipariṇāmi aññathābhāvi  
Cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ aniccaṃ vipariṇāmi aññathābhāvi  
Yopi hetu yopi paccayo cakkhuvīññāṇassa uppādāya, sopi hetu  
sopi paccayo anicco vipariṇāmi aññathābhāvī

The Dutiyadvayam sutta is contained in the chapter dedicated to ‘Saḷāyatana’ in the Saṃyutta Nikāya. It discusses the operation of the six senses (saḷāyatana) and the associated feelings, how the mind perceives sensory contact and the perceptions and mental formations resulting from it.

Consciousness (viññāṇa) is the discerning ability of our mind. It enables us to separately identify sense objects. Consciousness is the primordial form of our being. Even if thoughts or feelings are absent, as long as we have a consciousness, we are alive.

The common misconception is that consciousness is enduring and permanent. It was thought that if the five khandhas were compartmentalised, the body, the coarse aspect, is at the exterior. Then there are feelings, within which there is perception and mental preparations. Thoughts are within that layer of feeling, perception and mental preparations. Very last is consciousness, being the most subtle of the five khandhas. From this misconception emanated a popular myth that consciousness shadows a person from birth to death and then from life to life.

Yet, as the Buddha preaches, consciousness is impermanent and it causes suffering and is devoid of a self. It is not enduring. It is a result of causality and is subject to dependent origination. It arises due to two (dvaya) factors (dvayaṃ bhikkhave, paṭicca viññāṇaṃ, sambhoti).

### **Causality of eye-consciousness**

When the eye sees a visual object, eye-consciousness arises. Eye-consciousness is dependent on the operation of the eye coming within the avenue (of the senses) (āpāthagata) with the visual object seen by it at that moment (cakkhuṅca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ). All visual objects, (in addition to sounds, smells, tastes and tangibles) are rūpa. To see (colourful)

objects, we must have a healthy eye. When an object comes within range of the sensitivity of the eye, eye-consciousness arises. Without an object, eye-consciousness is inactive. To see the object, there must be colour, visible form and light. For example, eye-consciousness is inoperative in darkness.

Generally, during a session of walking meditation, you will retain mindfulness on the movement and the touch of the feet. When you stop at the end of the walking path, it is common to lose the continuity of mindfulness of the footsteps and for the mind to wander and pursue an external sense impingement caught by eye-consciousness. Immediately, the mind's attention will be taken to the visual object. At that moment, you become a person who is experiencing "seeing" different from one who previously experienced the sensations of the feet touching the ground. If you become aware of this transition, then you will not break the continuity of mindfulness, even though the object changes. If not, you are likely to continue with the process of "seeing" and unmindfully indulge in it. To recognise the visual object and identify its attributes and form, it must be viewed for at least four to five thought moments continuously. If you see it only fleetingly then it does not penetrate your cognitive capacity. So, by not allowing your attention to continue with the visual object, your attention will return to the movement and the touch of the feet as you continue with your walking meditation.

### ***Impermanence of eye-consciousness***

The eye is impermanent as it is subject to old age and deterioration. It dies with the physical death that marks the end of our lives. Scientific experiments have proved that every seven years, our bodies undergo a complete replacement of all the cells comprising it. This is a result of metabolic bodily cycles. The eye changes and disintegrates. It grows old. It is impermanent. If we personalise the eye and create an identity associated with it, we experience great suffering because, by its very nature, it is subject to change and death.

Similarly, the objects impinging upon the eye's sensitivity are also impermanent and subject to change. Just like our eyes, the objects that are seen by it also follow the same course of deterioration and disintegration. If the two causes underpinning eye-consciousness are impermanent, then, eye-consciousness must also be impermanent and subject to change. So we experience great suffering by attaching to what we see, because the eye and the visual objects seen by it are inherently impermanent and subject to change.

All visual objects are external and separate from us. They wear out, disintegrate, deteriorate and diminish over time. Whenever one claims them as "mine", he/she will experience great sorrow, as they are subject to change and are impermanent by their very nature (*aniccam viparināmi aññathābhāvi*). If one does not claim them, they just arise and pass away according to their cycles of nature without causing any suffering.

A lighted candle will dissolve with each burning flame. The candle, gradually dissolves, then evaporates, giving rise to light. As long as the flame burns, the candle melts. When it dissolves completely, the flame burns out. In a similar way, an eye-consciousness that arises due to two impermanent causes which, by their nature are subject to change must also follow the same course of impermanence (*sopi hetu sopi paccayo anicco vipariṇāmī aññathābhāvi*).

## ***Observing the causality of eye-consciousness in practice***

During a session of sitting meditation, if your attention is focussed on the in and out breathing, you can observe the operation of consciousness, caused by each of the sense faculties and see how the mind, in turn, gives its attention to each one of them. When you see this transaction, clearly and continuously, you have the continuity of mindfulness to observe how you change from being one who “hears” to one who “thinks”, to one who experiences bodily pains. When mindfulness is continuous and sharp, the object experienced through sensory consciousness loses its attraction. Its force or strength as an “object” and its appeal is tempered substantially. When we observe the mind’s shift from one sense faculty to another, we no longer pay attention to the content of the object. When the detail in thoughts and pains is no longer observed, they will not hinder the continuity of awareness on the breath. When your attention is retained on the mind and its movement from body-consciousness to ear-consciousness, the detail in thoughts, sounds or pains becomes irrelevant.

Once, a yogi undertaking a retreat, climbed over a nearby mountain that overlooked the sea. It was the end of the day and the sun was setting. He silently enjoyed the beauty of the setting sun, its vibrancy, colour and peaceful descent into the ocean. He thought to himself, “how beautiful this world is, yet people are so caught up in worldly pursuits and never pause to appreciate the beauty that unfolds naturally. They take pictures of these beautiful images or try to capture them in paintings and take them home to be appreciated later, when they have some respite from their busy daily schedules”. Upon his return, he recollected his experience to his teacher. His teacher listened, but explained that in fact, had he paid attention to the operation of eye-consciousness, he would have realised that his mind was far more intriguing and beautiful than the setting sun. Otherwise, he could not have appreciated the beauty of the scene that was unfolding before him.

If you are absorbed in the beauty of an external projection, then you betray the beauty of the mind receiving it. In reality, the intrigue and beauty of the external is only a projection of the mind. It is the state of your mind that is externally projected to make what you see appear so special! When you mindfully observe the operation of your mind, you see that the quality attributed to the external object is in fact really just a projection of your own state of mind.

We frequently see beautiful objects through our eyes. We fix our attention on them and become attracted to them. As the Buddha taught, the operation of our mind is far more intriguing than the objects we see with our eyes. To appreciate the beauty before us, our mind must become even more beautiful. A mind that is in an unpleasant state will only see unpleasantness in this world. However, a beautiful mind will always be able to see the noteworthy qualities. This is the reality of perception and external projection.

There is no difference in sensory impingement on a mind that is enlightened and that which is not. The difference is in the projection of the qualities attributed to the external object. An enlightened being does not indulge in the experience created by the operation of the consciousness. Rather, he or she sees the external object separately from the sense faculty receiving it and becomes aware of their interaction. An unenlightened mind will usually indulge in sensory consciousness. An enlightened being will know the operation of sensory consciousness

as “seeing”, “hearing”, “smelling”, “tasting” (etc.) in addition to the triple aspects of impermanence, suffering and non-self underpinning them. So the reaction to external objects is one of equanimity. It is one of ‘choiceless’ awareness and detachment.

It is not the “quantity” of sensory experience that measures progress in life experience. Seeing more visual objects or experiencing numerous sounds does not make one superior to others. Rather, it is the capability to correctly observe the operation of the mind and its external projections that marks progress in mental development.

If you are a cop and want to catch the ring-leader of a gang, you don’t rely on always running after the thieves, attempting to catch them, do you? The skill of a good cop is to know the modus operandi of the thieves, catch them and question them to extract as much information as possible about the gang and map out the operations and the location of their ring leader. Simply following the thieves around will not take the cop to the real mastermind who orders that various crimes be executed by the gang of thieves. Similarly, to know the operation of the eye, it is pointless to chase after the external sense impingements. The more you follow after it, the more you take your attention away from the mastermind. Instead, you must catch the eye and the mind receiving the visual projection to really comprehend the operation of eye-consciousness.

So, how can we observe the operation of our eye-consciousness in practice? Say you are practising walking meditation – as you walk up and down the walking path, your awareness will be taken to some visual object seen through the eye. Without reacting to it by attaching to it or rejecting it, you must note it as “object, object” or “form, form”. Then you become aware of “seeing”. You then note it as “seeing, seeing” (and not as “object, object”) and become aware that you are experiencing “seeing”. The more advanced state of mental noting is to note it as a process – “seeing, seeing”. This leaves less room for the interaction of perception and memory (*saññā*). It is *saññā* that fuels the unconscious compulsion to enhance our identities by identifying with the visual object, by building it into a mental structure as an illusory identity of a “self”.

If your mindfulness is sharp, you will note that the experience gained through the eye and the foot touching the ground are both simply states of mind characterised by just “knowing”. When mindfulness is continuous and steadfast, your experience of the sense impingements is neutral. Both, the body-contact (*kāya samphassa*) and the eye-contact (*cakkhu samphassa*) experienced are just states of “knowing.” You realise that this is the point of demarcation in sensory operation. It is from this point of “knowing” that priority is given to the impingement of sensory consciousness and a person changes from one who “sees” to one who “hears” and so forth. When you remain with just “knowing”, you remain in a state of primordial equilibrium. You are at home. It is from this junction of “knowing” that you note sensory experience. The junction of “knowing” is an impartial state of mind.

Due to the magnetism of the eye towards a visible object, it is difficult to backtrack from the observation of the visible object to the knowing mind. So, it is recommended that you commence with body-consciousness (the breath) and gradually go back to the “knowing” state of mind that appears to be unrelated to the five physical senses. During a session of sitting meditation, when you observe the in-breath and the out-breath continuously, from the beginning, through the middle and to the end, the breath gradually becomes inconspicuous and you can no longer discriminate the two processes as in-breath and out-breath. As there is nothing concretely available for your observation, you are confined to the point at which the breath appears to have

disappeared. So, in other words, there is a change from noting the movement (and the touch of the “in-breath” and the “out-breath”) to just awareness of the neutral, “knowing” state of mind.

When the breath is observed continuously like this, it becomes rather boring. Seeing it again and again can become tedious and monotonous. When the breath becomes inconspicuous, being in a state of just “knowing” may seem even more unstimulating. So, just by observing the breath, you can see how it changes from gross to subtle, from interesting to boring. You see its impermanence and how it is unsatisfactory as it changes and results in boredom. At least theoretically, one must understand this process.

Often, we are bewildered by the concept of an entity, both in ourselves and what we experience through sensory consciousness. If we dissect sensory operation, we can gradually understand the true nature of our experience. We need to understand impermanence by knowing the attributes of impermanence and see the dissolution, disintegration and deterioration in all existence. To understand impermanence, we need to contemplate impermanence in our daily activities; realise the truth of impermanence underpinning all existence and directly experience the impermanent nature of phenomena during meditation. In all rūpa (the sense impingements and the sense faculties), we must see the dissolution, disintegration and wearing out nature. See how they change from one moment to the next. So, in everything we see, hear, smell, taste or think, we must observe the impermanence, dissolution and disintegration. When our meditation gains momentum, we directly observe the impermanence in all matter (both the sense faculties and the sense impingements). We gain an understanding of the impermanence of consciousness: if the two factors upon which consciousness is dependent are impermanent and subject to change, then consciousness will (and must) follow the same course of nature.

When you are mindful, you know that the object seen through the eye and the person “seeing” it are separate and independent. It is consciousness that connects the subject and the object (the internal and external). It is the external object and the sense faculty that gives rise to eye-consciousness. This process is inextricably linked in all sensory experience. The contact between the subject (the sense faculty) and the external object activates eye-consciousness. Then the external object becomes something of interest, disinterest or indifference. Unless the external object captivates our eye-consciousness and we attribute a mental quality to what we see, it will just exist in its own state. It will just arise and pass away without our attention or interest. So, we see how our consciousness connects us to our surroundings and creates the world within which we operate. When we impart a “self” into this process and attribute greed, conceit and self-view to all that we experience, we create a conceptual reality around our existence.

Dvayaṃ, bhikkhave, paṭicca viññāṇaṃ sambhoti  
Kathaṅca, bhikkhave, dvayaṃ paṭicca viññāṇaṃ sambhoti  
Kāyaṅca paṭicca phoṭṭabbe ca uppajjati kāyaviññāṇaṃ  
Kāyo anicco vipariṇāmi aññathābhāvi  
Phoṭṭabbā aniccā vipariṇāmino aññathābhāvino  
Itthetaṃ dvayaṃ calañceva vyayaṅca aniccaṃ  
vipariṇāmi aññathābhāvi  
Kāyaviññāṇaṃ aniccaṃ vipariṇāmi aññathābhāvi  
Yopi hetu yopi paccayo kāyaviññāṇassa uppādāya, sopi hetu  
sopi paccayo anicco vipariṇāmi aññathābhāvi

Consciousness is dependent on two (dvayaṃ) factors: the object (sense impingement) and the sense faculty. One of the six sense faculties comes within range of the object entering it to give rise to sensory consciousness: eye-consciousness; ear-consciousness; nose-consciousness and so forth. In the next section, we will briefly discuss the causality of body-consciousness and its operation by observing the movement of the breath during a session of sitting meditation. Although, the subject of sensory consciousness is theoretically complex, observing the operation of body-consciousness and its causality during meditation is not such a complicated task for a practising yogi.

## ***Causality of body-consciousness***

The body makes contact with a tangible object to activate body-consciousness. To experience the contact of this impingement, the body must be alive. The body cannot experience consciousness or sensitivity unless it makes contact with a tangible object. Without a tangible object, body-consciousness is inactive.

Because eye-consciousness and ear-consciousness are particularly strong in respect to their magnetism towards external sense impingements, the Buddha recommends that yogis should go to a quiet place and close their eyes before commencing Ānāpānasati bhāvanā (Mindfulness on the in-breath and the out-breath). To avoid the distractions that could arise due to eye-consciousness, you must either go to a place where there are no visual objects (which is near impossible) or close your eyes. For much of our daily lives, we experience the operation of eye-consciousness. It is the dominant sensory consciousness in our realm of sensory existence. When we go to a quiet place and close our eyes, eye-consciousness and ear-consciousness, which are both very powerful tools of distraction, become rather inactive. It is only when this is done that our attention could be directed to the body.

So, being seated in an erect posture, we close our eyes and give priority to body-consciousness. We become aware of our posture, of being seated on the floor in an erect manner, and that our postures are balanced and symmetrical like the pyramids in Egypt. Body muscles must be relaxed. If you hear sounds, your mind's attention will be taken away to the sounds that have impinged upon your ear-drum. Just become aware that your attention is not with body-consciousness and is with the hearing. Then, if thoughts are continually arising, don't reject this process, but simply be aware that mind-consciousness has taken priority. Make a soft mental note of the thought as "thought, thought." When the thoughts cease, come back to the movement and the touch of the in-breath and the out-breath.

When you observe the breath, you must note the in-breath and the out-breath separately and become aware of the most prominent touching point at which the breath manifests. If your attention is confined to this point, the operation of body-consciousness can be observed. This may be at the tip of the nose, top of the upper lip, the throat area, or the rising and falling of the abdomen (etc.). Whatever it is, let it manifest in its natural course. Discerning the in-breath and the out-breath is possible because of consciousness. With the discerning ability of your consciousness, you can observe the rubbing sensation of an inward flow of the 'in-breath' and an outward flow of the exhalation. With continuous mindfulness, you can identify the air-draft touching your body and its associated sensations. You may note the in-breath as an inward

rubbing sensation and the out-breath as a quick exhaled release. With the assistance of your consciousness, you can identify the operation of the in-breath and the out-breath separately and discriminately. In this way, the operation of body-consciousness and the causes underpinning its arising and cessation can be observed.

When you are unaware of the operation of sensory consciousness in your chaotic and hasty daily life, you act like a mad monkey, jumping from one experience to another. If you slow down the pace and become mindful, you can see how the mind moves swiftly from one sense faculty to the other. Instead of just indulging in what you see and hear, you become aware of “seeing” and “hearing” as a process and observe the operation of sensory consciousness. To see which one of your sense faculties is activated at a given moment, by a sense impingement, you must pause with mindfulness. When you are mindful, you note that your attention is with ear-consciousness and not with mind-consciousness or eye-consciousness (etc.).

You can draw an analogy between the operation of consciousness and the performance of a stage play. When you watch a stage play, often a spot light moves across the stage to focus on different areas, as well as particular characters involved in a scene. When you simply follow the spot light, as intended by the director, you recognise the actors and become aware of the plot as it actions that unfolds. Similarly, when the spot light of mindfulness is projected on the performance of sensory consciousness, occurring in each of the six sense faculties, you can see, which aspect of the performance is in operation (whether ear-consciousness or eye-consciousness, etc. is the main actor). It may be the eye-consciousness seeing a visual object, or the ear, listening to some music or the nose experiencing a scent. When you mindfully become aware of sensory consciousness, you can note which part of the play is being performed and observe the drama, that is the performance of your ‘consciousness’!

As a yogi, you must note the process involved in body-consciousness: “I sat down, closed my eyes and experienced an inward flow - this was the in-breath. Then an out-breath occurred. I noted it as such because it was an exhalation, an outward rubbing sensation”. In this way, you observe the movement and touch of the in-breath and the out-breath, separately and independently, as they occur in their natural rhythms. To fully understand the process, however, it is imperative that the attributes of the process are observed in minute detail and with accuracy.

Then you will see how body-consciousness (which arises due to two causes that are by their nature, impermanent) is subject to change and cessation. The body is subject to old age and death. The breath just arises and passes away. As the two ingredients underpinning body-consciousness are impermanent, body consciousness must also follow the same course. The experiences gained through body-consciousness change from one moment to the next. For example, if you hold anything, even a piece of cotton-wool, in your hand, the experience of it will change with time. Initially it may seem light, but with the passing of time it will seem to become heavier and heavier, and more and more painful.

You can vividly see the changes in the breath and its touch, by observing continuously the operation of the breath during a session of sitting meditation. If the two causes upon which body-consciousness is dependent are impermanent and subject to change, then how can body-consciousness be permanent and enduring? The in-breath changes from the beginning, through the middle and to the end. The out-breath also undergoes the same process. The first five minutes of a session of sitting meditation are different to the next five minutes. The manifestation and

experience of the breath changes from one moment to the next. When you are continually mindful of each passing in-breath and out-breath, you observe how the sense impingement underpinning body-consciousness changes from one moment to the next.

When you practice like this, you will reach a stage where you can observe the thoughts that arise in your mind and the sounds coming within range of your ear-drum, along with undertaking meditation on the breath. Although your attention shifts from the breath to the thought and comes back to the breath towards the end of an in-breath, there is continuity of mindfulness, because you noted the operation of the mind. You observed how your attention was with the breath – how it was taken away to the ear and then came back to the body. In this way, you directly observe how the mind operates and interacts with sensory consciousness.

Similarly, during walking meditation, you may see many visual objects, even though your attention is supposed to be on the touch sensation of the feet. But, if you are aware of the shift of attention and are not caught up in the detail of the visual object, you will naturally come back to body-consciousness (bodily sensations).

Habitually, we are immersed in the detail and not this shift. If we just remain ‘choiceless’ and become aware of the six-fold operation of sensory consciousness, observing the operation of the mind and its attention, moving from one faculty to the next in our day-to-day activities, mindfully, we will not be engulfed by the variety in sensory experience. When we mindfully observe how the mind receives sensory consciousness, we press the “pause” button in our samsāric cycles. If we just indulge in the distractions presented through sensory contact, we are assured of nothing but another round in the carousel of sensory experience which simply takes us from one life to the next in the endless cycle of samsāra.

## Chapter 2

### Operation of Sensory Contact

Yā kho, bhikkhave, imesaṃ tiṇṇaṃ dhammānaṃ sangati, sannipāto, samavāyo, ayaṃ vuccati cakkhusamphasso

The previous chapter considered the causality of eye-consciousness and body-consciousness. If the eye sensitivity catches the sight of a visual object (paṭicca rūpe), giving rise to eye-consciousness and the mind becomes aware of it, “seeing” occurs. Unless the attention is focussed on eye-consciousness, “seeing” does not occur. Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The concurrence of the three is contact (cakkhusamphassa).

The operation of sensory contact can be seen during a session of sitting meditation by observing the movement and touch of the air-draft, moving in and out. When an air-draft touches the body, it gives rise to body-consciousness. When the mind becomes aware of it, you experience it. Body-contact can also be observed when the feet touch the ground during walking meditation; when wearing robes or washing the alms bowl. When the body touches an object, giving rise to body-consciousness and the mind becomes aware of their concurrence, there is sensory (body) contact (kāya samphassa). At this stage, the mind separates itself from the sensory consciousness occurring through the other five sense faculties, giving priority to body-consciousness.

Observing the detail in sensory contact

Generally, the characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta) and the modes (ākāra) of a visual object, which has come within the sphere of perception through eye-consciousness can only be described after “seeing” occurs for four to five cognitive processes. Without fixing one's attention upon it for four to five thought moments continuously, we can't separately identify the shape and the manner of the object that has activated our eye-consciousness. If an object is seen only fleetingly, we will not have the capacity to describe its characteristics (lingha), signs (nimitta) and modes (ākāra). But, if four to five thought moments pass with our attention retained on the same visual object, we can describe it with some discerning clarity. In the early stages of practice, many yogis find it difficult to give a detailed account of their meditation on the object of observation. Gradually, with the continuity of awareness and diligent attention, a yogi becomes skilled in recollecting how the primary object was observed in terms of its' intrinsic characteristics, signs and modes in practice.

Similarly, with the breath, it is only after observing it continually for four to five thought moments that a yogi can describe the movement of the air-draft - the characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta) and the modes (ākāra). With an in-breath, a yogi can observe its movement, noting its natural characteristics. With the out-breath, a yogi can note and clearly know that an exhalation is taking place.

In this way, you become aware that you are breathing out (and not inhaling), because you are experiencing an outward flow of air or an outward rubbing sensation, discretely from that of the in-breath. With precise aiming and diligent effort, you then become aware of the in-breath from

the beginning, through the middle and to the end. Throughout this process, you are observing the characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta) and the modes (ākāra) of the in-breath. The out-breath must also be observed in a similar manner. When there is choiceless awareness of the breath as it manifests, observing its characteristics (lingha), signs (nimitta) and modes (ākāra) just as they are, there is no room for past perceptions to operate, as continuous mindfulness meets the object directly, as and when it arises. This is the beginning of seeing things as they are.

Sounds, in general may impinge upon your ear-drum, during a session of sitting meditation. But, if you are diligently engaged with the in-breath and the out-breath, you will have uninterrupted mindfulness. In this way, you need to train your mind to observe the characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta) and the modes (ākāra) of the in-breath and the out-breath, clearly and separately. Sometimes, the in-breath will manifest as coolness and the out-breath as a warm sensation or a warm outward flow. Whatever the discerning attributes - characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta) and the modes (ākāra) of the two processes - just note them and become aware of their operation.

The more detail you observe in sensory contact, the more direct experience you gain about sensory operation. Sensory contact is a very fine and subtle observation. It is difficult to catch without sharp and well-developed mindfulness. Further, it is difficult to relate the experience to your teacher during an interview. Ordinarily we are aware of the experience of sensory contact (i.e. the coolness of the in-breath or the warm outward flow of an out-breath). By the time we experience sensory contact it has already occurred and passed. Hence, you have to diligently and continuously follow the process of the breath, moving in and out.

As you mature in your practice, thoughts or sounds may arise in your stream of consciousness while walking, but, you will not be disturbed by them. Instead, the mindfulness will be continuous. Bodily pains will occur, especially after being seated in the same position for a while. Although the mind becomes aware of the pain, it will not be distracted to an extent where its attention is taken away from the primary object (the breath). It is like walking along a busy street. There may be many vehicles passing by and pedestrians crossing a road full of hawkers. Without waiting for the road to clear, interfering with the pedestrians or worrying about the number of vehicles on the road, you just continue to walk along the street, skilfully without any reaction, uninterrupted by external distractions. When your practice matures, you will continually be with the breath, from the beginning, through to the middle and to the end amidst distractions such as pain, thoughts or sounds. As you do this, you observe its characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta) and the modes (ākāra) and note them clearly and continuously. This clarity of awareness and practice will enable you to clearly describe your experience to your teacher and discuss the attributes that are unique to the in-breath, compared to the out-breath. This is a real break through in vipassanā practice.

When we observe the movement of the air-draft, “in” and “out” of our body, we can describe body-contact. This is a very subtle observation. Generally, we describe the experience of sensory contact by recollecting our perception or the mental formations associated with it. Sensory contact is particularly discernible when the mind develops to a stage of vipassanā concentration (kanika samādhi). At this stage of momentary concentration, the mind notes each and every object, as and when it arises, discretely and without delay.

As the Buddha taught, as long as the eye, a visual object and the resulting eye-consciousness

operate together and the mind becomes aware of this operation, there is contact through the eye (cakkhusamphassa) and we experience “seeing” (yā kho bikkhave imesaṃ tiṇṇaṃ dhammānaṃ sangati, sannipāto samavāyo ayaṃ vuccati cakkhusamphasso). When we observe this process for four to five thought moments continuously, we can describe what we are seeing. Then, the Buddha teaches how eye-contact is subject to change and is impermanent. If eye-contact occurs because of a particular factor (or factors), that is (are) impermanent and subject to change, then eye-contact must also follow the same course. If something is predicated upon an impermanent cause that is subject to change, then it must also be impermanent and be subject to change by its very nature.

### ***Interplay of mind and matter in sensory contact***

In the Mahānidāna sutta, the Buddha discusses the interplay of mind (nāma) and matter (rūpa) in sensory contact. The Buddha explains that sensory experience becomes relevant to us, when we are able to describe the characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta), the modes (ākāra) and exponents (uddesa) of the sense object that is being experienced (adhivacanasamphassa). An object has no relevance, unless it creates a verbal impression on us. To enable this, there must be some contact (resistance impression) (paṭighasamphassa). If we can’t describe the rūpa that we experience, it will not be relevant to us.

For example, our bodies are composed of the four elements: the air element (vāyo dhātu), heat element (thejo dhātu), earth element (pathavi dhātu) and the water element (āpo dhātu). During a session of meditation, if your awareness directs itself to a contemplation of the elements (dhātu manasikhāra), you may observe the vibrating quality of the air-element and be able to describe its characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta) and the modes (ākāra) in terms of your verbal impression (adhivacanasamphassa). Although the body is comprised of a collection of the four elements, by observing the characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta) and the modes (ākāra) of the elements and their unique and innate characteristics, you can separately identify the vibrating quality of the air-element from the liquidity/cohesiveness of the water-element. When your observation of their independent and intrinsic nature and attributes can be described with clarity, there is no confusion. Your verbal impression (adhivacanasamphassa) of the elements is clear. You will not personalise the experience by importing a “self” into this composition of the elements. So you see how sensory contact (samphassa) of any incident occurs with a combination of both verbal impression (adhivacanasamphassa) (when we are able to describe the characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta) and the modes (ākāra) of the sense impingement) and resistance impression (paṭighasamphassa).

At the onset of any thought process, cognitive series or event, there are really no defilements created. It is our reaction -indulgence, rejection or ignorance of sensory experience - that gives rise to defilements. Otherwise, the incident (sensory contact) is just a neutral occurrence. Our delusion about the sensory world can be traced back to the illusion created by perception (saññā). It is saññā that fuels the samsāric fabricating and knotting process. As the Buddha described in the Māgandiya sutta (Sutta Nipāta), for those who are free of perception, there is no knotting process (saññā virattassa nasanti ganthā). In conventional language, we often experience form as an entity. It is not the external object that makes us accept or reject sensory experience. Rather, it is perception (saññā), which makes us grasp or reject sensory experience.

With each sound, smell or taste, we experience seamless inner chatter. From morning to night, we regurgitate our sensory contact and the mental formations created around it. It is our regurgitation of sensory contact that causes us to travel through samsāra. By recollecting the detail involved in sensory contact which is usually coloured by preception, we create defilements. But, if we are choicelessly aware of rūpa, as they really are, there will be no defilements created.

So, how can we do this in practice?

When you observe the movement of the air-draft, you must observe clearly and continuously the characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta) and the modes (ākāra) of the in-breath, as and when they arise, as compared with the out-breath, without a gap. You must be able to describe the object, how it was observed and what was noted in that process (what were the characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta) and the modes (ākāra) of the in-breath versus the out-breath). To describe these, one has to repeatedly observe the object as and when it arises without delay and negligence. This is one of the aphorisms in insight meditation. In this way, you train yourself to describe the sensory contact observed during meditation clearly and precisely during your meditation interview. With the in-breath, you observe its characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta) and the modes (ākāra) and then the same with the out-breath.

When you observe the difference in the movement of the in-breath and the out-breath, you gain a closer observation of the breath. You can see more detail of the natural characteristics involved in the in-breaths and out-breaths, when your attention is detailed and continuous. With such clarity of awareness, you can clearly communicate your experience to your teacher. You can also note the sounds that attract the attention of the ear-consciousness. How you experienced them, whether you reacted to them or were you able to continue with mindfulness on the breath. Similarly, with pain, you can observe whether you reacted to it, whether the pain intensified or whether you gave into the pain. The pain, or the reaction to it, may be temporarily in the foreground of mindfulness and the awareness of the breath temporarily in the background. It is when you practise like this, that you can continue with uninterrupted mindfulness of the primary object. Slowly, you will understand the nature of sensory experience, as and when it arises, without any reaction.

Gradually, you reach a stage in practice, where the primary object becomes subtle and you are not able to describe the characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta) and the modes (ākāra) of the breath, as you were able to earlier, since it is no longer perceivable. Because there is no difference in the characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta) and the modes (ākāra) of the in-breath and the out-breath, it is not possible to describe the discerning attributes of the in-breath and the out-breath as the practice advances. Although this stage marks progress, it is common for many yogis to become distracted or confused when there is nothing to observe discriminately and to note. As a result, they hesitate to attend interviews and report their experience to their teacher, feeling that it is a sign of a lack of mindfulness or concentration.

But, there is a solution to this confused and doubting state of mind. In the discourses on the Patīcasamuppāda, the Buddha describes how sense faculties give rise to sensory contact (saḷāyatana paccayā phasso). Alternatively, the Buddha has described that sensory contact occurs because there is nāma and rūpa. For sensory contact, there must be a mental (nāma) and physical (rūpa) aspect. Previously scientific thought assumed that an experiment on a particular object (rūpa), conducted in either the northern hemisphere or the southern hemisphere should arrive at

the same observation and conclusion and could be repeated with the same results. Now it is said that this is inaccurate as the conclusion reached would depend on the scientist's perception of what was being observed. The two scientists, one in the northern hemisphere and the other in the southern hemisphere, conducting the same experiment on an object will perceive what is revealed in the experiment in two different (or opposite) ways, giving rise to two different conclusions. So, it is the mental perception of an object (*rūpa*) that gives rise to the variety in description.

There is a popular Zen Buddhist query that provides a useful analogy here. It is asked, if no one is around, would the sound of a large Sandalwood tree falling in a far away forest in the Himalayas be heard? The response is clearly "No"! For it is impossible to hear the sound of the tree falling without a person being present to hear it. For "hearing" to take place, there has to be an ear, which comes within range of the sense impingement (the sound of the tree falling). Hearing cannot take place without the aid of a live ear (just like it is impossible to clap without the aid of both hands).

So, we see how sense faculties and sense impingements exist separately and independently. It is our reaction to what is being experienced that causes tension. From morning to night, we react to the incidents of this world, which just occur independently, through their own cycles of nature. Unnecessarily, we personalise them, due to greed (*taṇhā*), conceit (*māna*) and self-view (*diṭṭhi*), the three hallmarks characterising the hallucination of a "self". So, our reality becomes a reflection of the illusory "self". However, observing what unfolds within and around us without the interference of an "I" gives one a taste of the truth underpinning one's existence. This is the function of mindfulness. It enables us to directly and choicelessly observe the process. As long as we are with the detail involved in the process, perception (*saññā*) loses its space of operation. Our observation is unlikely to be propelled by an "I". It is just a process of "seeing", "feeling" or "hearing". There is no person to "see", "feel" or to "listen".

For sensory contact to occur there must be *nāma* and *rūpa*. This much is clear. To hear the falling tree, there has to be an active ear and the mind must become aware of the "hearing" occurring through ear-consciousness. As long as there are perception and thoughts, relating to sensory contact, there will be good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant, attractive and ugly (etc.), creating diversity and tension in our existence. Yet, if there is a cessation of *nāma* and *rūpa*, sensory contact will also cease and this tension will no longer be present.

In the *Kalahavivāda sutta*, a man asks the Buddha, "where does *nāma* and *rūpa* cease? The Buddha responds that it is where *nāma* and *rūpa* ceases, that sensory contact also ceases. So, during meditation, when we experience a state of mind which does not perceive the breath, we experience the cessation of our perception of *rūpa*, to a certain extent. It appears as if sensory contact has ceased. In this state of mind, we become aware of an experience that cannot be expressed in words. This state of mind is characterised by the dialectic of a seeing that is not apparent, a hearing that does not generate a sound, being alive when you feel as if personality is dead. The 'contact' experienced does not give rise to any 'arising'. When the perception of the breath appears to have ceased during meditation, there is no apparent sensory contact, as the characteristics (*lingha*), the signs (*nimitta*) and the modes (*ākāra*) of the causal link of *rūpa* ceases. Your perception of *rūpa* at this stage is not ordinary (*na saññasaññī*), neither have you fainted (*na visaññasaññī*) nor have you reached the immaterial brahma realms (*no pi asaññī*), yet you are not without a perception either and you are alive and not dead (*na vibhūtasaññī*). When

you are in this state of equilibrium, you experience contact which does not arouse any mental proliferations (*evaṃ sametassa vibhoti rūpaṃ saññānidānā hi papañcasanḅhā*) or a mental reaction, either positive or negative. The rūpa (form), you experience cannot create defilements. Then, for the first time, to a certain extent, you are beyond *taṅhā*, *mānā* and *diṭṭhi* - you transcend “personalisation”.

When you reach this stage in practice, you have steadfast mindfulness. It is not an ordinary awareness, but one that is strengthened by continuous attention to the primary object. So, at this stage, you must skilfully and without interruption become aware of *vibhūta rūpaṃ* (rūpa devoid of perception) for as long as possible to progress towards a stage of finer mental development. If you can be aware continuously of this “knowing” state of mind, you will progress to experience the enlightenment factors of rapture (*pīti*), joy (*sukha*) and tranquillity (*passaddhi*). At this stage of practice, one has to exercise caution and be aware of two possible traps: firstly, one could fall asleep due to the lack of dynamism in the practice or its relatively ‘uneventful’ nature. Secondly, one may entertain doubts, wondering whether the path is wrong or whether one’s mindfulness is weak. However, if a yogi’s mind is well prepared to meet these traps during practice, they can be avoided.

Of the six sense faculties, the operation of body-consciousness is a relatively gross experience. Although sensory contact is generally discussed first with reference to eye-consciousness and eye-contact, practising yogis could benefit from a discussion of the operation of body-consciousness and body-contact as it can be directly experienced during a session of meditation.

### ***Observing the operation of sensory contact during meditation***

Yā kho, bikkhave, imesaṃ tiṅṅaṃ dhammānaṃ saṅgati,  
sannipāto, samavāyo, ayaṃ vuccati kāyasamphasso

By undertaking *Ānāpānasati bhāvanā*, a yogi establishes continuous mindfulness on the movement of the in-breath and the out-breath. During this process, a yogi clearly notes and discerns the experiences gained through an inhalation and an exhalation as well as the bodily sensations that arise. Bodily sensations may also arise through the body’s contact with the floor or a meditation cushion or due to the touching of the two palms, whilst being seated. Body-consciousness (*kāya viññāṇa*) arises when there is awareness of the breath (*vāyo phoṭṭabba*) at the moment it contacts the body (*kāya*). There are three elements that need to operate together (*saṅgati sannipāto samavāyo*) in order to experience the associated feelings and sensations. In this example of breathing, these are: the striker element (air-draft), the base element (the tip of the nose or the top of the lip (body sensitivity) and the ignition element (body-consciousness). Feelings are a direct result of sensory contact. There is no other way for feelings to arise.

When you become aware of the movement of the in-breath and the out-breath, you experience body-contact (*kāya samphassa*). When the breath moves in and makes contact with the body, the mind perceives it, thus, clearly noting the sensory contact that occurs through an inhalation. As long as you are aware of the three elements: the breath (which is the sense impingement (*ārammana*); the body sensitivity (*dvāra*) and body-consciousness (*tadupapanna*), you experience body-contact. When your mind becomes aware of the interplay between these three ingredients,

one at a time, you observe sensory contact. With continuous awareness of the breath (body-contact), you can clearly discern the operation of sensory contact: the awareness of the interplay between the sense impingement (the breath), the sense faculty (the body) and body-consciousness (which registers in the mind). Contact through the other faculties also involves the same three elements. Whatever we experience involves a contact of the senses (*saḷāyatana*), an object and the resultant consciousness. For body-contact to be experienced, the mind's awareness must be within the field of perception of an impingement on the body (i.e. the "in" and "out" breath).

Throughout this observation, a yogi continues to experience sounds entering the ear-consciousness, smells entering through the nose as well as the tongue experiencing various tastes. Images imprinted in our memory could also manifest in our stream of consciousness. The mind may wander and experience the sensory contact of these experiences. Yet, when the mind's attention returns to the in-breath and the out-breath, and it is sustained, the sensory consciousness experienced through the other five faculties does not manifest. Although the other faculties continue to make contact with sense impingements, we don't experience the sensations gained through them, because our consciousness is engaged with the body (the breath).

So, you can discern how the mind gives priority to only one sensory consciousness at a given time and experiences the associated sensations. When the mind's attention is drawn to the movement of the breath, and is sustained there, then the experiences gained through the other sense faculties are not available. Although sounds and thoughts may have interfered with the stream of consciousness, you can now continue with uninterrupted mindfulness upon the breath. If the mind's attention is drawn to the sounds entering through the ear or the thoughts that arise in the mind, you will experience sensations arising through ear-consciousness and/or mind-consciousness and at that time, the touch of the in-breath or the out-breath is not perceivable. Once the hearing or the thinking finishes, the attention may return to body-consciousness (the movement and the touch of the breath).

Within each passing moment, continuous transactions occur between the six sense faculties and the objects that attract their attention, although priority can only be given to one of them. When you experience the sensations of body-consciousness, the experiences gained through the other faculties lose their space of operation within our awareness. But, it is impossible to discern these individual and separate transactions, as the mind moves with such extraordinary speed, unless we are continuously mindful of sensory contact. A mind that continually runs after sensory experience has no clarity of awareness. It is simply a muddled state of mind, perceiving a myriad of sensations, intermingled with emotions, manifesting as one unified (and confused) sensory experience. This is how the unwieldy mind experiences sensory contact. A yogi, however, will clearly note and know the discerning feelings of the in-breath versus the out-breath and know the experience gained through body-contact, compared to eye-contact, due to well developed mindfulness.

When we experience sensory contact, we can experience its associated feelings. So, in this equation, sensory contact remains in the middle. When the mind is aware of sensory consciousness, there is sensory contact and dependent on this contact, feelings arise. To trace this dependent equation, during a session of *Ānāpānasati bhāvanā*, we must note the experience of the in-breath and the out-breath, separately and independently, clearly identifying the discerning features of the two phases, as much as possible. When we refer to sensory contact, we

refer to the sensory consciousness that has won the attention of our awareness. If we know that our mindfulness is continually on the in-breath and the out-breath, then, through the associated sensations of the in-breath and the out-breath, we can discern that our awareness is retained upon body-contact at that moment. The information gained by observing the two phases will confirm that the mind's attention is with the breath and that *Ānāpānasati bhāvanā* is in progress. This is a sign of diligent effort and precise aiming. At that point, there isn't any sensory contact with eye-consciousness or ear-consciousness and so on.

During *Ānāpānasati bhāvanā*, we directly become aware of this because we are observing the phase of the in-breath separately from the out-breath, clearly noting the sensations that arise in each process. Through the sensations and feelings that we experience, with continuous mindfulness from one sense faculty to another, we become aware of the operation of sensory consciousness. So, if our attention is on the in-breath and the out-breath, any sounds that enter our stream of consciousness will not be heard, or at least, they will not disturb our meditation.

When *Ānāpānasati bhāvanā* is in progress, we maintain continuous awareness of the point at which the in-breath and the out-breath touches and in this way the mind retains its awareness on body-contact, from one moment to the next. Then, we clearly see the operation of the three elements: body sensitivity (*kāya*), the breath (*vāyo phoṭṭabba dhātu*) and the resultant body consciousness (*kāya viññāṇa*) - the three elements that the mind experiences as sensory contact, which in turn gives rise to sensory experience (feelings). As long as these three aspects are in operation, they give rise to sensory contact (*samphassa*) and its associated feelings. The feelings and sensations experienced through the in-breath and the out-breath can be clearly noted in this process. The indifferent feelings experienced in the gap between the in-breath and the out-breath can also be noted. With continuous mindfulness, we observe the sensory contact of the in-breath and the out-breath and the sensations that they create. In this way, we can discern that feelings are experienced because we have sense faculties (*saḷāyatana*) and their contact with sense impingements.

In any sensory transaction, becoming aware of the associated feelings, enables us to know that the mind is now with the eyes, the ear, the in-breath and the out-breath (etc.). The indication that sensory contact is present is confirmed by the feeling that is associated with it. When we continue to observe one sensory experience, the experiences gained through the operation of the other five sense faculties lose their opportunity to manifest in our awareness and materialise in perceptions or mental formations. By confining our focus to the operation of the most prominent and conspicuous sensory consciousness (in this case body-consciousness), we have the developed clarity of awareness to observe the causality underpinning sensory experience.

To clearly note the operation of body contact during *Ānāpānasati bhāvanā*, we must see the difference in the experience gained through the in-breath versus the out-breath. However subtle, there is a difference in the feelings experienced through the in-breath compared to the out-breath. For such a detailed and subtle understanding however, uninterrupted mindfulness with precise aiming is necessary. Similarly, during walking meditation, we must see the difference in the experience gained through the touch of the right foot, compared to the left foot. There is a difference in the experience of the touch sensations of the right foot, compared to the left. As we continue to walk up and down with uninterrupted mindfulness, we can observe how our attention shifts from body-consciousness (the touch sensation of the foot) to eye-consciousness, when we become distracted by an external object, especially at the end of the walking path. We

can clearly discern the shift from one sensory consciousness to another, when mindfulness is sharp and continuous.

Even the shutting and opening of our eye lids occur with sensory contact and give rise to feelings. But, we cannot observe this, unless we have well developed mindfulness. Without continuous mindfulness it is simply impossible to observe the numerous transactions that continually occur through the six sense faculties and their operation. By retaining our attention on the feelings experienced through the sensory contact of one sense faculty, (for example, the breath touching the body), two important observations are possible: (1) the other sense faculties are inoperative and have not won the attention of our awareness; and (2) without sensory contact, there can't be any feelings. When we directly observe this in practice, we realise that feelings are experienced because there had been sensory contact due to the operation of one of the six sense faculties.

During the time that the Buddha was residing at the Jetavanārāmaya, the resident Sangha were dedicated to their meditation practice and had strict adherence to the vinaya. Inspired by their commitment and dedication, the lay supporters developed deep respect for them. The wandering ascetics of other sects however, out of jealousy for the respect lavished upon the Sangha, began to condemn their practice by slandering them whenever they saw them. Everything that the Sangha did was criticised. The Sangha complained to the Buddha. The Buddha listened patiently. He then asked the Sangha whether they experienced pleasant and unpleasant feelings. The Sangha responded, “yes”. The Buddha taught the Sangha about the benefits of not personalising any pleasant or unpleasant feelings; or attributing their cause to someone else. If sensory contact is experienced with greed (*taṇhā*), conceit (*māna*) and self-view (*diṭṭhi*), then, you will identify with them and create defilements. It was because the Sangha experienced sensory contact through a prism of greed, conceit and self-view, that they were affected by the derogatory comments. To remain neutral amidst any adversity or triumph, one must reach a state of mind neutral to sensory experience - a state of mind and consciousness that appear to be unrelated to the sense impingements (when you behave as if you are blind when you can see; or to act as if you are deaf, when you can hear (etc.)). As long as tension is created (both positive and negative) due to a sense impingement and perception is still anchored upon greed, conceit and self-view, one will continue to react mechanically to sensory contact.

The Buddha's response regarding this incident appears in the Udāna, recollected as a spontaneous utterance of joy:

Gāme araṅṅe sukhadukkha phuṭṭho,  
nev'attato no parato dahetha,  
phusanti phassā upadhiṃ paṭicca,  
nirūpadhiṃ kena phuseyyum phassā.

“Touched by [pleasure and] pain in village or in forest  
Think not in terms of oneself or others  
Touches can touch one, because of assets  
How can touches, touch him, who is asset-less?”

Here, the term “assets” or upadhi refers to our grasping of the five khandhas, when we are carried away by worldly conventions due to greed, conceit and self-view.

So, the Buddha recommends that yogis go to a solitary place, be seated in a suitable posture and focus their attention on the movement and the touch sensation of the in-breath and out-breath and the operation of body-consciousness; exercise moral restraint; develop concentration and focus awareness on body-contact and experience its associated feelings.

When we practice in this way, we gradually dispose of our attachments (although temporarily) and cleanse our consciousness (*citta*) of the five hindrances. We experience a freedom from the five hindrances (*cittaviveka*). Yet, within us remains greed (as a latent tendency) that fuels our attachment to the five *khandhas*. This attachment to the five *khandhas* gives rise to a perpetuation of an ego or an enduring identity of a “self”. If sensory contact is experienced through the triple proliferation of greed, conceit and self-view we will unnecessarily create defilements as a result of it. So, in meditation, we must transcend sensory indulgence and reach a state of mind virtually devoid of sensory contact and experience. This is the practice that the Buddha prescribed for yogis.

During *Ānāpānasati bhāvanā*, our experience of the breath becomes subtle and gradually reaches a stage where, due to its subtlety, our mindfulness cannot focus upon it to discern its movement or touch. At this stage, we experience a state of mind almost devoid of the operation of impingement contact. We experience a preliminary or primordial form of consciousness - one that appears as if it is unavailable to the five physical sense faculties. There is no apparent experience gained through the five sense faculties. The only experience that was available through body-contact (the breath) is also now no longer perceivable. It is only when this somewhat neutral consciousness connects to the senses that we perceive and experience sensory contact.

At this stage of practice, a yogi experiences a contact which does not give rise to feelings that can be described in words. It is a neutral state of mind. There is a contact which is present, yet is not easy to explain. Its quality is neutral and does not give rise to any mental arousal. It does not fuel attachments, unless one imports greed, conceit or self-view into this subtle state of awareness. So a yogi commences the practice by observing the operation of sensory contact and feelings to gradually transcend sensory contact in order to encounter an experience that is somewhat beyond the spatial and time dimension, where the mind cannot perceive the location, time or any conceptualisation. Then, for the first time, you experience a glimpse of the “self” or ego (*sakkāya diṭṭi*) being absent in your awareness. If you progress without fear or entertaining doubts during this stage of practice and do not import greed, conceit or self-view to this observation, you will experience great joy and rapture which marks a stage of extinguishment or ‘giving up’ (*paṭinissagga*) of gross sensory experience.

Our *samsāric* inclination is to develop greed, conceit and self-view through sensory contact and experience. So, to understand sensory contact in meditation, we must begin with an awareness of body-consciousness (*kāyānupassanā*) and gradually progress towards an awareness of subtle sensory contact, which is almost not apparent. At this stage of practice, the obsessive forms of defilements lose their momentum of operation within our stream of consciousness and we experience an ‘extinguishment’ of the hindrances whilst creating a foundation for the development of *vipassanā* insights. This foundation is the necessary stepping stone to finally free ourselves of the greed that fuels the attachment to the five *khandhas*. By contemplating upon the body (*kāyānupassanā*) and body-contact and seeing its cessation during meditation, we understand sensory contact and will forsake it to transcend our illusion of a “self”, although

temporarily, for the first time.

We then realise that our samsāric existence was basically fuelled by sensory contact. To reach a stage which appears to be devoid of sensory contact, (at least temporarily) is a great triumph, a significant step towards giving up greed, conceit and self-view. When we transcend sensory contact in this way, what we observe is without an identity. There is no personality in the experience. We just observe what unfolds just as it is, without a self or an ego. It is like awakening to our dream! Then, all experience, whatever it may be, will unfold in practice without the interference of a personality. There will be no “I”, an opinion, preference or any other conceptualisation, rooted in a self. In this way the fire that fuels the perpetuation of an enduring identity and our attachment to the five khandas will be extinguished in our very awareness, just with the simple observation of body-contact. When we transcend sensory contact and its associated feelings in this way, we progress towards liberation.

## Chapter 3

### **Casuality of Sensory Experience (Feelings)**

Yopi hetu yopi paccayo kāya samphassassa uppādāya, sopi hetu  
sopi paccayo anicco vipariṇāmī aññathābhavī  
Aniccaṃ kho pana, bhikkhave, paccayaṃ paṭicca uppanno  
kā yasamphasso kuto nicco bhavissati  
Phuṭṭho, bhikkhave, vedeti, phuṭṭho ceteti, phuṭṭho sañjānāti

If the causes giving rise to body-contact (kāya samphassa): the body, the sense impingement and body-consciousness are impermanent and subject to change, then body-contact must also be impermanent and subject to change. So, how can body-contact be enduring or permanent? To experience feelings, there must be sensory contact. It is because of body-contact that we experience coolness, warmth, coarseness or softness (etc.). Yet, if the sensory contact giving rise to feelings is impermanent, then the resultant feelings must also be impermanent and subject to change.

This chapter will consider the three-fold feelings accompanying sensory contact, their causality and their cessation.

### **Observing sensory experience during meditation**

We experience feelings and sensations because there is sensory contact (samphassa). We have six sense faculties, although, when we experience eye-consciousness we don't hear sounds that impinge upon our ear-drum. We don't hear them because our awareness is not available to it. As a result, there is no sensory contact experienced as "hearing". Even if flavours are touching the tongue, it is not possible to experience tongue-consciousness while the attention is retained on eye-consciousness. At any given time, we experience only one-sixth of our sensory inputs. Although we are invited to experience the sensory consciousness occurring through the other five faculties, our mindfulness cannot focus upon it because our attention is drawn to the sensory contact experienced through the eye.

During a session of sitting meditation, when you experience the in-breath and the out-breath continuously, you do not hear sounds or become interrupted by internal thoughts. But if, instead, you incline your mind to these secondary objects, the continuity of your mindfulness on the breath will invariably be interrupted. Although other sense faculties are in operation and the mind's attention can be momentarily drawn to sense impingements such as thoughts or sounds, an experienced yogi will try to come back to body-consciousness (the movement and the touch of the in-breath and the out-breath). Thoughts may arise and take the mind's attention away from the breath for a split second, but it does not disrupt the meditation upon the primary object. If a diligent yogi understands the operation of sensory consciousness, thoughts will no longer be an obstacle. Pains and sounds will also be the same. There may be thoughts, pains and sounds, but, if mindfulness upon the primary object is steadfast and uninterrupted, though sometimes in the

background, embryonic thoughts arising in your consciousness have no grounding. They just arise and pass away without leaving an impression. If one is a diligent yogi, one will become aware of these impingements (partially), but continue with mindfulness upon the breath. Under such circumstances, you may gain a closer observation of the primary object. As a result, any disturbances may (in comparison) appear to be far away.

Similarly, during a session of walking meditation, you can clearly see that your eye is open to numerous objects, but, the mind's attention is retained on the movement and the touch of the right foot and the left foot on the ground (i.e. body-consciousness). The touch sensation is sensory experience, caused by sensory contact - the foot touching the ground.

For sensory contact to occur there must be sensory consciousness, a sense faculty and an object. We say that we are experiencing sensory contact when our mind becomes aware of the sense impingements that are received through the sensitivity of eye-consciousness; ear-consciousness and so forth. Sensory contact has its associated feelings. With continuity of mindfulness, diligent effort and precise aiming, we can observe this in practice.

### ***Indulging in sensory experience***

Let's say we are seeing lightning. Generally, we will see the lightning, before we hear the sound of the thunder. But, in reality, both the lightning and the thunder occur at the same time. Similarly, there are many sense objects present at one time but we can only experience one of them at a time.

Assume that you are thinking. Suddenly, you see a beautiful object, which attracts the attention of your eye-consciousness. Then, you will give up your internal chatter and fix your attention on the object that has captured the awareness of eye-consciousness. You will, unmindfully, indulge in it. As you do this and continue to experience sensations channelled through your eye-consciousness, you begin to qualitatively discern the object through recognition (*phuṭṭho sañjānāti*). Then, you will either attach to it or reject it, depending on the quality of mind (the reaction) you attribute to the object.

When eye-contact is continuous enough, you classify it as good or bad and indulge in it by attributing a preference to it. Sensory contact (your awareness of the beautiful object that captured your vision) must be continuous enough for it to penetrate your cognitive capacity. First, there is cognition, followed by recognition. As a rough rule of thumb, before you can recognise the sense impingement, you must be mindful of it for at least four or five thought moments continuously. Whether it is a smell, taste or a thought, your attention must be continuous to recognise the detail in it.

The priority given to sensory consciousness is random. To catch the mind's shift from one sensory consciousness to the next, you must note it as soon as the changeover occurs. So, if you change from "seeing" to "hearing", you must become aware of the new process as soon as the mind shifts. Say, you are doing some pottery. To mould the shape of the pot, you must do so when the clay is moist and flexible. Once it is fired, alterations are not possible. As the common saying goes, you have to strike when the iron is hot! Similarly, in the continuum of a chain of thought

moments, the perception upon which the thought was initially constructed is important as it determines the resulting mental formations, which in turn sets in motion the chain of thoughts. If you are aware of the transition from “seeing” to “hearing” as soon as it occurs, you note it diligently and without delay, to determine the direction of the resulting causal equation. If you are negligent and delayed in your observation of the object which has arisen, you may end up in day-dreaming or bewilderment.

Our tendency is to indulge in a particular sensory consciousness, when it attracts the attention of our awareness, by attaching to it. Yet, simultaneously, there is an invitation to experience the sense impingements that captivated the sensitivity of the other five faculties. However, we are unaware of them, because we are conscious of the particular sensory consciousness that has randomly attracted our attention. When we continually experience something, we lay emphasis upon it and create mental formations based upon our preferences. Take the example of watching television. If we tune into a channel which is showing a depressing movie, by engaging in it for a long period of time, we could become sorrowful. We could even become tearful. But, throughout that time the other channels have been in operation, projecting various programs. We didn't know about them because we did not tune into them. So, if the movie becomes tragically depressing, we can overcome our state of sorrow by simply switching to another channel and watching the news, sport or something else. We can even switch to the comedy channel to swiftly change our mood to one of laughter!

### ***Three-fold feelings accompanying sensory contact***

Although the selection and priority we give to sensory consciousness is a coincidence, it is generally dependent upon a number of factors, which are generally beyond our control. By continually indulging and engaging in a chosen sensory consciousness and attaching to it, we betray the discerning ability of our minds. Our tendency is to fixate on one experience and indulge in it. But, if we are yogis trained in observing sensory consciousness, we will know that there is an invitation to experience sensory consciousness through any one of the other five sense faculties. Whatever the disturbance, a diligent yogi will continue with attention on the primary object, as much as possible.

All sensory consciousness that is experienced, gives rise to feelings. The feelings experienced through sensory contact are threefold: pleasant, unpleasant and indifferent (neither pleasant nor unpleasant) feelings. An ignorant person, when experiencing sorrow, will only experience it and will not experience the pleasurable or indifferent feelings accompanying it or would not simply be aware of their existence. Similarly, a person who seeks and engages in only pleasurable feelings will not be aware of the indifferent and unpleasant feelings accompanying them. On the other hand, an enlightened being (an arahant), is able to see any of these three types of feelings in the same scenario. When observing an unpleasant sight, an arahant is well aware and able to view it as pleasant or indifferent. Even indifferent feelings can be viewed as pleasant or unpleasant by an enlightened mind. Whatever the sensory contact, an arahant (as he or she wishes) can experience it in a three-fold manner.

In our practice, to experience the indifference and the pleasure in unpleasant feelings, we must mindfully face pain, without a premeditated view and directly observe it in detail. This simply

means, seeing pain (or any feeling), diligently and without delay, from its beginning, through to the middle and the end. The day we endure pain in this way and see the pleasure and indifference within it, we experience a heroic moment in our meditation practice. There is joy hidden in sorrow! Any moment of adversity awaits triumph, which can be materialised with endurance. To experience the joy accompanying sorrow, we must penetrate the pain with vipassanā insight. Observing pain directly without classifying it as “pain” is vipassanā investigation. This is to gain a distance from the pain.

If we have the opportunity to experience all sensory contact in a threefold manner, then, at any given time, we have eighteen options (the sensory contact of the six faculties giving rise to three types of feelings). A yogi must know this and in each sensory transaction, become aware of it. Seeing the indifference in the experiences gained through sensory contact is a detailed and subtle understanding, which is far more beneficial than seeing feelings in their gross nature, as either pleasant or unpleasant. Vipassanā investigation requires a yogi to patiently see all sensory experience in a three-fold manner. When we directly become aware of the freedom available through these eighteen options of sensory experience, we reach a triumphant moment in our practice. We realise the value of a human birth and our discerning capability.

To know that the end of pleasurable feelings gives rise to displeasure and vice versa and to know that being aware of indifferent feelings is joyful is something that can only be gleaned through vipassanā investigation. To know the three-fold nature of feelings, we must be aware of the beginning, the middle and the end of a painful feeling and endure it to its very end. In the end, we find indifference and pleasure. Vipassanā investigation demands a penetration beyond sorrow, to extract the pleasure beneath it. During meditation, when we see the three masks of feelings and know their interchanging operation, we become skilful in experiencing sensory contact and its associated feelings. Of course, it would be difficult to endure painful feelings at the beginning. But, in time, we will develop resistance and immunity towards moderate forms of pain. As we advance in our practice, we will develop the resistance to endure even acute forms of pain.

When we become dexterous enough in our practice to see the interchangeable nature of the three-fold feelings that are available to us in all sensory contact, we may question the need to exert effort in our quest for progress. We might think there is nothing to attempt, when we directly see and understand the three-fold nature of sensory experience – the eighteen options available to us in any sensory transaction. Then the momentum of vipassanā investigation continues by itself to reveal ever new insights, as there is nothing to set in motion the causal equation of dependent origination.

### ***Causality of sensory experience (feelings)***

We perpetuate pleasure, reject pain and fall asleep (or remain unaware) in the face of indifference. We either indulge in feelings or reject them – there is always a reaction. Instead, if we observe sensory contact (being aware of the interplay of the sense impingements and sense faculties, giving rise to sensory consciousness), and the feelings that ensue from sensory contact, we can directly see the causality of feelings. To catch feelings and to meet them directly during meditation, we must have continuous mindfulness.

Feelings arise because there is sensory contact; there is no other way for them to manifest. So, if the causes that give rise to sensory contact and feelings are subject to change and dissolution, then the sensory contact and feelings we experience, by their very nature must follow the same course. We must be patient to see this with insight.

A sense object can give rise to either of two prominent feelings at a given time (liking or disliking). The same object can be viewed in a completely different manner by two persons, based on the mental interpretation attributed to the sensory experience. We develop greed, conceit and self-view through our sensory experience. The diversity and tensions in human experience are caused by our attachment to sensory experience. So, people react; some even fight and yearn after sensory experience. If we dissect this diversity and tension, see the causes contributing to it and see that they are subject to change and dissolution, we can extract the remedy for enlightenment within it. Through direct observation, we see this causal equation unfold: that sensory contact gives rise to feelings, because of feelings we have recognition or identification, which in turn gives rise to mental formations and thoughts. If this is the causal equation, then the dissolution or cessation of the causes giving rise to sensory consciousness and contact will also see an end to the arising of feelings.

To transcend feelings and their arising requires a deep commitment to meditation practice. Because of sensory contact, feelings arise, which in turn gives rise to mental formations or intentions. In the Madhupiṇḍika sutta, the Buddha describes that if we experience feelings, 'we tend to classify them. If it is pleasurable, we try to perpetuate it and indulge in it. If it is unpleasant, we reject it and if it is neutral or indifferent, we ignore them and may fall asleep. Thus, we create mental formations around the feelings, depending on the perception, the quality of mind we attribute towards them. In between this dependent transaction, taṇhā (greed) ferments.

In my early years as a yogi, I recall very vividly, discussing with my meditation group whether we can be mindful of any incident at the stage of sensory contact, its associated feelings (phuṭṭho vedeti), the recognition or identification of the incident (phuṭṭho sañjānāti) or the thoughts created around it (phuṭṭho ceteti). We discussed how difficult it is for us to become mindful of sensory contact at the beginning as it is extremely subtle. Our conclusion was that we had to become aware of the feelings following an incident (after it passes the level of contact). Because it is impossible to observe sensory contact as a preliminary step, we focused awareness on the associated feelings to see the sensory contact preceding it. Gradually, we can train our minds to work backwards through this causal equation, to trace the cause that gave rise to the feelings and the mental formations (namely, the contact).

Phuṭṭho, bhikkhave, vedeti, phuṭṭho ceteti, phuṭṭho sañjānāti  
Itthetepi dhammā calā ceva vyayā ca aniccā  
vipariṇāmino aññathābhāvino  
Evam kho, bhikkhave, dvayam paṭicca viññāṇaṃ sambhoti

Each sense faculty gives rise to a particular consciousness (viññana): eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness (etc.). As long as the eye, the object and eye-consciousness operate together, there is sensory contact through the eye (cakkku samphassa). Consciousness is the discerning ability of our mind, which separately identifies the sense impingements attracted by the six sense faculties. We experience feelings because of sensory contact (phuṭṭho bhikkhave vedeti). When we

recognise the feelings (phuṭṭho sañjānāti), we contemplate upon them by classifying them as good, bad, pleasant and unpleasant (phuṭṭho ceteti) and create mental formations associated with them.

Our lives are consumed by sensory experience and we move from one experience to another in our daily lives, without any agenda, if we are unmindful. To understand this process, we must clearly note the sense faculty that is activated, observe the operation of sensory consciousness and become aware of the sensory experience associated with sensory contact as much as possible. When you are mindful of a particular consciousness, experienced through one of the sense faculties, you can clearly discern the experiences gained through the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue (etc.), and their individual characteristics. As long as your attention is fixed on one particular consciousness (e.g. the eye-consciousness) you can be assured that you are not creating defilements through the other five (possible) sense faculties. For example, if you see a flower, a river or any other object with your eye, you tend to fixate upon it and classify it as pleasant, beautiful, unpleasant or unattractive and create mental formations associated with that visual object. As long as you are with the visual object however, five of your six faculties will not give rise to defilements or create kammā . In other words, defilements are not created through the other five sense faculties. But, one may be creating defilements through the eye-consciousness that is presently in operation. As long as one's attention is fixed on an object and identifies and classifies it, one will create defilements. So, instead of perpetuating the arising of any desire (or displeasure) for the object in front of you, if you become aware of “seeing” by noting (or labelling) it as “seeing, seeing”, you mitigate against any defilements arising through eye-consciousness. Or, at least you gain a better understanding of the mechanism involved in creating defilements.

As long as your awareness is retained on eye-consciousness, you can knowingly experience a freedom from the defilements created through the other five sense faculties. Of course, sounds could be impinging upon your ear-drum. But, for ear-contact to arise, your mind must be detached from other sensory contact, to become aware of the sounds impinging upon your ear-drum. Similarly, during Ānāpānasati bhāvanā , as long as the focus is steadfastly maintained on body-consciousness, there is no longer the operation of eye-consciousness or ear-consciousness. Taking advantage of such circumstances, when you firmly fix your attention on the movement and touch of the in-breath and the out-breath, you will note that the breath loses its gross manifestation and gradually becomes inconspicuous. This is a sign of continuity of mindfulness. It demonstrates the precision of your focussing power. At this stage, any defilements and/or hindrances that could be created through body-consciousness and the sensory experience of the breath also become faint. If continuity of awareness is diligently retained on the breath, you will gradually experience a state of mind characterised by equanimity (neutral feeling).

The feelings experienced at this stage of practice are neutral as well as subtle. You reach a state of mind apparently free from defilements, whilst the mind, unswervingly retains its attention at the point at which the movement and contact of the breath was previously observed. Then you can clearly observe sensory experience (neutral feelings); the mental classification of it and the mental formations created as a result of it. Although there is sensory (body) contact, the feelings caused by the contact with this formless and inconspicuous breath object are neutral. This is a feeling and an experience which is indescribable. But, if you are not well instructed, in the absence of a gross manifestation of a pleasurable or painful feeling, you tend to become bored with the neutral feeling and do not want to persist in noting it. This is a crucial stage of

development in practice and you are encouraged to remain in this stage of practice for as long as possible, without entertaining doubts or falling asleep. In this neutral state of mind, you can clearly see the operation of sensory consciousness. If you persist with your attention on this neutral form of consciousness, you will experience rapture (pīti), which is a natural progression on the path towards enlightenment.

Because we are only used to experience and observe gross manifestations, it is difficult for us to retain our awareness on indifference, unless we are appropriately instructed. Where there is pleasure or displeasure, defilements are activated. To skilfully progress with this neutral state of mind, you must continually become aware of the point at which the breath was previously noted in a gross manner and the sequential progression towards this more subtle state. It is only in a state of neutrality (the feelings associated with the subtle breath) that you can experience immaterial joy and rapture. If you progress even further, without attaching to such immaterial joy and rapture, and retain your awareness on the point of contact with the neutral state of mind, you will, for the first time, clearly observe the mental preparations (the play of perceptions and feelings). The activity of mental preparations (citta sankhāraṃ) will also cease (passambayaṃ citta sankhāraṃ assasissā mī ti sikkhati) as you continue with diligent effort and precise aiming. Then, you will experience enormous joy and rapture (an intoxicatingly blissful state of mind) (abhippamodayaṃ cittaṃ assasissā mī ti sikkhati). The contentment and feeling experienced at this stage of abhippamodayaṃ cittaṃ assasissā mī ti sikkhati exceeds ordinary human experience. It is an unalloyed and inalienable experience - a state of mind commonly described as amā nusī rati.

Yet, this is not enlightenment. These are reversible experiences. It is only by developing the nine-fold vipassanā ñāna (insight knowledge) that you can experience the first stage of enlightenment (sotapatti magga phala). This progression is irreversible.

The Nandakovāda sutta provides a useful analogy for this discussion of a liberated mind. Generally as a matter of practice, Venerable Nandaka avoided his turn to give instructions to the resident nuns (bhikkhunīs). They were the first bhikkhunīs, five hundred in number, to be ordained by the Buddha. One day, Venerable Mahāpajāpati Gotami, the senior bhikkhuni arrived at Anāthapiṇḍika's Park and requested instructions from the Buddha. That day was Venerable Nandaka's turn to instruct the bhikkhunīs. The Buddha commanded Venerable Nandaka to honour his turn. Venerable Nandaka had no option but to do as the Buddha wished.

The reason for his reluctance is given in the Commentary to the Majjhima Nikāya (Middle-Length Discourses). In a former birth Venerable Nandaka had been a king and those bhikkhunīs had been his wives. He thought that if another monk, who possessed the psychic power of the knowledge of past lives, saw him instructing those bhikkhunīs, he might think that Venerable Nandaka was still attached to his former wives. However, the Buddha could see that Venerable Nandaka's teaching would be crucial for those bhikkhunīs.

He presented himself before five hundred bhikkhunīs (nuns) to give instructions. His instructions followed the style of questions and answers. The following dialogue took place:

Venerable Nandaka: Sisters, is the eye permanent or impermanent?

Bhikkhunīs : Impermanent, bhante.

Venerable Nandaka: Does that which is impermanent cause suffering or give rise to happiness?

- Bhikkhunīs : No bhante. It is full of impurities and subject to old age and sickness. It causes suffering.
- Venerable Nandaka: Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change, fit to be regarded as a self?
- Bhikkhunīs : No, bhante.
- Venerable Nandaka : Is the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind (the internal bases) permanent or impermanent?
- Bhikkhunīs : Impermanent, bhante
- Venerable Nandaka : Is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change, fit to be regarded as a self?
- Bhikkhunīs : No, bhante.
- Venerable Nandaka : Are the sense objects (sounds, forms, odours (etc.) (the external bases) seen with the eye permanent? Do they give rise to contentment or cause suffering?
- Bhikkhunīs : They are impermanent, bhante. So we have to see them over and over again. Because they are impermanent, they cause suffering and are devoid of form (an ‘entity’).
- Venerable Nandaka : If the eye sees an object and eye-consciousness occurs, is that eye-consciousness permanent? Does it give rise to contentment (or cause suffering)?
- Bhikkhunīs : Eye-consciousness is subject to change and is impermanent and therefore, causes suffering.
- Venerable Nandaka : Then sisters, can this impermanent eye; sense objects and eye-consciousness that give rise to eye-contact result in contentment?
- Bhikkhunīs : If all the three attributes that give rise to sensory consciousness are impermanent, then how can the sensory contact, occurring through the eye, which is also subject to change and is impermanent not cause suffering?
- Venerable Nandaka: When a lamp contains a burning flame, the oil that supports the flame will diminish over time. The wick will also burn out. The wick will give rise to a radiant flame as long as it has the oil to support it. Yet, the lamp, the wick and the oil are impermanent. If this is the case, then can the flame be eternal; everlasting or is it subject to change? Does it give rise to contentment (or cause suffering)?
- Bhikkhunīs : No bhante. The radiance of the flame is subject to change and is impermanent and causes suffering and is devoid of form (an ‘entity’).
- Venerable Nandaka: This body, the air that touches it, the body-contact and the associated sensory experience (the feelings) that it gives rise to, are they permanent?
- Bhikkhunīs : No bhante. It is not possible to classify the feelings as permanent, pleasant or unpleasant.
- Venerable Nandaka: Why not sisters?
- Bhikkhunīs : Bhante, if a feeling arises dependent on its corresponding condition, with the cessation of its corresponding condition, it ceases.
- Venerable Nandaka: Sisters, this is how feelings should be observed. If there is a well grown tree; its root is impermanent and causes suffering and is devoid of an ‘entity’; the bark, the branches and the leaves are the same; then can the shadow of a “tree” be permanent and give rise to contentment?
- Bhikkhunīs : No bhante,. Because the root of that tree, its trunk, branches and foliage are

impermanent, its shadow must also be subject to change.

Then, Venerable Nandaka asks one final question from the bhikkhunīs. “if a skilled butcher were to kill a cow and carve it up with a sharp butcher’s knife, without damaging the inner flesh and the outer hide, then cut, sever and carve away the inner tendons, sinews and ligaments with the sharp butcher’s knife and cover the cow again with that same hide, could he refer to that cow as being just as it was before?” The bhikkhunīs response was – “No bhante. It is impossible to call it the same cow because the nerves and veins that connect the flesh are no longer there. Instead, there are just cubes of meat, wrapped around with the outer hide”. Venerable Nandaka then explains that he gave this simile to convey a meaning: The inner mass of flesh is a term for the internal bases. The outer hide is a term for the external bases. The inner tendons, sinews and ligaments represent lust (*rāga*). ‘The sharp butcher’s knife’ is a term for noble wisdom that cuts, severs and carves away the inner defilements, fetters and bonds.

After Venerable Nandaka had given this discourse, the Buddha requested him to repeat it the following day, not as a punishment for his previous reluctance, but because he could see that the bhikkhunīs' minds had not been quite ready for developing insight on the first occasion. When Venerable Nandaka gave the same discourse the next day, all the bhikkhunīs attained a stage of enlightenment. Ironically, because of this great success, the Buddha declared Venerable Nandaka to be the foremost monk in instructing the bhikkhunīs.

So, if greed (*taṇhā*) towards a feeling is extracted, as instructed in the Nandakovāda sutta, could it be classified as pleasure or pain? If the feeling and the reaction are separated with the sharpness of wisdom, pain and pleasure will no longer arise.

During a session of sitting meditation, you may experience pain in your knees. If you know the operation of sensory experience, you know that it has arisen because of sensory contact. If the sensory contact which causes it also ceases, then, the pain will go away. Instead of getting up, personalizing it or attributing its cause to something external, just be with it, note it with ‘choiceless’ awareness. By observing the beginning, the middle and the end of pain, you can transcend it. Of course, at the beginning, you persist with moderate kinds of pain, but as you advance in your practice, you become resistant to more acute forms of pain. You know that it is impossible to have a day without pain, or to have a session of sitting meditation without bodily pains. All arahants became enlightened only after experiencing great suffering and pain. Really, pain is an element for our investigation that leads you towards enlightenment. That is why the Buddha has placed *Vedanānupassanā* (the contemplation of feelings) after *Kāyānupassanā* in the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta*. If we ‘choicelessly’ observe the pain, we separate the *taṇhā*, the desire to reject the pain, from the pain. This is getting a distance from the pain. Feelings arise because of the external base, the internal base and the mind in between them. With ‘choiceless’ awareness, we mindfully, separate the feeling from the automatic reaction.

Then, to transcend feelings completely in practice, we must progress towards a mind free from sensory consciousness during meditation, where there is no arising of sensory contact, giving rise to any sensory experience. When we gradually meet the formless and inconspicuous breath during meditation, at least momentarily, we reach a primordial form of our existence, a state of equilibrium, in which we transcend any “arising” caused by our enslavement to an illusory “self”. When we seemingly experience the cessation of sensory contact, we see a cessation of the gross manifestation of extreme positive and negative feelings. With uninterrupted mindfulness on the

equanimity experienced in this neutral state of mind, we progress towards enlightenment.

## ***Selected Reading***

Bodhi, Bhikkhu, tr. The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000.  
(Especially the chapter on the six sense bases, pages 1133 - 1259.)

## ***Glossary***

Some of these definitions come from Venerable Nyanatiloka's "Buddhist Dictionary" (4th ed. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1980).

**Adhivacanasamphassa:** (lit. 'verbal impression') the ability to describe the characteristics (lingha), the signs (nimitta), the modes (ākāra) and the exponents (uddesa) of a sense impingement.

**Ānāpānasati:** 'mindfulness on in-and-out-breathing', is one of the 40 subjects of meditation taught by the Buddha.

**Āpāthagata:** come within the avenue (of the senses), come within range, perceivable, within the sphere of perception, within the field of perception.

**Khandha:** The five 'groups (of existence)' or 'groups of clinging' (upādānakkhandha); alternative renderings: aggregates, categories of clinging's objects. These are the five aspects in which the Buddha has summed up all the physical and mental phenomena of existence, and which appear to the ignorant person as his/her ego, or personality, to wit: the corporeality (or materiality) group (rūpakkhandha); the feeling group (vedanākkhandha); the perception group (saññākkhandha); the mental formation group (saṅkhārakkhandha); the consciousness group (viññānakkhandha)

**Nāma:** (lit. 'name'): 'mind', mentality. This term is generally used as a collective name for the four mental groups (arūpino khandha), viz. feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhāra) and consciousness (viññāna). It is part of the fourth link (nāma-rūpa) in the formula of the Paṭiccasamuppāda, dependent arising or origination, where it comprises feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), contact (phassa) attention (manasikāra) and intention (cetanā).

**Nāma-rūpa:** (lit. 'name and form'): 'mind-and-body', mentality and corporeality or materiality. It is the fourth link in dependent arising or origination (Paṭiccasamuppāda) where it is conditioned by consciousness and on its part is the condition for consciousness and the six fold sense-base.

**Paṭiccasamuppāda:** 'dependent origination or arising', is the doctrine of the conditionality of all physical and mental phenomena.

**Paṭighasamphassa:** resistance impression arising from the initial sense impingement.

**Rūpa:** is the materiality / form group (khandha) which includes all physical phenomena. It is made up of the 4 elements (dhātu) - earth, water, fire and air. It includes all the objects of the senses (sights, sounds, smells, tastes and tangibles) (ie. derived from materiality), as well as the sense faculties (eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body).

**Samsāra:** 'round of rebirth', lit. 'perpetual wandering', is a name by which is designated the continual process of ever again and again being born, growing old, suffering and dying.

**Vinaya:** rules of discipline for monks (bhikkhus) and nuns (bhikkhunīs) laid down by the Buddha.

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