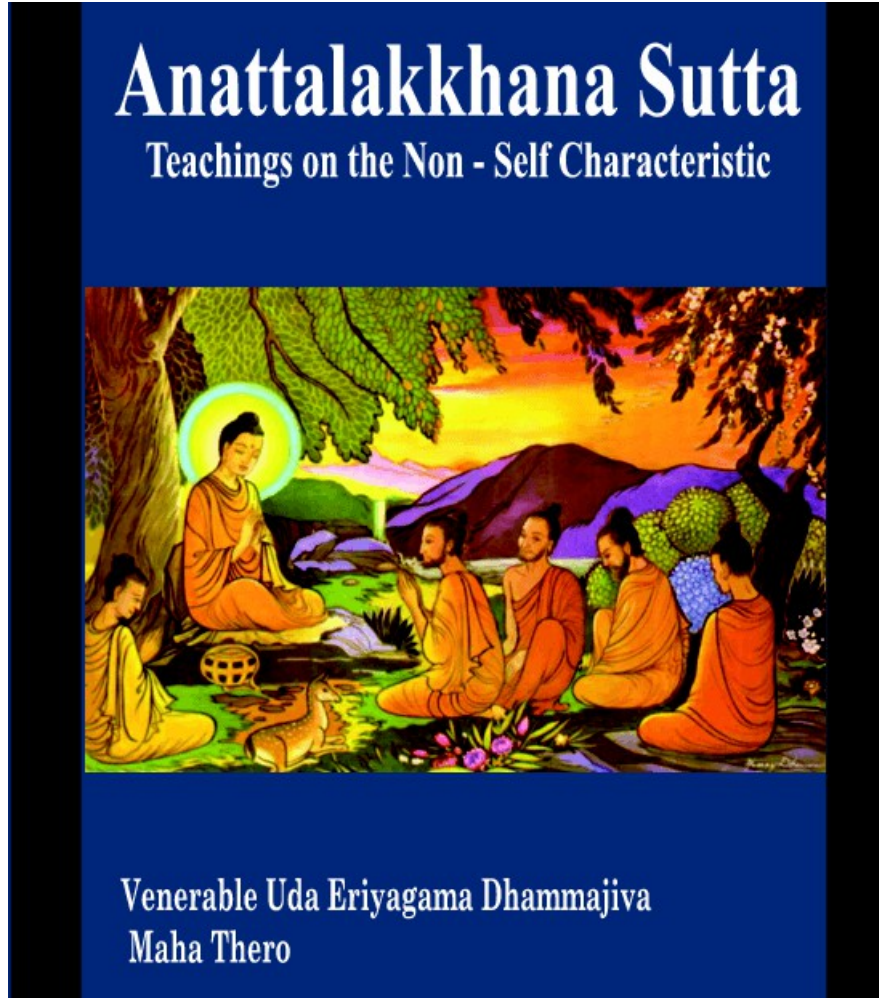


Anattalakkhana Sutta:
Teachings on the characteristic of Non-Self



Venerable Uda Eriyagama Dhammajīva Mahā Thero

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About the Author

Venerable *UdaEriyagama Dhammajīva Mahā Thero* is an experienced meditation teacher of the *Theravāda* Buddhist tradition. He is presently the Chief Preceptor of the Mitirigala Nissarana Vanaya, a monastery in the strict forest tradition in Sri Lanka.

He entered the order of the monastic sangha in 1988 at a relatively young age under the guidance of the late Most Venerable *Mātara Srī Ñāṇārāma Mahāthera*, one of Sri Lanka's well known and highly respected meditation masters.

Upon the passing away of Venerable *Ñāṇārāma Mahāthera* he travelled to Burma, where he trained under the guidance of *Sayādaw U Panditabhivamsa*, the revered Burmese meditation master for a number of years. Having developed his practice as a trusted student of *U Pandita Sayadaw*, Venerable *Dhammajīva Mahā Thero* returned to Sri Lanka and subsequently assumed the position of Chief Preceptor at Mitirigala Nissarana Vanaya.

Whilst having successfully preserved the spirit of the Buddha's teachings in a living monastic tradition, Venerable *Dhammajīva Mahā Thero* has also used the unique wisdom gained through his practice to give life to the *dhamma* in the hearts of others. He is the author of over forty Buddhist publications and has translated many Burmese meditation manuals to Sinhalese as well as to English.

Now an internationally renowned teacher to numerous monks, nuns and lay practitioners in Sri Lanka as well as around the world, Venerable *Dhammajīva Mahā Thero* speaks lucidly on Buddhist meditation, drawing from his own personal experience as a dedicated *yogi*, articulating a vision of the Buddha's teaching bent on the cultivation of the meditation practice. Giving the necessary instructions to harness the practice towards deeper insights, Venerable *Dhammajīva Mahā Thero* maps the path for *yogis* to confidently steer ahead towards final liberation and a realisation of the Buddha's timeless wisdom.

Introduction

Anattalakkhana Sutta (discourse on the Non-Self Characteristic), the second discourse delivered by the Buddha has historical significance. It is well known amongst Buddhist circles.

It is also featured in the *Sutta Pitaka*, (Basket of Discourses), under the title, *Pancavaggiya Sutta*, meaning the "Group of Five" discourse.

When the Buddha delivered the first sermon, *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*, (Turning the Wheel of the Four Noble Truths), one of the five ascetics, *Kondanna*, grasped the essence of the Buddha's teachings and became a stream enterer (*sotapanna*). The Buddha realised that the profound realisations gained through his enlightenment could be communicated and understood by others. Four more days passed. On the fifth day, the Buddha delivered *Anattalakkhana Sutta* on the characteristic of non-self. At the completion of this teaching, all five ascetics became fully enlightened. The wheel of *dhamma* gathered momentum and six *arahants* in total now formed the *sāsana*.

The unfolding of *Anattalakkhana Sutta* is as follows.

On one occasion, the Buddha was resident at Benares, in the Deer Park at Isipatana (a dwelling place of Seers), where he addressed the group of five:

"*Bhikkhus,*" — "*Venerable sir,*" they replied. *The Blessed One said this:*

"Bhikkhus, form is not-self. Were form self, then this form would not lead to affliction, and one could say of form: 'Let my form be thus, let my form be not thus.' And since form is not-self, so it leads to affliction, and none can command of form: 'Let my form be thus, let my form be not thus.'

"Bhikkhus, feeling is not-self...

"Bhikkhus, perception is not-self...

"Bhikkhus, determinations are not-self...

"Bhikkhus, consciousness is not self. Were consciousness self, then this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and one could command of consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness be not thus.' And since consciousness is not-self, so it leads to affliction, and none can command of consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness be not thus.'

"Bhikkhus, how do you conceive it: is form permanent or impermanent?" — "Impermanent, venerable sir." — "Now is what is impermanent painful or pleasant?" — "Painful, venerable

sir." — "Now, is that which is impermanent and that which is painful, because they are subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this is I, this is myself'?" — "No, venerable sir."

"Is feeling permanent or impermanent?"

"Is perception permanent or impermanent?"

"Are determinations permanent or impermanent?"

"Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?" — "Impermanent, venerable sir." — "Now is what is impermanent pleasant or painful?" — "Painful, venerable sir." — "Now, is that which is impermanent and that which is painful, because they are subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this is I, this is myself'?" — "No, venerable sir."

"So, bhikkhus any kind of form whatsoever, whether past, future or presently arisen, whether gross or subtle, whether in oneself or external, whether inferior or superior, whether far or near, must, with right understanding, be regarded thus: 'This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself.'

"Any kind of feeling whatsoever..."

"Any kind of perception whatsoever..."

"Any kind of determination whatsoever..."

"Any kind of consciousness whatsoever, whether past, future or presently arisen, whether gross or subtle, whether in oneself or external, whether inferior or superior, whether far or near must, with right understanding, be regarded thus: 'This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself.'

"Bhikkhus, when a noble follower who has heard (the truth) sees thus, he finds estrangement in form, he finds estrangement in feeling, he finds estrangement in perception, he finds estrangement in determinations, he finds estrangement in consciousness.

"When he finds estrangement, passion fades out. With the fading of passion, he is liberated. When liberated, there is knowledge that he is liberated. He understands: 'Birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived out, what has to be done is done, of this there is no more beyond.'"

That is what the Blessed One said. The bhikkhus were glad, and they approved of his words.

Now during this utterance, the hearts of the group of five were liberated from taints through clinging no more.

These teachings are a compilation of talks given by Venerable U Dhammajīva Mahā Thero at an International Yogi Retreat at the Mitirigala Nissarana Vanaya Meditation Centre in July 2012. The editor is indebted to Mr. Kenneth Morris and Ms. Barbara

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Chapter 1

Form is Non-Self

The Buddha exhorts, *rupam bhikkhave anattā* - "monks, materiality or form is self-less", form is empty, there is no soul or a self in form (materiality).

At the time of this teaching, many worshipped the sun, trees, fire, rocks and oceans. Materiality (form) was thought to have a controlling power, the capacity to govern. Many believed in an invisible or mystical soul controlling the earth, that an omnipotent god was present. Atheists on the other hand, refuted the existence of a soul or an omnipotent god.

In between these extreme views was the Buddha's middle-path.

Contemplating form as form

In the sequence of contemplations, the Buddha introduces *kāyanupassanā*, a contemplation of form or *rupa dhamma* first, as form is verifiable and measurable. Contemplating on the body as an object of meditation, one can see its evolution, a metamorphosis. The person observing it also experiences a shift in view. At first, one believes that a soul exists. As the meditation practice deepens and one begins to investigate the formless nature of phenomena, this hypothesis is disproved.

By its nature, form is transient. It has its intrinsic and individual characteristics. Taking form as the starting point for the experiment, *Anattalakkhana Sutta* investigates whether it is of an unbreakable and continuous nature.

Of the six sense impingements, touch is the best object to contemplate matter; it is direct and involves the least distraction. In order to observe the touch of the breath, the Buddha recommends that we go to a forest, be under a tree or a cleared area. An environment of minimal distractions is recommended as the mind tends to wander after the surrounding sense impingements. Close your eyes to avoid distractions caused by visual objects. Remaining in a space of minimum sensual gratification, commence the practice of meditation.

Form is comprised of the four elements: earth, air, heat and water. Of the four elements, the air element is the most prominent as expansion, contraction and pressure can be readily experienced. The touch of the body on the ground, the hardness or the softness of the earth element can also easily be observed. In the practice of *ānāpānasati* meditation, we observe the experience of the air element. Buddhist literature specifies that the air element is the easiest object for a beginner

yogi and it is recommended that the practice be commenced with an observation of the in-breath and the out-breath or the rising and falling of the abdomen.

Observing the neutral movement of the air-draft with 'choiceless' awareness, without preference, and in an unassuming and non-reactive manner, there is an alignment between the noting mind and the object. When the mind is one-pointed, one could investigate whether the air element (matter) has any controlling power or whether it governs on its own accord.

If one were to believe in a creator, one might consider the breath as God's wish or will or that the world is God's design. Atheists would argue that the world is one of natural selection, a result of evolution. However, such pre-conceived ideas are sure to dissipate as you progress on this noble quest.

When the mind's attention is retained on the process of the in-breath and the out-breath, consciousness experiences minimal distractions. There is clarity of awareness and one can observe the discerning characteristics of the in-breath compared to the out-breath. The natural manifestations of the in-breath and the out-breath can be observed - that the in-breath is cooler than the out breath or the out breath has a rubbing sensation when the in-breath feels like an inward gush of wind. Closely observing these characteristics, the noting mind and the object become aligned and fewer distractions are experienced.

Observing the breath (form)

In the *Satipatthāna Sutta* and the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, we are instructed to mindfully observe the in-breath and the out-breath. When the in-breath is long, observe it as such and when the out-breath is long observe it as such; when the in-breath is short, observe it as such and when the out-breath is short, observe it as such. The breath will gradually appear as shorter. A magnetism or penetration towards the object will begin as the breath disappears from your awareness.

Now the relationship between the object and the noting mind is well aligned and you begin to understand the phenomena, directly and immediately. Sounds may distract and impinge on your ear-consciousness and thoughts may arise, but your attention remains with the object and the one-pointed awareness. The mind no longer entertains the gross in-breath or out-breath and its discerning features.

The subtle breath is gradually replaced with an aligned, one-pointed awareness. It is difficult to describe this experience, as the discerning characteristics of the breath have disappeared. Gradually, the internal and external boundaries will dissolve and one remains in an oceanic state. At times, the breath will appear as if it is far away or that it feels as if one is far away from their external surroundings.

The Buddha recommends that we observe the eleven facets of the breath during the practice: see it as gross, subtle, in, out, close, far away, present, past, future and so on.

Whatever the observation, it is not subject to one's governance. With sharpened mindfulness, one can see the beginning of the in-breath, how it is about to arise, the tactile sensation experienced when the in-breath process slowly begins and when the in-breath process is completed, how one's mindfulness remains intact. Observing the beginning, the middle and the end of the in-breath, one can see the past, present and future of form.

There is no controlling of the process. It is a natural unfolding.

Form is non-self

As the breath becomes subtle and dissipates, the various facets of the four elements, the interplay between the air element, the water element, the heat element and the earth element manifest. With equipoised awareness, just observe the theatre in the performance of the elements. The experiences of vibration, contraction, heat patches, light perception and so forth are vivid. By simply observing what unfolds and remaining in a neutral equilibrium of energy, one reaches a state of equanimity. The healing qualities of the mind can be experienced in this state of awareness.

As the elements dissolve into a flux, one sees the non-governable state of matter. The experience becomes an observation of energies. Through the flux and the dissolution of matter into a rapid arising and passing, one penetrates through concept to navigate towards reality. It becomes clear that form is non-self.

Any unfolding in the practice can be harmonised with an understanding of prior knowledge. So it is useful to be equipped with a sound theoretical understanding of the process before commencing the practice. Whatever the unfolding, don't rush to a decision or judgment. Just continue with detached observation.

With regularised practice, during each session of sitting meditation, you will begin to see the shift from the gross to the subtle.

Penetrating deeper into the breath, the unfolding of non-volitional phenomena can be observed. One begins to experience heat waves, bubbles, contractions and stiffness - all manifestations of the elements, unfolding without an agenda; there is no control over it whatsoever.

We are instructed to passively observe the unfolding of form and its manifestations, seamlessly, in our awareness. By witnessing the non-governable nature of matter, the truth of the Buddha's statement, that form is non-self, can be validated with direct experiential knowledge. When wilful or volitional activity is absent from the mind, phenomena is seen as an unfolding; there is an absence of controlling power over any apparent substance.

Our wilful action is just the tip of an ice berg when compared to the infinite space of equanimity. An enduring identity is built as long as the mind is anchored upon a

view that there is substance or an essence in matter. When faced with the unforeseen non-governable state of phenomena in the practice, one naturally feels humility or dissatisfaction. The result is not what one had hoped for.

In spite of the truth that unfolds, many struggle to accept it. When the boundaries between the internal and the external merge, one feels lonely or bored. There is no substance worth grasping. There is no longer comparison (or observation of an internal and external boundary (or an observation of “me” or “not me”)); instead, you remain in an oceanic state of awareness, separate from sense impingement.

The awareness is broad and expansive when you remain in a sign-less state of observation. A sign-less state of awareness cannot be reached overnight or during one session of sitting meditation. To see the self-less nature of form, the practice needs to be regularised. Meditation is not a single stroke, but the repeated application of the mind to the object.

Throughout *samsāra*, gratification has been our driving force. Yet, when we witness the emptiness of form, we retreat to an unmotivated state.

Sensitivity to moral shame and fear intensifies as one begins to witness the non-governable nature of form. Seeing the truth in the Buddha’s teachings, your views are broadened. You are able to validate your faith by direct, experiential knowledge.

Dissolution of form

The breath will gradually disappear from our awareness as the individual characteristics of the elements unfold. Progressing deeper in the practice, one begins to see the common characteristics of the elements as the individual characteristics dissolve into a flux and appear as if they are merging with one another.

Have resolute faith to navigate towards the deeper layers of consciousness as the mind and the object merge with one another. In *samatha* (tranquillity) meditation, this state is characterised as *jhānic* experience or absorption. In *vipassanā* meditation, the experience appears similar, although, instead of absorption, one inquires into the object. Mindfulness is vivid and the spectrum of observation is broad. All that unfolds is noted with penetrative insight whilst the mind remains merged with the object. One must master this state by repetitive application of the mind to this one-pointed awareness.

When the common characteristics continue to manifest, the experience becomes rather monotonous and uneventful. It is common to experience lethargy. So be equipped with boosted energy.

When lethargy sets in, become aware of lethargy as lethargy or boredom as boredom and one can see how their nature is also subject to change.

As the mind merges with the object, you enter a state of flux; the boundary between the internal and the external disappears and the “self” is temporarily suspended. Your attitude towards a soul experiences a revolutionary change when the paradigm shifts from materiality to the mental sphere. Mentality seeks refuge in perception when the mind loses its grip over any tangible matter.

Throughout this process, simply observe the fading nature of the breath, the subtle states of matter, the flux, and how the mind becomes agitated as it adjusts to a state of sign-less perception.

If you suffer from mental imbalance or a superiority complex, it is difficult to reconcile this state of awareness. Egocentric ideas or a perception of an enduring self cannot be grounded upon this state of awareness. Just become a neutral observer and don't listen to the mind's interpretation or rationalisation. Be armed with resolute faith and well established morality, so that you can accept what unfolds in a balanced manner. Simply be aware: “I must observe what unfolds in a choiceless manner - now the breath has gone and only the shadows are present”.

Language cannot describe the experience of common characteristics and the sign-less state of awareness. When form ceases in your awareness, simply listening to the inner chatter of the mind and its agitation provides an insight into the cheating nature of the mind and how interpretations plague the clarity of one's awareness. These defilements and perversions are common to all *yogis*, so have an open mind and simply become aware of them. Everyone falls into the traps of *upakilesas* (perversions).

Common traps

A common trap is overestimation (*dhammaudacca*) and agitation built on the success of one's practice. Overcoming the perversions that manifest in one's awareness, requires preparedness, vigilance and alertness, to recognise them and develop an immunity to any distraction caused by them. Your response to perversion is the first acid test to see if you are mentally balanced. If the objective is short of liberation and you seek after therapeutic outcomes or healing, these traps could derail you from the path. Some meditate as it is “fashionable”, some others, for healing purposes or to achieve success in worldly pursuits. Inferior objectives could readily direct you to fall victim to one of these traps.

Straighten your views and aspire towards liberation. Your practice will gather momentum and direct itself in an unassuming manner and serve as your teacher, enabling you to move ahead with resolute faith, whatever the obstacle.

When continuity of awareness from a session of sitting meditation can be carried forward to daily activities, one is able to master the art of non-reaction and go about in an unassuming manner. With “choice-less” awareness, one can assimilate the practice and take the least frictional path under any circumstances.

As the practice reaches its peak (mastering the subtle states of awareness and the merging of the internal and external boundaries), treat it as a temporary experience, be unassuming as if you are a beginner. If the experience is completely collapsing and the mind becomes scattered or the body is shaken or threatened, maintain resolute faith.

For example, overcoming the hindrances, sleepiness or agitation, requires patient observation, being aware and aligning the noting mind with each experience. Mindfulness also arises and passes away. Concentration, just like faith is also subject to change and will arise and pass away. Equally, wisdom and clarity will do the same.

Claiming any insights developed in the practice as “mine”, one behaves foolishly, as the next minute one will be overcome by a state of ignorance. The five faculties of faith, mindfulness, energy, concentration and wisdom become powers when they are neutrally observed. Learning through one’s mistakes becomes the best teacher in the practice. Reinforcement is possible through repetitive application. Whatever the hurdle experienced, don’t personalise it and instead, treat it as an opportunity to progress.

Facing life’s challenges requires resistance and a response of ‘suchness’, underpinned by equanimity. When the response is informed by pause and reflection, one utilises the strength of a human birth, the mind’s capacity for non-reaction and non-judgment. Just move behind the scenes to observe the magic of the mind and the disguise projected by perversions. When the observation is non-judgemental, one naturally returns to an unassuming state, just to see what unfolds in one’s awareness. Progress in the practice is painfully slow. Knowing this, *yogis* must try to facilitate the repetitive application of mindfulness as often as possible.

Simply fulfil the causes and don’t expect results. Measuring one’s contribution according to a result is like economics – supply and demand. Whatever the result that unfolds, just become aware of it as yet another phenomena. Regret is unnecessary as there is no volition in the processes that unfold. Instead, simply respond by adjusting to the circumstances.

Gradually, the practice will navigate from materiality to feelings. Observing the subtle nature of this awareness, the peace, and allowing the mind to anchor upon it, seasoning it, one withdraws from the mind’s regimentation and manipulation. One learns the art of ‘letting go’ as rapture and serenity sets in.

Much depends on one’s attitude. Assimilating the middle path taught by the Buddha in the practice is one’s own responsibility. When painful states can be endured without reaction, becoming aware of blissful states and capturing the mind’s awareness to what unfolds in the present moment, one can see the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha in the practice.

Nibbāna over *samsāra* is your choice. The decision rests with you. Good and bad belongs to you, as does preference and judgment. Morality is your decision and the practice is steered by your well boosted energy. Become aware of matter, its nature and common characteristics of impermanence and non-self.

All episodes that unfold, arise, persist and pass away; matter is the same and so are feelings, perceptions, volitional formations and consciousness. Observe them all with non-judgmental awareness. Observe the dissolution of matter and the practice will gradually navigate towards feelings and perceptions.

Non-self and affliction

If form could be under one's control, could it be subject to affliction? If one had control over one's body, it would respond to one's command, "let my form be thus or be formed in a particular way."

During the time of the Buddha, an ascetic by the name of *Saccaka*, disciple of *Nighanta*, a debater and great speaker was also dwelling in *Vesali*.

He felt he could outsmart anyone in an argument. The Buddha was also residing at *Vesali* during this time. One morning, *Saccaka* met Venerable *Assaji* during the Venerable's alms round. Having exchanged greetings with Venerable *Assaji*, he asked: "Master *Assaji*, how does the Buddha discipline his disciples and how is the Buddha's instruction, usually presented to his disciples? "

Venerable *Assaji* responded, this is how the Buddha disciplines his disciples: "*Bhikkhus*, material form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is impermanent, formations are impermanent and consciousness is impermanent. *Bhikkhus*, material form is non-self, feeling is non-self, perception is non-self, formations are non-self and consciousness is non-self. All formations are impermanent; all things are non-self."

Saccaka became rather agitated and responded that he wished to confront the Buddha to disprove this 'hypothesis' and wrong view. Venerable *Assaji*'s silence was treated by *Saccaka* as an invitation to visit the Buddha.

Visiting with 500 *Licchavis*, *Saccaka* presented the same question before the Buddha. The Buddha responded in the same terms as Venerable *Assaji* had done previously.

Saccaka said to the Buddha, "a simile occurs to me, Master *Gotama*."

Just as when seeds and plants, whatever their kind, reach growth, increase, and maturation, all do so in dependence upon the earth, based upon the earth; and just as when strenuous work, whatever its kind is done, all are done in dependence upon the earth, based upon the earth, so too Master *Gotama*, a person has material form as

self and based upon material form, he produces merit or demerit. A person has feeling as self and based upon feeling, he produces merit or demerit....”

The Buddha responded: “are you asserting that material form is myself, feeling is myself” and so on? *Saccaka* responded, “yes, material form is myself, feeling is myself”.

The Buddha asked *Saccaka*, King *Pasenadi Kosala* is ruling and governing the Magadha Kingdom and has many powers. King *Pasenadi Kosala* and King *Ajātasattu Vedehiputta* would exercise powers in their own realm to “execute those who should be executed, to fine those who should be fined and banish those who should be banished?” *Saccaka* responded in agreement to this.

Then, the Buddha asked, when you say thus, “material form is myself”, do you exercise such power over that material form as to say: “let my form be thus, let my form not be thus?” When this was said, *Saccaka* was silent. The Buddha asked a second time. *Saccaka* was again silent. For the third time, the Buddha repeated the question. *Saccaka* responded, “No master *Gotama*”. *Saccaka* began to sweat, sat silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum, and without response.

Saccaka’s confusion stands true to the perception we hold of form. We are taught from our childhood that we can manipulate and navigate the future to our design. So we strive at material accomplishment and success. Day-dreaming, planning and designing, our creative thinking doesn’t lend towards liberation. Operating in a camouflaged world, we live in extremes. We believe that soul manifests as form, self takes refuge in form or that form takes refuge in a soul, and so forth.

We are trained and conditioned to believe that what we see, exists, what exists, we see. Our conventional belief system is like a mirage. Yet, the closer you run to it, the further it appears. We don’t realise that we see the world through the lens of a magician.

As soon as the eye catches sense impingement, it is received with preference. Sensory perception is marred by preference, pre-conceived views and ideas. Throughout *samsāra*, we pursued material satisfaction gained through the eye and visual objects, the ear and sounds, nose and smells, tongue and tastes and the body and tactile sensations. Sensual pleasure is expensive and requires maintenance.

Mindfulness lends itself towards non-judgmental awareness. With the presence of mindfulness, one automatically responds with suspended decision. The “self” is suspended when the observation is one of detached, non-judgmental awareness.

When we move towards the immaterial sphere, there is no fighting, winning or rivalry, and everything feels like a walkover. The observation is neutral. In a state of equilibrium there is a vast expansion of space, solitude and openness.

As the Buddha advised the elder, *Nakulapitha*, “this body is one of suffering”, it is subject to affliction”. Yet even if the body were to fall ill, aim to keep the mind aloof and separate from the physical affliction. Venerable *Sāriputta* instructed *Nakulapitha*, there are four wrong ways to view self: form is self, self possesses form or form is in self or self is in form. Considering self as form is similar to holding a view that the flame and light are the same. When the flame is extinguished, so is the light. Or else, we take the simile of the tree and the shade, the flower and the smell. They are interdependent on one another.

Keep the mind separate from the body when it is unwell. If the mind is separate from the physical discomfort, it can remain unhindered. In spite of the pain that is aroused by terminal disease, take a step back to observe the physical torment caused by the pain. Keep the mind neutral.

I recollect the story of a young girl’s experience with a brain tumour. Her surgery was destined to fail. In spite of the unlikely prognosis of success, she went ahead with the operation. Just prior to the surgery, she was placed on the aluminium trolley and she closed her eyes and began to experience the temperature of the trolley. She became mindful and could hear her family chant the *Rathana Sutta* as she was taken to the operating theatre. She soon entered a state of absorption and wasn’t aware that she had arrived at the theatre. During the surgery, observing the effect of the anaesthetic and the sensation of the body separating from her awareness, she remained in a state of bliss. On her return, she recollected this experience and how her awareness remained separate from her bodily processes. This serves as an example of how the mind could remain unaffected when the body is subjected to a painful ailment.

One must have radical reflection on this onward journey. Don’t stop short at rational reflection as you already have plenty of that gained through worldly knowledge. Engage in non-judgmental awareness, be bold and be armed with sufficient theory when faced with the unknown in the practice. Be prepared to gamble with your life.

The *Vipassanā* practice is challenging. Be fuelled with generosity and well entrenched morality to progress confidently in your practice. When concentration sets in, upon a foundation of one-pointed awareness, you can gradually penetrate deeper to allow *vipassanā* insights to unfold.

Keeping the mind unhindered amidst affliction is possible for a *vipassanā yogi*. Practice before you are old, fall sick or simply don’t have the physical capability to meditate. The world is afflicted by the suffering of human malaise. No one can claim perfect health. Affliction is inherent in every person. As you see the destruction of form, its emptiness and non-governable nature, you begin to understand its illusory nature. You can experience this liberation when you transcend beyond its creation.

Chapter 2

Feeling is Non-Self

In the practice, we investigate the gross (measurable and tangible) aspects of the five aggregates and move towards the subtle aspects of feelings, perception, mental formations and consciousness. So we commence the practice with mindfulness upon materiality, develop concentration and gradually navigate towards feelings, the sphere of mentality.

From materiality to mentality

Only a relatively small percentage of *yogis* can effectively navigate their practice from materiality to mentality. A sound theoretical understanding is essential for this development. Make time for the practice and create supportive conditions to assimilate the least frictional path. When the right conditions are aligned, there is a natural transition from materiality to mentality. The deeper one delves into mentality, the greater the emancipation one feels from the material sphere.

Clearly comprehend the truth of suffering as this onward journey is geared towards an understanding of this truth. Many different shapes and types of cushions are available in meditation centres to keep the body comfortable. This is necessary for a beginner *yogi*. As the practice matures and the theoretical knowledge develops to experiential knowledge, it is apparent that acclimatizing one's attitude to feelings is far more effective than reliance on external support.

One's approach towards painful sensations is an important ingredient to advance in the practice. Whenever painful bodily sensations arise, patiently become aware of them without reaction or feelings of distress. Don't reject the painful feelings with aversion or treat them as a hindrance. Instead, patiently become aware of them, noting their nature and attributes, and whenever possible, continue with mindfulness on the primary object.

Bodily pains may intensify as one undertakes longer periods of sitting meditation. Mindfully, aim to observe the beginning, the middle and the end of all painful sensations. Enduring bodily pains is an important ingredient to progress towards an investigation of feelings.

We respond with natural instinct and react when confronted with negative experience by claiming it as "mine" or "myself". Instead, the Buddha instructs us to observe feelings as and when they arise, to align our attention with the negative

feeling. Not to react, but to neutrally observe the unfolding without claiming it through self-view.

If moral restraint is absent, there are no limits to one's verbal, physical and mental deeds. Many forms of sensual desire, hateful feelings and regret will manifest. Excitement and doubt can also hinder one's practice. One may transgress ethical and civil norms, falling victim to law enforcement. If one were to restrain the faculties, there is protection from misconduct and misdeeds. Morality is an aid to minimise disturbance from the hindrances and to develop mindfulness and concentration.

Navigating deeper to the subtle layers of the mind, efficiency of concentration helps one to observe the subtle states of materiality. Moving deeper, the subtle layers of feelings can also be observed. Be unassuming, as ego-centric attitudes, conceit and desire can disturb the observation or experience by claiming any advancement in the practice with thoughts of "success". As the practice deepens, the experience is uneventful and monotonous. Without proper instructions, one might feel disheartened as the mind experiences lethargy, boredom or sleepiness.

The practice promises an investigation of all three forms of feelings: pleasurable, painful and indifferent. As the awareness shifts towards the subtle mental states, *yogis* experience the all pervading influence of indifferent feelings.

Observing feelings

Aligning the mind's attention with negative emotions, becoming aware of boredom, uncertainty and the sense of loneliness, one can investigate mentality directly, confronting all presently arising negative emotions as and when they arise. Negative or painful feelings are always associated with the latent tendency to hate (*patigha anusaya*). A combination of hate and physical pain can be unbearable.

Confronting pain, one understands the first truth of suffering. Observing pain from the beginning, through the middle and to the end, one develops endurance towards negative feelings and when the pain ceases, experiences the more positive mind states of gladness, rapture and alertness. Pain is non-self. It is one's reaction to pain and the negative sentiment towards the pain that is rooted in self. Developing the maturity to welcome an observation of negative mind states, one's attention naturally shifts to an observation of feelings.

A useful theoretical basis for any discussion on feelings is the *Culavedalla Sutta*, which consists of a dialogue between *Upāsaka Visākha* and *Bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā* (former husband and wife), two esteemed disciples of the Buddha. The dialogue ensues when *Upāsaka Visākha*, developed in his practice of insight meditation, takes leave from his solitude to visit his former wife at her nunnery, to investigate her progress in the practice. Unknown to *Upāsaka Visākha*, *Bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā* was fully enlightened.

Upāsaka Visākha asks the *arahant* nun: "what is the pain and pleasure of the pleasurable feeling?" *Bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā* responds: "the arising of pleasurable feeling is pleasure, the disappearance of a pleasurable feeling (*sukha vedhanā*) is pain".

Generally, we have a negative pre-disposition towards painful feeling unless we are instructed to observe it (in)differently. We only see the painful side of feeling. Observe it from the beginning, through the middle and to the end, to see its transient nature that it is due to cause and effect. When the causes cease, the feelings undergo cessation. It is through this observation that one is able to see the absence of "self" in the painful feeling.

Then, *Upāsaka Visākha* asks: "what is the pain and pleasure of the painful feeling?" *Bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā* responds: "the arising of the painful feeling is pain; the disappearance of a painful feeling is pleasure". Enduring the painful feeling from the beginning, through the middle and to the end, one could see how a pleasurable feeling awaits from its disappearance.

From birth, our conditioning has been to pursue pleasure, and it dissipates to make room for painful feelings to arise. Don't value-judge these sensations and associate negative and positive thoughts towards them or see them through a lens of self-view. Just experience the whole episode of a painful feeling, how it arises, peaks and then dissipates.

Indifferent feeling

Finally, *Upāsaka Visākha* asks: "what is the pain and the pleasure of the indifferent feeling (*adukkhamā sukha vedhanā*)?" *Bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā* responds: "being aware of an indifferent feeling is a pleasure; to not know an indifferent feeling is pain."

The middle path prescribed by the Buddha is one of indifference and equanimity. In the continuum of in-breaths and out-breaths, there is a point of transition (where the in-breath ends and the out-breath begins), a gap, which is indifferent feeling. We feel bored when faced with indiscriminate awareness of the subtle sign-less breath.

Our lives are consumed with the aspiration to maximise pleasure and to avoid pain as much as possible. Indifferent mind states are monotonous and uneventful black hole. So, when we experience indifference, our tendency is to follow hobbies, plan, read books and magazines to overcome the boredom.

Indifferent feeling is incommunicable as it lacks description. It is a state of indiscriminate awareness. Unknown to us, much of our lives are spent in this neutral state of awareness.

Pursuing pleasure and avoiding displeasure, we don't appreciate neutral feelings. There is no space for rationality, pre-conceived ideas, preference or judgment in indifference. You are simply an observer with no governing power.

Any attempt to maintain our preference gives rise to suffering. Throughout *samsāra*, we collected friends with similar interests or preferences, and selected projects of our choice. We didn't realise that the oscillation from good to bad was self projection, simply claiming life's unfolding with personal preference. All objects seen through eye sensitivity were claimed with desire or rejection. What we liked, we desired. What we disliked, we rejected. We failed to see the indifference in sense impingement.

Sensory contact and non-governance

When the eye contacts with a visual object, it is near impossible to avoid preference. With sharpened mindfulness, slice the time to thin layers so that you can observe the process that takes place at eye sensitivity and the preference attached to it. Seeing this in the practice is a significant step forward as you begin to see how experience is claimed with self-view, judgment and preference.

Observe the arousal generated at eye sensitivity and the reaction, that it is without 'self'. It is happening without your governance and there is no power of control over the process. It is simply an unfolding of cause and effect. Nothing happens according to our agenda/design. Observing the process of sensory contact in this way, one gains a distance from feelings. Otherwise, immediately, there is attachment or rejection of the object. Attachment and desire are generated in the present and are the cause of all suffering. Become aware of sensory contact, the visual objects, sounds, smells, taste and the tactile sensations experienced. When 'seeing' occurs, if we note it, we don't entertain it.

Discriminate between the process of 'seeing' and 'looking'. When mindfulness is sharp and well aligned, you can discriminately separate the processes of 'seeing' and 'looking'. One intends to look (*sacetanika*) when compared to 'seeing' (*acetanika*). There is no *kamma* generated in 'seeing' as intention is absent. There is no self in the process of 'seeing'.

The Buddha says to the elder, *Mālukyaputta*, any object that you have not seen in the past or are not looking at in the present does not generate defilements in the mind. Neither are defilements generated by any sounds that you have not heard or which you are not listening to in the present moment. The past and the future are the mind's projections that generate so much worry, regret and excitement. All visual objects and sounds are experienced in the present moment. When you 'look', you personalise the experience; when you 'see', there is no claim over what is being observed.

Of the six sense bases, only one connects to sensory objects at a given time and we only experience only one-sixth of sensory consciousness. The remaining five are free from sensory contact. Committing to one sense base, the experience available

through the other five is rejected. Continuing with sensory contact in one sense base, we reject the sensory experience available through the other five sense bases.

Pleasure and pain are absent when one separates from sensory contact. Separating from the sensory realm, one experiences indifferent feeling. Maximising indifferent feeling and familiarising with it, there is an experience of 'living'. At all other times, we just plan and design. Our pre-disposition is to identify with desirable sounds and touch. We feel bored when pleasure is absent. Indifference is our real home.

Immaterial feelings

With sharpened mindfulness, a cessation of intense painful feelings can be observed. The more one endures intense bodily pain in the practice, the more rapture one experiences with the cessation of bodily pains. This is a paradox in the practice. When rapture sets in, *yogis* experience a bubbling sensation, scratching, muscle reactions and so forth. As the thrills become continuous, at times, the body begins to jerk. At times, the whole body experiences a massaging sensation and one may feel a rippling effect on the skin. Amidst such blissful states, the aim should be one of continued awareness of the primary object.

As the practice gathers momentum, awareness becomes panoramic. All manifestations are immediate, vivid and active. Venerable *U Pandita Sayadaw* instructs *yogis* to maximise faith when faced with such experiences, to retain the awareness on what unfolds, to be a passive observer with well aligned mindfulness. Well balanced faith, concentration, discernment and effort provide a fertile foundation for wisdom to arise.

Confidence in the practice increases as faith is validated with direct experiential knowledge. One must be ready to sacrifice one's life for this knowledge. At times the whole body feels engulfed with rapture and pleasure. Just allow it to happen. One may feel as if a boiling pot of milk were overflowing throughout the body. Each and every cell experiences rapture and the awareness is bright. During this stage of the practice, one experiences a number of episodes.

When experiencing such blissful and tranquil mind states, it is common for *yogis* to overestimate their progress. The experience of *jhānic* absorption or rapture becomes all pervading and one begins to feel a sense of achievement, advancement and competence. One may become conceited. Such over-estimation can distract a *yogi* from staying on the correct path. These pitfalls are a trap for successful *yogis* and any distraction or misdirection is a waste for the *sāsana* at large.

Unlike material pleasure, the experience of immaterial rapture and serenity is free of charge. They are by-products of well aligned mindfulness and concentration. *Yogis* may begin to expect blissful mind states during every sitting. Yet, as instructed by the Buddha, feelings are non-self (*vedhanā bhikkhave anattā*); they are not subject to governance and control. Don't expect blissful states in each session of meditation and

instead, have equanimity to develop a 'suchness' to all that unfolds. Just tread on the path with humility.

Once, when at Panditarama, my practice progressed well and I reported my practice to my teacher, *U Pandita Sayadaṃ*, explaining, that as I was observing the rising and the falling of the abdomen, the practice gathered momentum and I witnessed a brightness and rapture and experienced very good mind states and so forth. Yet, my teacher's facial expression changed. Instead of praising the advancement, through the translator, I was told that I was trapped within. But, I reported that it was the best of my sitting meditation, I experienced a light, rapture and wisdom. I was told that I had overestimated my progress, stopped noting the object and should read the Buddha's instructions for *yogis* trapped within due to mental factors.

We interpret immaterial pleasure favourably, bolstering our ego and adding fuel to conceit and craving, even as we move away from the realm of material pleasure. This is habit accumulated throughout *samsāra*.

Just become a passive observer to the theatre that unfolds, whether the experience is pleasurable or unpleasurable and retain awareness of the present moment. Don't interpret the experience that unfolds.

Try to overcome attachment to progress and insights or assuming superiority in one's practice. All results in the practice are due to conditions, be they material or immaterial success. As the Buddha instructs, they are all results of past deeds. Over-estimation due to worldly accomplishment, wealth or beauty is ignoble. Just allow direct experience and non-judgemental awareness to lead the way. Be humble and develop a beginner's mind, otherwise, when the shift from materiality to mentality occurs, over-estimation could muddle the clarity of awareness.

Feelings are non-self

As described by Venerable *Katukurunde Nānānanda Mahā Thero*, if there is no thread in the bobbin attached to the sewing machine, it is not possible for stitching to take place. Outwardly, there is an appearance of a stitching process. At the end of the process, the cloth comes apart as there was no thread in the bobbin to stitch them together.

Similarly, a distance from pleasurable and painful feelings allows us to observe the separation between the feeling and the observing mind, how distaste is attributed towards painful sensations.

Disclaim all that unfolds without interference. Can you claim this pain as me, mine or under my control? Gaining a distance from intensified pain, one develops forbearance, an essential ingredient to advance in the practice. Separate the feeling from the mind that interprets it with non-judgemental awareness. Don't attribute

negativity towards painful feelings or positive sentiment towards pleasurable feelings or boredom towards neutral states of mind.

In the practice, we transcend material pleasure (*āmisa sukha*) to experience immaterial pleasure (*nirāmisa sukha*) as the mind delves deeper into the sphere of mentality. As the practice deepens, we experience *avedhaitha sukha*, a state of unperceivable feeling, the final aim of the practice. As *Venerable Sāriputta* instructs, what one feels or perceives, gives cause to suffering, and in the absence of perception, there is no change and affliction, only an equilibrium (a neutral state), which is the pleasure of noble beings. There is no oscillation in *avedhaitha sukha*.

Assimilating the path remains the responsibility of *yogis*. The Buddha can only guide us. So continue to observe all that unfolds in the practice with detachment, without claiming any experience, be it positive, negative or neutral. Once in a while, allow the body to suffer, as pain is a raw material for *vipassanā* investigation. Forbearance aids one to prepare for the inevitable old age, sickness and death. Don't hesitate on this noble quest to investigate pleasure, pain and neutral feelings. Observing feelings and confronting them directly, we experience the sap of *dhamma*.

Restraint from sensory contact

Avoid seeing distracting objects which are provocative and activate sensual pleasure. Be cautious when listening to pleasant sounds, tasting delightful flavours, smelling pleasant odours and so on. The Buddha instructs us to become aware of visual objects that impinge on eye sensitivity and the associated feelings that arise.

Diligently note how visual objects attract eye sensitivity, become aware of the causal connection that gave rise to the pleasurable (or painful) feeling. Be sharp enough to see your reaction, how you accept the process as either desirable or undesirable. If you are negligent, you are taken away by the visual object, and if it is pleasant, you indulge in it.

When sounds strike the ear drum, it is inevitable for desirable or undesirable feelings to arise. Entertaining the sound, lending one's ear, one becomes negligent. Don't immerse yourself in pleasant sounds and visual objects and instead, observe the dependent origination of desirable, undesirable and neutral feelings. Observe how sound is attracted to the ear drum.

Unless you are taught to observe sensory contact in this way, your pre-disposition is to entertain them. So be armed with sound theoretical understanding, beforehand. Be vigilant to observe desirable and undesirable feelings as and when they arise equally and observe how they are received through one's own conditioning.

Sensory experience is not due to external control, so there is no reason for depression or disappointment as our moods are predicated on how we receive sensory contact. Instead of grappling with external sense impingements, sharpen your insight to

observe all presently arising feelings, whether they are desirable or undesirable. Become aware of your response towards feelings and the impact they generate.

Practising in this way, one develops equanimity towards all that unfolds with well aligned mindfulness. *Yogis* never take on the world in order to try and change their circumstances, but instead, focus on their inner states, their response to sensory contact, with diligence. Becoming mindful of desire as and when feelings are generated, one can see the fiction in sensory contact.

We give primacy to what unfolds through preference and judgement. Our selection is based on preference. Due to the mind's richness and variety, one sees diversity in external surroundings. Once, a Zen practitioner, feeling somewhat bored at a retreat went to a nearby mountain to observe the sunset. He was absorbed in the setting sun and the panoramic view of the landscape. On his return, he recollected the experience to his master. The Zen master admonished him and exclaimed that his mind is more beautiful than that of the scenery (indicating that it was the noteworthy qualities of his mind that allowed him to appreciate the beauty of the setting sun. When the mind is beautiful, the external surroundings projected through eye sensitivity, invariably, become beautiful).

Being in the forest, it is easier to have sense restraint. All directions in the forest are the same and the landscape lacks diversity. Everywhere, you find trees and shrubs. This is why it is recommended that we go to a forest and sit under a tree to undertake the practice. If the mind is surrounded by various sights, sounds, smells, tastes and comfort, there is so much distraction.

An enlightened being, an *arahant*, immediately sees the dangers of a beautiful object captured through eye contact and begins to observe it in an equipoise manner. Whatever the external distraction, an *arahant* is not moved by it and remains liberated from external view. Becoming aware of all presently arising phenomena, an *arahant* can see the same sensory experience as auspicious, inauspicious or neutral.

During the time of the Buddha, Venerable *Nāgasamala*, whilst undertaking the daily alms round, saw a damsel dancing to music on the highway path with many onlookers surrounding her. Realising that it was *māra's* trap, he immediately became mindful and exercised sense restraint. Looking at the dancing figure, establishing mindfulness, he became an *arahant*. By applying mindfulness in the correct way, that very trap, he declared, due to his vigilance became an aid to fully realise the *dhamma*.

If one's mind simply responds to external sense impingements, one operates like a puppet and the sensory remote control is in control. Observing one's response without reaction, noting how the mind receives external sense impingement and the feelings generated (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral), one takes control. Like the sewing machine operating without any thread in the bobbin underneath to facilitate the stitching process, whatever the sense impingement, becoming aware of the

process of sensory contact and the associated feelings, one paves the path to liberation.

Many visual objects surround us. Whether or not we look and what objects we select is our preference. It is like partaking in a buffet. Many types of food are available, but the selection is based on individual preference. What you select, you taste, what you taste, you swallow and will result in obtaining nutriment, high blood pressure or diabetes. You can't blame the host for high cholesterol and blood sugar if you select something rich in fat or sugar. The selection was entirely yours. Similarly, blaming external forces and impingements for our misery, we fail to identify the cause of our suffering (response to sensory contact).

Non-governable feelings

In the practice, with sharpened mindfulness, one observes how one breath differs from the other. As the breath becomes subtle and the noting mind becomes merged with the object, one must have well mobilised energy and sharpened awareness to observe the breath closely, immediately and continuously. As the mind merges with the object, one begins to see a combination of the four elements, manifesting, intermittently.

Their common characteristics, the change and transience can also be observed. When the mind is aligned with the object, it feels as if you are in a state of absorption, yet the discerning mind continues to observe the details of the object. At times, you feel disoriented as space and time dissolve. Gradually, your awareness transcends boundaries and you dissolve into the universe; there is no judgment, or comparison.

Be well equipped with reinforced faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha as you delve deeper into your consciousness with non-judgmental awareness. Penetrating deeper into the object, one undergoes a metamorphosis, an evolution of feelings; the experience could at times be positive and at other times, negative. Whatever the experience, don't be moved by it; simply appreciate it as a sign of progress in the practice. Just remain in equanimity while continuing with the practice.

The mind's perversions may add to the experience with benevolent thoughts that can appear spiritual, yet, lure you away from the present moment.

Irrespective of language, religion or creed, those who are mindful are now coming together. They are governed by a life of simple living, high thinking. I see many *yogis* attending retreats in order to learn the *dhamma* and develop the art of meditation, to silently finesse their practice and maintain their integrity, freedom and openness, to strive in the *vipassanā* practice.

It is not one's religion, but one's capacity to retain continuous mindfulness on an object that aids in the progress towards liberation. Mindfully, one must transcend pleasure and pain to move towards indifferent feeling. The edges of the see saw

oscillate, but the middle is peaceful. To remain in the middle, replace the negative feelings with positive feelings and the pleasurable feeling with indifferent feeling.

A drop of water on a lotus petal or leaf does not smear. When shaken, you can see how the droplet remains independent, yet at the same time, touches the flower or the leaf. Separate from sensory contact and experience to see the cause of pleasant and unpleasant feelings and how judgment and preference intervenes. Simply observe how feelings are the result of a cause, sensory contact, and how non-judgemental awareness leads to indifferent feeling. Feelings are not subject to our governance and there is no *self* in feelings.

Approach the practice systematically and observe how the mind transcends from material pleasure to immaterial pleasure. As the practice progresses deeper, you will begin to appreciate the solitude, stillness and neutrality of indifferent feeling and slowly navigate towards the more subtle layers of mentality.

Chapter 3

Perception is Non-Self

Perception or cognition is what gives rise to recognition. In the cognitive series, when the eye contacts with a visual object and eye-consciousness takes priority, the coming together of the three (eye, object and consciousness) is eye-contact. Eye contact generates feeling. To feel, one must become a 'seer', and the mind needs to engage in 'seeing' at that particular moment of contact.

Impingements that come into contact with the senses are cognised (perceived) through the corresponding sense faculties. Habitually, one claims what is received through sensory contact. So, when the eye 'sees', we claim the experience, thinking, "I saw", "I see", "what I see is mine" and so forth. Whatever the experience, it is personalised, claimed, and we cling to it.

The mind places a label on the sense impingements received. Cognition (perception) is the signage and the recognition process begins when one contacts the object a second or third time, becoming familiar with it. Labelling aids recognition as it is not possible to recognise with the first impression of sense impingements itself. The mind must be repeatedly applied to the object to verify sensory contact.

Transience of perception

When mindfulness is applied repeatedly to the primary object during *ānāpānasati* meditation, one can observe how perception evolves and changes, how the mind labels the first transaction of air, how the labelling changes when the breath becomes subtle, and so forth. Unless perception is tested with repeated application of the mind to an object, one habitually tends to believe in first impression.

Without rushing to a decision based on first impressions, it is wise to enhance the observation by having an evenly focused attention on the object with a suspended conclusion, then, continue to observe. Becoming mindful over a series of events, one can directly witness how recognition of an object is subject to change and is not within one's control.

The untrained mind is fuelled with notions of permanence. So the mind must be prepared to accept impermanence as it unfolds in the practice of insight meditation. Otherwise, one might challenge or doubt the impermanence of perceptions observed in the practice. Whether one undertakes sitting meditation, walking meditation or day to day activities, simply become aware of the process. Don't arrive at a decision.

In the practice, the in-breath and the out-breath can be seen from gross to subtle, and then to the subtlest. Gradually, the breath becomes less visible. The perception of the breath changes, it appears as if the breath has ceased. The perception of the breath in this subtle mental state is different from the gross in-breath and out-breath observed at the beginning. It is uneventful, as it is at a distance from the senses. When the breath becomes subtle, one's sensitivity shifts from materiality to mentality. One must be bold and welcome the subtle stages of the breath, master it and see the changing nature of perception.

The transience of all objects can be observed in the *vipassanā* practice alongside the transient nature of perception. Perception is volatile; it evolves and changes. When compared to materiality and feelings, the volatile nature of perception is far more prominent.

At the beginning of a cognitive series, the in-breath is perceived as cool and the out-breath as warm. In the early part of the practice, one's perception is based on the individual characteristics of the object. When the common characteristics unfold, the signs change and perception is radically challenged when the discriminate in-breath and out-breath disappear from one's awareness.

Labelling is important at the beginning, but one must refrain from doing so when the practice navigates towards the subtle mental states. Changing one's awareness from individual to common characteristics in the practice is a challenge. When awareness is sharp (although the in-breath and the out-breath can still be felt), it is not possible to see the two processes discriminately. They appear as if they are equal. Although the movement of air continues, the individual characteristics can no longer be seen; the point of touch becomes imperceptible and the distinguishing features of the two processes are absent.

Whether it is matter or the mental states, phenomena arise, persist and pass away. Transience and non-self are common attributes of matter and mental states.

Don't engage in forced breathing, nor entertain doubt or boredom when the breath becomes subtle.

Don't expect to arrive at the subtle mental states immediately during the next session of meditation. Simply retain awareness during each session of sitting meditation with openness and calmness of mind. Without labelling the subtle states of the breath, allow 'auto piloting' to take over.

Becoming mindful of the unperceivable gap between the in-breath and the out-breath is a radical observation. When the unperceivable space between the two processes is observed, it is possible to see the oncoming in-breath, how it manifests in the middle of the process and how it tapers off at the end, leading one's awareness to the unperceivable or subtle space, before the next process begins. Within an in-breath, it is possible to see many short in-breaths. The same can be seen within an out-breath.

The in-breath is not a single unit but a conglomeration of many tiny in-breaths, likewise is the out-breath.

When lifting the hand, although it feels as if it is a single action, the various stages of the lifting process can be seen. It is like a cartoon which involves a number of slides, synchronised in a rhythmic manner to project an on-screen animation. The individual slides can be seen when the cartoon is unbundled, one slide at a time. In between the slides is darkness, similar to the space between the in-breath and the out-breath. Yet, we are never conscious of the darkness and instead, our focus remains on the positive signs depicted on screen. So the cartoon series unfolds under the guise of perception; the story connects through a linkage of the individual slides, and in between the slides, there is space.

In your practice, aim to see how pleasurable feelings pass away, making room for displeasure to set in. When displeasure fades away, it is replaced with pleasure. Observing phenomena, again and again, one can see how perception undergoes change.

Nature of perception

Venerable Katukurunde Nānānanda Mahā Thero says that when we cognise or recognise, we see the shape or colour that represents an image. Cognition takes it in and the imprint is decoded in the mind. When it is described to another, you communicate the shape, colour and the quality attributed to it. So you rush to explain it to others, yet fail to realise that you are only seeing one facet of the phenomena that unfolds, exaggerating and adding on to make a complete picture without explaining what you actually witnessed. You are simply reporting through a lens of ego, conceit or desire. So the listener must heedfully consider how much is perceived and how much is reflected. It is not that you are a liar or a manipulator, but this is simply how the mind operates and projects sense impingements.

Neurologists identify two hemispheres of the brain, the right and the left, the right being aesthetic and the left being analytical. It is said that the two lobes rarely communicate. A rational person may die without ever recognising the aesthetic aspect of the mind. The heart and the mind rarely communicate. So, humanity clashes as opinions and views differ. The perception projected to sense impingement also differs. Yet, when we can appreciate the common humanness, we acknowledge difference without disparagement, grudge or judgment.

Don't believe in your first impression, as perception is transient; when the complete process is observed, from the beginning, through the middle and to the end, one can clearly see the transient nature of perception.

We build arrogance and conceit around what we have seen and touched. What we see, we believe exists, and what we believe exists, we see. Believing in perception or cognition, without realising that a self is absent from the experience, we fight, make

accusations and claim that what is observed is through our direct experience. Repetitive application of the mind to an object helps to verify the experience and one develops the confidence to see the transient nature of cognition and recognition.

There isn't a need for dogmatic views. Just like the perception of in-breath and out-breath (body-contact) changes without any tension or expectation. By allowing the process to unfold without distraction, you can see how the image, recognition and cognition of sense impingements change, while mindfulness remains intact.

With continuity of mindfulness the practice navigates towards the subtle aspects of the mind; the eyes remain closed and one feels cut off from distractions caused by visual objects and sounds. Body-contact is absent when the breath is subtle and cannot be felt. The internal faculties appear separate from sense impingements.

In this subtle state of awareness, it is common for *yogis* to entertain mind-made images. The trickery of perception creates an imaginary world. So *yogis* speak in symbols, reflecting on mental projections, referring to them as either auspicious or threatening. Whatever their nature, the projections continue. Without aggravating the state of awareness, simply disclaim it as "not me, not mine or myself".

Maintaining continuity of mindfulness in spite of these projections, disclaiming them and progressing towards the deeper layers of consciousness, one is met with rapture. With the calming down of mental formations, one meets the lustrous mind free of defilements. It is like a still forest pool without thrills or frills, so calm that if you look into the pool, your reflection can be gleamed without distortion.

The more one remains in a state of *passadi* (calming down of formations), the more one experiences a healing of the mind and the body, where all physical and mental imbalances reach harmony. Until one reaches a state of *passadi*, friction from materiality, feelings and perception continue.

The practice is one of trial and error. As you mature in the practice, you become independent of your master, cultivating your own practice and developing the confidence to see through the cheating nature of perception. As one's practice matures, one begins to see beyond negative perception (boredom or hatred) and move towards a pure mind state that does not create volitional activity.

The path is one that navigates away from signage to a sign-less state, from perception to non-perception. This is the journey of a *vipassanā* practitioner. When signs disappear, if mindfulness is intact, one moves from gross to subtle, to reach the middle path.

Trickery of perception

One's ego is supported by perception, although it lacks any essence and is not subject to governance. As stated in the commentarial teachings: ignorance is two-fold; one

may be overpowered with misperception or simply, not know. What one does not know can be cured through guidance along the path or theoretical (book) knowledge. Misperception on the other hand is difficult to overcome as it requires a de-learning and de-conditioning process. Guiding a person who is unaware of misperception is difficult, as he or she is likely to cling to wrong view.

Spotting the trickery in perception requires awareness of one's interaction with external sense impingements. This is done with the aid of mindfulness. Mindfulness has a penetrative capacity. When the noting mind is repeatedly applied to an object, one's view is not marred by judgment or first impression. Select an object (primary object) and repeatedly become mindful of its varying facets. Repeated application of mindfulness re-confirms and re-iterates the nature of phenomena that unfolds.

Clarity is the function of mindfulness. It is proximate and its manifestation validates one's perception, retaining one's attention on the same object. When the attention is well aligned, the mind is in view with the object and one can penetrate into its transient nature.

Aim to see all possible facets of an object without distraction. Continued observation without interruption is essential. When perception plays tricks, if you are prepared, mindfulness can cut through it. With the aid of mindfulness, one can transcend preference and judgment rooted in perception.

The Buddha compares form to froth, feelings to water bubbles and perception to a mirage. A mirage lacks substance and gives an appearance which promises water. Our insatiable thirst chases after it with the promise of water, yet, the closer we come to it, the further we move away from it. We neither reach the mirage nor reduce the distance. Entertaining a permanent notion of water, we experience exhaustion.

We have fixed views of gender and we assign certain manners and characteristics to males and females. Although females maintain their femininity, they are attracted to male mannerisms, the male voice, attire and characteristics. Similarly, although males preserve their masculinity, they desire feminine mannerisms and attributes.

As the Buddha identifies, females are unable to exceed their femininity and males, their masculinity. Underneath is perception. All female and male attributes are based on perception and from birth; our societal conditioning is to maximise gender based attributes and characteristics. Males and females assume these attributes, clinging to them, making it difficult to escape their femininity and masculinity and appreciate the common humanity underpinning all beings. In the practice of meditation, one mindfully penetrates into the common characteristics of the elements, which carry no signs of masculinity or femininity, giving rise to a realisation that such thinking patterns are nothing other than mere perception.

We must transcend our perception of self-hood: "I am a monk, a man, a woman" and so forth. Mindfully, we must observe the breath, its discerning features, how the in-

breath is different from the out-breath and how one breath differs from the next. When the breath becomes subtle, one begins to experience the roughness, the coolness and the heat, all characteristics of the four elements. There is no gender in this experience, it is common to humanity. In spite of these universal characteristics, one perceives the superficial nature of phenomena, classifying it with preference: good, bad, beautiful, ugly, all attributes projected by the observer.

Disclaim perception not by argument, but through real touch and direct experiential knowledge. When experiencing the movement of air, don't accept or reject it, let it unfold according to its own accord. Don't observe through a male or female lens, but, directly experience it with well aligned mindfulness. Experiencing the fourth *vipassanā* insight (*udayabbaya nāna*), the rapid arising and passing away of phenomena, a *yogi* no longer clings to views of gender. The mind undergoes a re-wiring process and begins to appreciate humanity, the triple aspects of impermanence, suffering and non-self.

All classifications of male, female, ordained, beautiful and so forth are based on perception and misperception. Seeing through classification, when the practice deepens, a *yogi* appreciates the common (universal) attributes of all phenomena.

Sensory experience can be differentiated according to the modes (*ākāra*), signs (*lingha*), characteristics (*nimitta*), and exponents (*uddesa*) that are observed. We say, "I have seen this and it is like this" based on the different modes, signs, characteristics and exponents. Observing the same phenomena, again and again with the efficacy of mindfulness, one can see that one breath is not equal to the other and that the facets within the breath itself do not appear equal. When the breath becomes subtle, it lacks description; the different modes, signs, characteristics and exponents are absent. There is no signage when description is absent, and there is no communication when the experience lacks detail. *Vipassanā* only really begins to unfold beyond this point.

Our mental imprints are based on signs, exponents, characteristics and modes. We recollect through these signs, modes and so forth. The whole world is nothing but projection, yet it is believed as reality. Our dreams and projections are based on our mental imprints.

Perception is the culprit that generates perversions in the practice. When one experiences deep meditation, perception plays tricks, attributing benevolent and spiritual thoughts to muddle the clarity of awareness. *Yogis* need to have control over perception and its perversions in the practice. Mindfulness is unattractive and lacks appeal when compared to energy, faith or concentration.

Venerable U Pandita Sayadaw used to compare *vipassanā* with pure white bread; you must eat it without jam or cheese, and it lacks taste. Many teachers in the market place are willing to sell jam and cheese. If you have the maturity to accept the uneventful aspects of mindfulness, you don't fall victim to the traps that promise extra sensory perception or other magic.

Where perception intervenes, your description of an event is clouded by exaggeration and you communicate through desire, conceit, ego and not fact. Only noble beings communicate facts. Without perception, the story lacks spice, so we import conceit and ego into the process, to add colour and vibrancy. Yet, noble beings withdraw from desire as they speak.

Learn the art of non-reaction (*appannaka patipadā*). Observe life's processes fully, from the beginning, the middle and to the end. When the whole episode is witnessed, a decision is unnecessary.

It is when we just see the middle that we react and rush to a decision. Advancing in your spiritual life, you see that there is no pressure or tension, just openness. The experience is dynamic. There is no rush to arrive at a decision. Instead, one remains in the present moment, unmoved by the projections created by perception.

Neither perception nor non-perception

In the *Kalahavivāda sutta*, the Buddha is asked the question, "at what point can one see through materiality or reach seclusion from material pleasure" (*kathan sametassa vibhoti rupam*)? The Buddha instructs that one reaches such seclusion when one's perception reaches a point unrelated to the senses. One experiences a state of mind, which cannot perceive the touch of the breath. It appears as if sensory contact has ceased, and one continues with an experience which cannot be described in words, a state of mind characterised by a seeing which is not apparent, a hearing that does not generate a sound, being alive when one feels as if personality is absent.

At this stage, one's perception of *rupa* is not ordinary (*na sannasaññī*), neither has one fainted (*na visannasaññī*), nor has one reached the immaterial brahma realms, rather, one remains in neither perception nor non-perception (*no pi asaññī*). However, one is not without any perception, since one is alive and not dead (*na vibhutasaññī*). In this state of equilibrium, one experiences a contact which does not arouse any mental proliferation (*evam sametassa vibhoti rupam sannā nidānā hi papanca sankhā*). All materiality dissolves back into energy.

One's mindfulness is intact, but, one is not in *jhānic* absorption, there is openness and the mind is awakened to fully witness the unfolding of the present moment. There is no duality in the pain and pleasure experienced, the feeling is of neutral quality and lacks description. There is perception, but it is of neutral quality and one feels alienated, separate from the sensory world.

When materiality, pain or pleasure are absent, one queries how one's mindfulness may be sustained on sign-less perception, without falling asleep or feeling alienated and lost. Communication cannot take place in such a state of consciousness.

Being in this state of awareness, one feels contentment, satisfaction and fulfilment. This stage of sign-less awareness can become one's base for spiritual progress if one continues the practice without questioning or disturbing the awareness. One's mindfulness ought to be aligned and boosted to retain continuity of awareness. The mindset must be willing to accept the shift towards the sign-less state and one must strive toward calmness of the mind when the rational mind feels fearful. One must approach it in a way in which the spiritual mind accepts it.

Many *yogis* are overborne with the fear of freedom when experiencing this state of awareness. One's rational mind begins to doubt and play tricks, attempting to avoid the alienated experience, looking for an anchor to seek refuge when tangible form is unavailable. The Buddha can only guide you. Assimilating the path is one's own journey. If one is not able to appreciate the progress, the isolation and alienation of immaterial perception, one must query why one undertakes the practice.

The Buddha instructs that *yogis* must develop a perception which does not engage in argument or sensual pleasure. It is difficult to perceive an experience without interpretation, which is invariably underpinned by egocentric ideas. So the mind continues to proliferate. When one engages in mental proliferation, one must immediately become mindful, not taking delight in the experience or clinging to it.

Beyond sensory perception

When the eye is attracted by a visual object and consciousness also takes an interest, the coming together of the three give rise to contact, which generates feeling. What one feels, one recognises and perceives. One takes the shape, colour, modes, manner and attributes and engages in them, generating mental proliferation. Forgetting to observe the "seeing" process, forgetting to become aware that consciousness is now with eye sensitivity and not with the ear, the nose, tongue and so forth, one forgets to observe the shift in consciousness from one sense base to another. Forgetting, one becomes absorbed by the sensory process that unfolds. Doing so, engaging in the object, delighting in the shapes, the modes and the expositions, one misperceives the unfolding of phenomena.

Similarly in the practice, when the attention is with the in and out-breath or the rising and the falling of the abdomen, one can perceive that one's consciousness is aligned with body-consciousness. When a sound is transmitted to the eardrum, one ought to become aware of the "hearing" and note how the attention has shifted to ear-consciousness.

When external impingements intervene, the mind naturally entertains them, resulting in increased mental proliferation and sacrificing the well earned peace of mind. A *yogi* must safeguard the peaceful mind states from defilements, as it is easy to become distracted, moving away from neutral perception to sensory perception, entertaining external sense impingements. One's aim in the practice must be straightened, be nothing short of liberation, or else, one will become distracted by

experiences in the practice, claiming them as one's "achievements", thus, derailing from the path.

Many find it difficult to observe the difference between "seeing" and "looking". Mindfully, becoming aware of the process and not the detail, one's practice progresses to a state of nothingness, a voidness where the colour of sensory perception is absent. Progressing to the real essence in the practice, there is less explanation, just voidness and a lack of substance. The fruits of the path are unattractive to those bent on sensual pleasure.

Experiencing the first *magga nāna*, one realises that something special has happened, yet, it is difficult to communicate something that the other party is unlikely to perceive. Allow this experience to happen again and again, keep going back to it, validating whether a permanent change has occurred. Never assume or cling to the progress.

The *sotāppanna* and *sakadagāmi* states are almost equal. With the former, one cuts off the three bondages (belief in a permanent self, doubt in the truth of the Buddha's teachings and belief that just adhering to rules, rites and rituals will lead to liberation) and with the latter, one continues to weaken the remaining fetters. It is only at the stage of *anāgāmi* that one actually transcends the three fetters of lust, hatred and delusion.

By measuring path and fruition knowledge, one may fall into the trap of perception. Conceit remains until one is fully liberated and therefore, the potential to overestimate or underestimate will continue. This is the perplexity of the mind.

Progress in the practice cannot be measured. Spiritual progress doesn't leave room for conceit, unless claimed with self-view. At the *sotāppanna* and *sakadāgāmi* states, perception is still active.

A fig tree is planted with a tiny seedling, yet, as it establishes and branches out, it spreads, engulfing more and more land. Ultimately, the stem cannot be seen. Similarly, when misperception and mental proliferation over an insignificant experience takes over, one is so overwhelmed that it is difficult to see the unfolding and instead, gives in to unrelenting thought.

Comprehending the *dhamma*, one no longer makes adamant statements, asserting the truth of one's statement and disclaiming the rest as wrong. What you know, may or may not be the truth. Opinion is based on judgment and faith and the Buddha says that what one selects through a lens of faith (alone) may not contain the truth. What you desire may be malevolent and what you rejected, beneficial. What you argue, you claim as truth. Yet, even if you win by argument, what you reject may carry the truth. You may think your view is the truth and when taken as correct, the rest proves wrong. Yet, the truth may lie outside what you considered to be your view.

Repeatedly applying the mind to an object, observing its nature by validating truth through direct experiential knowledge, one paves the path for omniscient knowledge. This is how one experiences the highest capacity of the human brain. As long as perception is neutral, one's spectrum of view is broad and ultimately one develops choiceless awareness and equal liking to all presently arising phenomena.

Vipassanā is seeing things as they are. Our view is narrowed due to perception and we are limited by what we see through desire, conceit and self-view. The Buddha's invitation is to see the mirage of perception, its trickery and the vast expansion when perception is neutral and separate from the senses. Understanding is not limited to what the mind perceives. When interpretation or rational knowledge take over, disclaim it; never delight in it or claim it.

Hopefully, this teaching has imparted the practical aspects of the mirage of perception and will help to avoid the friction caused by misperception.

Chapter 4

Volitional Formations are Non-Self

The term *sankhāra*, also known as *sanskara* in *Sanskrit*, has many shades of meaning. It is difficult to translate to English and in *Pali*, depending on the context, its meaning varies. The term anticipates some form of (past) preparation and is also referred to as bodily and mental manifestations.

Even when there is very little verbal or bodily preparation, one may experience applied thoughts and discursive thoughts (*citta sankhāra* or *mano sankhāra*). For bodily actions to settle and cease, there ought to be a cessation of verbal activity (*vaci sankhāra*).

Motivation is volition (*cetanā*). The Buddha has enumerated 52 mental factors. Feelings stand separate to perception and the remaining 50 mental factors are known as *sankhāra* of which the most active is *cetanā* (volition or will).

In the *Sutta Pitaka*, numerous shades of meaning exist for the term *sankhāra* and in the *abhidhamma*, mental factors are separated into consciousness (*citta*) and mental properties (*cetasika*). For example, if one were to take the sea as *citta*, it is said that the waves are like *cetasika*. The waves are dependent on water, although they are neither the water nor separate from it. Faith, energy, concentration and wisdom fall under the category of *cetasika*. Similarly, desire, hatred, sloth and torpor also fall under the category of *cetasika* and so do feelings (although described as a separate aggregate). Where there is *cetanā*, there is volition, involvement, as something is done wilfully. Understanding *sankhāra* is an acknowledgment of our will or disposition. *Cetanā* is the foremost factor for mental formations and *kamma* is generated due to *cetanā*.

The Buddha's instructions are for *yogis* to observe verbal, bodily and mental deeds, become aware of sensory transaction, how one's consciousness connects to external sense impingements, the eye and the visual objects, the ear and sounds and so forth. Then, *yogis* are invited to become aware of verbal deeds (*vaci sankhāra*) and mental deeds (*citta sankhāra*).

If the mind were taken as the globe, its superficial layer involves sensual activities; as one delves deeper, leaving the sensual world behind, the mind becomes calm, collected and one-pointed to reach a state where physical, verbal and mental deeds are absent.

All mental formations are transient, impermanent and lead to suffering (*sabbe sankhārā dukkhā, sabbe sankhārā aniccā*). All meritorious and unmeritorious activities

lead to affliction or suffering. Performing wholesome deeds is meritorious (*punyābi sankhāra*). Doing the opposite, performing unwholesome deeds is *appunyābi sankhāra*. If *sankhāra* were within one's control, had an essence or governability, it would not lead to affliction. Anything done voluntarily leads to affliction.

The nature of volitional formations

Those immersed in worldly pursuits, consumed by productivity, creativity, progress and so forth, might feel challenged when the Buddha's teachings stipulate the opposite view. Anything done wilfully, volitionally and consciously works against pleasure, giving cause to suffering. One must be alert and observe the causal relationship between consciousness and external sense impingements.

As the practice deepens, *yogis* experience a metamorphosis in bodily actions (*kāya sankhāra*), verbal actions (*vaci sankhāra*) and mental actions (*mano sankhāra*). A contemplation of the body is related to bodily actions (*kāya sankhāra*), our physical behaviour. Beginner *yogis* must commence the practice by observing bodily actions, which are tangible, gross and can be more easily observed by undeveloped mindful awareness.

Observing volitional formations in the practice

During a session of sitting meditation, one experiences minimum bodily activity. *Yogis* are instructed to mindfully observe the in-breath and the out-breath as and when it arises, keeping the noting mind aligned with the breath. Allow the breath to unfold naturally; don't volitionally become involved with the breath. Over enthusiastic *yogis*, keen on results, may attempt forced breathing, attempting to drive it. Detached observation on the other hand is a form of letting go.

Mindfully and vigilantly, continue attention on the breath, as it settles down, penetrating more closely and immediately, keeping all distractions at bay.

As the breath becomes subtle, *yogis* are instructed to maintain balance and equilibrium, not entertain doubt or fear. Too much calm and tranquillity can lend towards lethargy. Unless one is attentive, sleepiness or doubt can invade one's stream of consciousness.

A life built on volitional involvement is one of complexity, always thinking fast, planning, manipulating and attempting to shape the direction of events. Yet at its deeper layers, unhindered by such manipulation and direction, the mind is calm and collected.

In the practice, one's true nature can be discerned through noting the defilements (the thoughts, motives and perversions) that interfere with the pure stream of consciousness. One might even feel rather ashamed at one's perverted thought process.

Some *yogis* tend to project past memories or engage in creative thinking during this stage in the practice. It is common to experience various bodily manifestations as one progresses towards the more subtle layers. The body may begin to sway or there may be an experience of numbing, a feeling of creatures crawling up and down the skin, or a feeling of needles piercing the skin as well as stiffness. These are natural manifestations in the practice.

Other *yogis* begin to project past memories, dead relatives, *devas* and *brahmas*. Whatever unfolds, become vigilant, not claiming the experience with self-view. Wherever the mind wanders, always return to the primary object and maintain continuity of awareness.

There is no other refuge other than mindfulness on the path. Don't give in to perception as even the slightest deviation can derail a *yogi* from the path. *Venerable Moggallana* experienced sloth and torpor during his practice, experiencing sleepiness when his mind became one-pointed. It is common for sloth and torpor to set in when the mind congeals, so the Buddha instructs that one must become mindful of the sloth and torpor to master the sleepy states of mind.

Become aware of sloth and torpor, the nature of the sleepy and drowsy mind, how drowsiness changes and disappears as the mind begins to note it. To retain alertness, when the breath disappears from your awareness, diligently note and discern the characteristics and features in feeling, perception or volition, becoming aware of them without losing sight of the primary object. It is like walking a tight rope or crossing a foot bridge, which becomes shaky towards the middle of the water way. Hold on to the railing without looking away or up and down, ensuring that you don't fall into the water.

Similarly, in the practice, when the breath is about to disappear, have resolute faith in the Buddha and be willing to sacrifice everything for the *dhamma*. If you are mentally sound, have moral integrity and shame, you will not entertain fear at this stage of the practice.

You remain in a healthy and balanced mind state even if you are detached from external sense impingements; internally, there is a balance. The equipoised state of mind is always with you, but you are never aware of it as you are always distracted by sense impingements. So the mind wanders externally, seeking after sensual pleasure.

Systematically, attempt to refine the practice, transcend bodily activities (*kāya sankhāra*) and to observe mental formations (*citta sankhāra*). Daily, try to refine the practice and you will be met with positive mental states such as rapture (*piti*) and joy (*sukha*), you will then see the operation of mental formations (*citta sankhāra*).

By assuming or reacting to feelings and perceptions that arise, mental proliferation begins. Become fully mindful of what unfolds, just like when you observe the calming down of the breath. See how perception is a mind-made product. Assuming and claiming perception with self-view, seeing it as reality, you encourage mental proliferation. Instead, withdraw. Disown all that unfolds.

The more one withdraws from the sensory realm, the more one begins to see the pure mind, how it is uncontaminated by defilements. It is like peeling off a red onion, removing it, strand by strand, to reach the pale white middle. The reddish appearance is no more. Pure consciousness is like blank white paper. It is like the sky in a mid-summer night. A few clouds may appear here and there and will pass, but will not smear the sky. Instead, the sky continues in its vibrancy as in reality, the sky and the clouds are separate.

Consciousness can be swayed by sense impingements, seeking refuge in sensory contact. Consciousness has an identity (claimed with self-view) and a role to play as long as it is engaged in external sense impingements. But, when cleared of defilements, initially there is a sense of imbalance, a feeling of aloneness or a separation from the external.

An uninstructed *yogi* might easily feel a sense of imbalance as consciousness separates from the senses, seeking after a refuge, an anchor, when identity and boundaries dissipate.

At such times, consciousness begins to project and generate mind made objects to attach to, feeling volatile without an identity or a clear demarcation. Understand the crafty nature of consciousness, its perverted nature, to see how easily it can produce and project. Much of our *samsāric* life has been one of diversity and varietal entertainment. So, in the practice, we are instructed to calm the mind in order to see its operation, observe the volition, thought and the undermining tendencies founded upon sensory contact.

It is like catching a bird and putting it in a cage as it tries its best to escape. When the practice deepens, the mind's nature is to project and create, to attempt to seek refuge in sensory consciousness as it begins to separate from external sense impingements.

Cessation of verbal and bodily actions

A cessation of verbal deeds lends towards an appreciation of the cessation of bodily action. It is common for *yogis* to practice noting and labelling (mental noting of the breathing process and the experience). Noting – applying thought (*vitakka*) is a tool that keeps the mind aligned with the object. The analytical thought (*vicāra*) involves verbal expression. When the breath becomes subtle and the mind aligns with the subtle breath, the labelling also ceases. Cessation of verbal action paves the way towards awareness of mental activity (*citta sankhāra*).

In the *Vipassanā* practice, one must progress from the gross to subtle, allowing the process to navigate naturally. The labeling ceases naturally as the mind aligns with the object and is replaced with attention of the one-pointed mind state. At the beginning, feelings and perception proliferate to give rise to colourful events. If you do not become involved, assume or claim them, either positively or negatively, you become aware of the more subtle underlying volitional formations. Therefore, one should minimise volitional activity, in order to observe the cessation of volition and volitional formations.

The six internal faculties, the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and the mind contact with external sense impingements. Mental proliferation is generated when sensory experience is claimed with self-view. From one moment to the next, one becomes a “seer” from being a “listener” and so forth.

This occurs at random and largely depends on your preference and tendencies. I use the example of a buffet diet, an assortment of food and drinks placed on a table, inviting you to partake of anything that you wish. It is impossible for you to eat everything that is served, but your selection is one based on preference.

It is your decision, so you are responsible for your selection and the effect on your health. What you chew and absorb into your blood stream is entirely your selection. No one but you is responsible.

The same rule applies to volition. In any situation, your involvement, your preparation and manipulation is your selection and the outcome or result is entirely your choice. Just like it is impossible to blame a third party for any indigestion over what you eat, chew, swallow and absorb, you must take responsibility for any suffering caused by preparation and manipulation.

Becoming a “seer”, you can’t smell, taste or think, as consciousness is occupied with the “seeing” process. Selecting one sensory experience is rejecting the remaining five. The change from “seeing” to “tasting” is so swift and unless you are mindful, it is difficult to be aware of it.

Volition is the decisive factor of this process and much is predicated upon your underlying tendencies, prompting you to exercise your will. What you select indicates the state of your mind, whether you are morally sound or otherwise, balanced. Your “unintentional” selection is underpinned by your personality traits, hobbies, addictions and indicates who you are.

Unless you are mindful of the process of sense contact, you become a slave to sensory consciousness. It is when you are mindful that you master the process. Otherwise, you are prompted to arrive at a decision, unknowingly you are swayed into the process, attempting to manipulate it, although it is inherently non-governable.

Sankatha is volitionally making a choice. *Asankatha* is unconsciously making a choice due to your underlying tendencies. For example, when the mind falls calm and collected, your breath appears to cease from your awareness, but, the breathing process continues. There is no volitional involvement on your part. In the practice, as the elements become prominent, your body may begin to shake or you may experience tightness or swaying, all experiences unfolding without volition. Your interpretation of the manifestations determines your personality traits and your motives in the practice.

When the unintentional bodily and mental activities unfold, it may feel as if you are undergoing a hypnotic regression; your psychological wounds begin to surface.

Observe these latent tendencies from the beginning, through the middle and to the end. Take on the role of a psychiatrist; don't rush to a decision, instead, make observations the pathway to your treatment. As you patiently observe your mental patterns, you begin to see the dirt under the carpet. There is no selection, but there is an underlying mechanism, informed by personality traits. Volition continues in both active and passive forms. The active form is mind-consciousness (*sankatha vinnāna*) and the passive form is sub-consciousness (*asankatha vinnāna*). *Sankatha vinnāna* involves consent. Borrowing from Freudian terminology, conscious manipulation is only the tip of the iceberg, when compared to vast terrain of the subconscious mind.

When the preparation and steering come to a halt, if you are mindful, you can observe your true and intrinsic nature. With the aid of mindfulness one can see the cessation of mental and physical activity.

Freedom from volitional formations

Upon enlightenment, the Buddha proclaimed, *aneka jāti sankhāra* (the mind is free from all mental (or volitional) preparations. When desire is absent, there is a natural withdrawal from preparations. It is desire that propels us forward, motivating us to disrupt the clarity and interfere with the way things are. The world and its process are a natural unfolding. It is the ego that intersects, underpinned by desire and conceit, attempting to manipulate a select part of the world. That selection is based on your preference and as soon as you commit, you become responsible for the result.

Each time you are unmindful, you give into sensory experience, immersed in a delightful piece of music or a pleasing visual object, so much so that you are not awakened to the present moment. Then the mind is confined to a narrow spectrum based upon your selection, rejecting the totality of what unfolds. Life goes on, selecting and rejecting time and again without any realisation that one remains responsible for one's own delight and suffering.

Let me offer a very electric and verifiable example of the peace that can be experienced when one moves beyond acceptance or rejection, otherwise, known as volition.

When you go to the calm and serene state where the breath is no longer perceivable, your consciousness is retained in the present moment. Your consciousness is not dependent on the eye or visual objects, the ear or sounds, the nose or smells, the tongue or tastes and sometimes the body is also forgotten.

For that split second, you are separate from the material world. Although you turn away from varietal entertainment in the sensory realm, you are opening the door to experience immaterial pleasure. There is no signage, smells or sounds in this state of awareness. The Buddha proclaims this neutral immaterial form of pleasure as one that excels all material pleasures.

Although you are detached from the sensual realm, you reach a state of inalienable and unalloyed satisfaction for the first time in your life. You are present, but don't feel enriched in the worldly sense. When you select trivial worldly pleasures, you move away from this pleasure, the inalienable bliss that is described as the highest form of pleasure by the Buddha.

All human beings can reach this state of mind, but they choose to fight over land, claim desirable shapes and forms, attach to delightful music and fight for human rights, engaging in volition, will, bolstered by motivation. Yet, an equanimous state of mind, free from volition is available to you. It is a state of contentment, a point of saturation that is not propelled by desire (motivation). This is what the Buddha compassionately offers us. Instead of spending a whole life on material gratification, we are instructed to reach a state of mind worthy of a human birth for it is only in a human birth that some transcendence is possible.

It is motivation that drives us towards an aim, to do something. In the spiritual life, we are driven by faith. To become a *yogi* requires motivation. One needs motivation to undertake the noble eightfold path. As the *Arahant* nun, *Dhammadinna* says to *Upasakha Visakha* in the *Cula Vedalla Sutta*, motivation, rooted in will (*sankhata*) leads to suffering. To be devoted towards a subject, one must have desire, conceit and ego. Commencing the practice requires motivation. To continue with the practice requires motivation. Without ego and conceit, mindfulness is not exerted.

As the practice gathers momentum, when faith, energy, concentration and wisdom are aligned, one must withdraw and allow the practice to progress without volition, any exertion or effort. Allow the process to gather its own momentum.

Withdrawing from such manipulation is a subtle art. It is like driving a car. It is only from the second gear that you move to the third and then to the fourth and so forth. As the speed reduces, you go back from the fourth gear to the third, to the second

and then to the first. It is a gradual release, not a rash changing of gears from the fifth gear to the first.

Disclaim all that unfolds as the practice gathers momentum, not me, mine or myself. Just allow mindfulness to run its course in an unforced manner, becoming mindful of moments when mindfulness is absent, simply becoming aware of its disappearance. Don't be tense. Mindfulness is also subject to change, it is impermanent. Develop equanimity towards the process, realising that although mindfulness disappears, it will return. Becoming aware of its disappearance itself is being mindful. As the practice matures, one gradually bids farewell to all states which are constantly arising and ceasing.

Observe all that dissipates in your awareness, all mental qualities, positive mind states, emotional turmoil and their release, in an unmoved and equipoised manner. Then, one can overcome motivation and prepare for relinquishment. Slowly, let go of the initial motivation in the practice informed by faith. As the practice deepens and navigates on its own accord, wisdom arises to temper the effect of conceit and ego. Just facilitate the merging with totality as if a river is flowing into the sea, where you can no longer differentiate the river from the sea, its beginning or its end; instead, it is just a natural flow of water.

Allow auto-piloting to take over as the practice gathers momentum. Don't interfere with the process that unfolds. When the five faculties of mindfulness, concentration, energy, faith and wisdom, align they become five powers. When faith erodes, remain unshaken. The power of faith mobilises energy, to keep us upright, alert, not allowing the mind to be taken over by sloth and torpor.

Becoming aware of the changing nature of mindfulness is also being mindful. When the mind is concentrated, one remains unshaken in the midst of possible bewilderment, as if in a state of absorption. Wisdom overcomes ignorance. All mental factors are subject to change. Just accept the change without distraction or disappointment, without commitment and bondage, with mindfulness, concentration or wisdom.

There is nothing to gain, win or lose in the practice. There is no need for motivation, selection or choice. Volition and manipulation are rooted in desire, conceit and self-view. Phenomena is just a natural unfolding, a non-governable process, which takes its own course.

At the beginning, faith is essential as it ensures adherence to the precepts, the requisite foundation to commence the practice. As the practice deepens and wisdom unfolds, simply merge with the natural flow of events, the absence of boundary, the merging of the internal and the external.

Unless equipped with radical reflection, one attempts to control everything that unfolds. Instead, withdraw as much as you can, let go, not only once, but as often as possible. Throughout this process, the mind is healed, settled and alive. There is no

fantasizing into the future or languishing in the past. One remains awakened to the unfolding in the present moment. All preparation ceases. Instead it is just a natural flow, an unfolding, from one moment to the next.

Chapter 5

Consciousness is Non-Self

The outermost of the five aggregates is materiality, followed by feelings, perception, volitional activities and consciousness (*vinnāna*). The most valuable item in the coffer, *vinnāna*, the core, remains hidden.

So the practice is commenced with materiality and gradually, as the practice deepens, it becomes apparent that there isn't any essence in the five aggregates. As the "self", rooted in each of the aggregates is weakened, one can see that the five aggregates are not subject to any individual's governance.

Once, *U Pandita Sayadaw* gave a useful example for this unfolding. A *mafia* organisation has many levels of operation. The outermost circle carries out the criminal act. The usual practice is for law enforcement officers to arrest those visibly responsible for the trafficking of weapons or the criminal activity, but, they fail to capture the person responsible for the orders, the mastermind behind the scenes. Capturing those at the operational level has minimal impact on the organisation. So, it is essential for law enforcement officers to interrogate those captured, obtain the necessary clues to aid the investigation so that the mastermind can be found. Otherwise, the main instigator remains hidden, unexposed to society and well protected, continuing to carry out the criminal acts of deception.

Similarly, consciousness, although well hidden, inflicts much suffering throughout one's life and remains responsible for perpetuating the *samsāric* journey. The Buddha equates consciousness to a magician. Although, entertaining and amusing, the tricks of the magician are a camouflage. If one were to go behind the magician to witness the magic, all the tricks can be found. By seeing through the theatre presented by the aggregates, commencing from materiality, and navigating towards consciousness, observing their operation, one will come to understand the teachings of the Buddha with penetrative wisdom.

Observing the nature of consciousness

Consciousness is threefold. The outermost layer is connected to the senses: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and the mind. As long as it remains connected to the senses, it simply jumps from one sense base to the other, so swiftly that it appears as if consciousness is connected to the six faculties. The sense of "self" creates a false boundary between the internal and the external – and so one claims, I can feel, I can smell, I can touch and so forth.

Oscillating with sensory consciousness, one continues to be busy, undertaking many tasks, feeling important in society and spending very little time on the practice of meditation. Burning the candle at both ends and juggling many tasks, one fails to give priority to the practice. Living like this, at the time of death, one feels a sense of loss, having sought refuge in sensory consciousness.

Instead, mindfully observe the operation of sensory consciousness. Observe how consciousness connects to one sense base at a time and how inundated and absorbed one becomes with the impact at each sense base, while at the same time, assuming a complete world based on these partial views of, touch, taste, hearing and so forth.

Although it is difficult to identify the primary object and maintain continuity of mindfulness in the midst of sensory consciousness, one must align the mind to an object and note it as much as possible. Gradually, background thoughts and inner chatter will fade away and feelings will be given less attention.

If you are eating, keep track of the taste; if moving forward, backwards, stretching, looking sideways, become mindful of each bodily action. When an act is isolated and given attention, the observation is vivid; it is live and immediate.

Initially, to retain continuity of awareness, one must focus on a single primary object. As the practice deepens, a *yogi* is able to observe a single primary object and at the same time, be aware of any hearing, tasting, touch and so forth. Although secondary objects can be distracting, one is able to retain continuity of mindfulness upon the primary object, not allowing the mind to wander.

Venerable *Nānaponika Maha Thero*, in his book, *Power of Mindfulness* describes mindfulness to be shy in character, never attempting to promote itself, always in solitude and preferring inner peace. On the other hand, faith (*saddha*) is rather self-promoting, wishing to advertise and show off, aiming at quick results. So we see many devotees preferring faith over the practice of mindfulness as faith generates results, it is overt and promotes recognition. Energy is also extroverted. Mindfulness on the other hand is introverted, shy and prefers minimum attention. Yet, the Buddha placed mindfulness at the helm, and when mindfulness takes control, it continues uninterrupted, stridently leading and neutralising the effect of the other factors.

Many pages of Buddhist literature are written on miracles of faith and energy, which are both unpredictable and incredible at the same time. Mindfulness by its nature, never loses confidence, never lets you down and continues with the momentum, although it is discrete and doesn't show off. In turn, it brightens the inner qualities.

Unless you are mindful, the mind continues to oscillate with sensory consciousness. With the aid of mindfulness, one can keep track of the primary object, instead of fuelling sensory consciousness. With continuity of mindfulness, one can see how the mind is cut off from external sense impingements.

Continuing with the practice, your eyes are closed, sounds are available, although, temporarily, you are separate from the senses: the eye, ear, nose, tongue and mind. Consciousness is connected to the body, the end of the nostril, the upper lip or abdomen or the breath, but, there is no yielding towards sensory consciousness. The experience is not in the material sphere.

One never reaches this state of awareness by coincidence, but through systematic practice. One could be in this state following the route of tranquil (*samatha*) meditation, or insight (*vipassanā*) meditation, either way, moving beyond external stimuli.

Navigating beyond sensory consciousness

The mind falls calm and collected on the object, although not completely separate from the senses, there is aloofness; consciousness remains immersed in immaterial pleasure. Although transgressive forms of defilements are arrested and the mind is equipoised and cut off from external stimuli, it is still susceptible to latent forms of defilements. Even the ascetic *Siddhartha (Bodhisatva)* realised that there was no mastery of consciousness at this stage of development. As his understanding was incomplete, he took leave from his teachers to undertake the practice and to delve deeper into an observation of mental states.

Similarly, *yogis* must not assume immaterial consciousness to be the final destination. With well boosted mindfulness, they must be awakened, be vigilant and diligent in such a balanced state of mind, even if external impingements are absent, knowing that the mind is still engaged and there is continuity and momentum. Although one does not consciously contribute with volition at this stage of the practice, there is only an apparent separation from the senses.

Yogis must become aware of the magical nature of the mind and how, when a noting object is absent, it is possible for mind-made objects to take over.

When materiality, smells, sounds, tastes are absent and there is a calming down of external sense impingements, the mind begins to dwell upon ambition, will, fabrication or mental preparation. These mental formations arrive uninvited, interrupting the pure stream of consciousness.

These mental formations are sometimes referred to as volitional activities. Venerable *Katukurunde Nānānanda Maha Thero* described them as mental preparations and in the West they were described as mental fabrications. These mental formations are subjective and informed by egotistical ideas, desire and conceit. It is important for *yogis* to observe these mental states and become mindful of their nature and operation.

Otherwise, creative thinking (mental proliferation) will take over and one begins to have thoughts of relatives, fame, good repute and the desire to have good health. Thoughts are continually conjured up in the mind. These thoughts appear to be for good measure, they appear to be compassionate, kind and generous, but are nonetheless, disruptive for the practice, veering the mind away from the one-pointed continuity of awareness. So, just disclaim them and be careful not to entertain them with self identity.

As the mind reaches isolation and experiences freedom, serenity and calmness, do not introduce anything wilfully, as consciousness is likely to seek refuge in any manifestation, creating fertile soil for latent forms of defilements to proliferate and the mind to be taken away from the continuity of awareness.

Consciousness finds nutriment in fabrication and mental preparation and in turn, fuels the reciprocal and mutual relationship between mind (*nāma*) and matter (*rūpa*). Instead, disclaim all that appears by way of mental formations. In turn, the operation of latent forms of defilements will be weakened. As consciousness separates from the senses, it feels cornered and one might feel unsafe, lost or disoriented. A well informed *yogi* is prepared for such an experience and is able to progress in the practice, unaffected and with confidence.

Unmanifested state of consciousness

Navigating towards the deeper layers in the practice, one is met with unmanifested consciousness (*anidassana vinnāna*), a refined (sign-less) state of consciousness. In spite of us having this refined state of consciousness, we fail to appreciate it, as it is not dramatic or eventful. Immersed in our busy lives, engaged in multi-tasking, we fail to realise the potential to reach such a refined state of awareness. Such awareness speaks of a common humanness that underpins all of us. Yet, we feel as if there is always something that ought to concern us, something that needs to be searched or aspired to.

Associating with the past, one experiences regret, and with the future, there is the wish for hope and excitement. In the middle, there is an uneventful and neutral consciousness which lacks excitement, remorse or anxiety.

Anyone who is positive and forward thinking could progress towards the blissful state of unmanifested consciousness by developing mindfulness and concentration. If one is always fault finding, looking at the negative side of society, entertaining an inferiority complex and fails to exert sympathy and forgiveness, it is difficult to progress deeper in the practice.

The outermost layer of consciousness connected to sensory consciousness is smeared with defilements unless one responds with the presence of mindfulness. At times, one may experience sleepiness or regret and at other times, excitement or doubt. All mind states arise, only to pass away, they are transient. Any permanency that

manifests is due to perception. It is our perception that prolongs the effect of an event.

In the practice of tranquil (*samatha*) meditation, when experiencing lust or desire, one is instructed to recollect the repulsive aspects of the body. With hatred or ill will, one must exert loving kindness to neutralise the aversion. Where sloth and torpor, regret or excitement are present, recollect the virtues of the Buddha, to align the mind with the object, to understand the nature of mental states and how rapture arises when doubt dissipates. Gradually, one masters the art of confronting difficult situations, learning to overcome all obstacles through one's own ways and means.

Desire starts to fade away as the practice gathers momentum. There is a weakening of hindrances. Then, faith, energy, concentration, mindfulness and wisdom gradually fade away. In the same way that a building cannot be constructed without the scaffolding, the five faculties must be utilised as an aid in the path towards liberation. As the practice progresses, the cessation of the five faculties could also be observed. So don't attach to them or cling to them. Just let them go away as the scaffolding is thrown away once the building construction is completed. Seeing the unfolding of *dhamma* in the practice in this way has a galvanising effect.

In the practice of tranquil (*samatha*) meditation, *yogis* can easily assume and claim, I am "such and such", I have "achieved in the practice" and so forth. In *vipassanā* meditation, one uses all manifestations and techniques as a tool and their fading off is part and parcel of the observation; there is alignment in the transience. All mishaps are observed without aversion or attachment.

When faith diminishes, observe it with equanimity. Knowing the nature of all mental manifestations, one remains unshaken when the good qualities erode or fade away. This is a discerning quality of the *vipassanā yogi* – always adopting an approach of wise reflection to directly meet all presently arising objects, observing their transience, without appreciation, rejection or claiming them and in an assuming manner, at a distance, through the lens of an objective third person. There is no room for frustration because everything that arises is taken as an object for the practice.

Unless you are able to manage the gross forms of defilements, you will not be exposed to the subtle mental aspects. Unless you are skilful, you will be distracted when defilements arise. You will not penetrate to the deeper layers of consciousness. Juggling too many things, oscillating in emotions, you are simply entertaining volitional formations (*sankhāra*). When the ego intervenes, the situation becomes messy; there is friction and the flow is disturbed.

Objectively seeing the mind and its operation, how volition is projected, one directly comprehends one's personality traits. Observing the unfolding, immediately, one is able to engage wise reflection. Only *vipassanā yogis* are able to observe the natural unfolding of phenomena. So, be ready for the moment to unfold. When the observation is instructed by mindfulness, the response will be one of equanimity.

Seeing the operation of consciousness in the practice

If consciousness had a governing essence, it would be subject to affliction and one could say, let my consciousness be thus or not be thus. It is very difficult and confronting for anyone to understand that consciousness inflicts suffering, as it is considered as a positive, healthy and supportive aspect in one's life. Materiality, feelings, perception and volition are supportive factors for the operation of consciousness. Materiality (*rūpa*) and mentality (*nāma*) have a reciprocal relationship with consciousness.

When one has direct contact with materiality, feelings, perception and volitional formations, one can observe the non-governable nature of consciousness. Commencing with materiality, we progress in the practice to observe feelings, perception and volitional formations, slowly becoming aware of the operation of consciousness. With continuity of awareness, materiality reaches an unperceivable level, at which point, one experiences indifferent feeling. Perception is also "signless". Yet, one must be aware of the distractions that can be caused by volitional formations, fabrications and inner chatter. Mental fabrications habitually intervene to support the more superficial worldly consciousness.

Consciousness always engages in duality, it discerns, always separating any situation as good and bad, black and white and so forth, encouraging relativity, separation and qualitative discernment. So in the practice, we continue to observe the same object, observe the shapes, characteristics and manner, allowing consciousness to be with one object, to gradually move from diversity to unity. On the way, one develops a certain amount of friction and phobia as one loses the theme and motivation. Moving away from sensory consciousness, there is an absence of communication. This is because conventional language is based on relativity.

Growing up, our chemistry changes; our perception also undergoes change. Throughout a life cycle, any one person is not the same and one's identity card cannot be the same. There is a continuous facial difference, an ongoing ageing process. All feelings, perceptions and volitions are fuelled by consciousness; it is the medium upon which aggregates manifest. Consciousness is anchored upon identity.

Just pause at "seeing" without further engagement with the visual object, to limit the commentary and mental proliferation. Engaging in the characteristics, modes and the nature of visual objects, one generates defilements. Whether the object is perceived as auspicious or inauspicious is based on one's qualitative discernment. There is no "seer" in the "seeing process". It is just "seeing". If one engages with the "seeing" one will continue to think, interpret, fabricate and engage in mental preparation. Pause, with "seeing" as just "seeing" and listening, as just "listening". The same with touch, taste, smell and mind consciousness. Pause at the inception of any event to take consciousness under your control.

For example, as I speak, you receive the sound waves. But there is no interpretation, unless volition intervenes. It is like a recording or the operation of a camera. There is no interpretation in the recording of a camera which takes the visual imprint. Operate as if you are an instrument, just stop short at process without interpretation, just listening, tasting and touching. Don't go to mental preparation (fabrication), or take on the responsibility to worry, simply become responsible for allowing the process to unfold naturally. As you begin to observe all processes as an unfolding, rational consciousness begins to feel rather insecure.

Feelings, perception and volitional activities may continue, but you are not carried away and instead, observe their operation. You are not taking delight in them or feeling distressed over them, rather, they just pass by. Habitually, consciousness is promoting us to respond, to claim, to take responsibility. Gradually, as the practice navigates to the deeper layers, you are able to see how consciousness loses its base. As momentary consciousness unfolds, you will see the flux, the rapid operation of mind and matter. Have equanimity and develop "suchness" to what unfolds. Allow nature to take its course.

When a visual object contacts with eye sensitivity, eye consciousness arises and one experiences "seeing" consciousness. Where there is contact between the mind and the object, there is "seeing" and you feel either delighted or repulsed at the sight, interpreting the process without pausing from the very inception of the process, thus giving nutriment to mental proliferation. Although displeasure and pleasure records in our memory, there is an indifferent mind state, a neutral feeling that is often overlooked, a state that is characterised by equanimity, where there is no pain or pleasure. This is the state of mind that ought to be harnessed in the practice.

If one interprets sensory consciousness, there is a label associated with cognition and recognition. If one were to pause at the onset of any unfolding, cognition or recognition does not take root. All that you perceived in life is not real, you only perceive what you feel and interpret, the meaning, you ascribe to the event, fuelling desire or aversion to that which simply unfolds. What you label, you think over, prolong and chew on. So you chew the cud, a self-imposed interpretation of importance, ascribed to an event, an unfolding, qualifying it as positive or negative. Without your realisation, *tanhā* (desire), *māna* (conceit) and *dhitti* (view) have taken over.

Our inclination is to indulge in pleasant sights. So, we habitually begin to wander and absorb the delightful images. Don't leave room for such negligence, instead, try to become aware of the "seeing" as early as possible.

The ecstasy or the impact feels better than the direct touch and a whole story is built around the perception, a self-directed interpretation, of the event and a motivation based on your own fabrication! So, you are taken for a ride, without any understanding of direction. So how do we apply the clutch and the brake, to stop the skidding of the vehicle?

Pausing the cycle of sensory consciousness

Instead of being immersed in mental proliferation, become aware of the mechanism, the process of the sense base receiving sense objects, just observe the mere unfolding of universal conditions. If you are undertaking walking meditation and see a beautiful sight, pause at “seeing”, then, if sounds impinge on your ear drum, become aware of the “hearing”, observe the swift transition from body consciousness to eye consciousness and then to ear consciousness. Then, as the mind returns to the sole of your feet, become aware of the transition. Mindfulness is the safety valve that prevents mental proliferation. The mind can only receive sensory contact through one sense base at a time. So it is impossible to see and hear at the same time, or to taste and smell at the same time.

Generally, with sensory contact, we are able to exert mindfulness only at the stage when feelings arise. Becoming aware of the feelings associated with sensory contact, we don't generate sensory perception and volitional formations, being aware of the “seeing”, “hearing” and so forth. Otherwise, one's ego or conceit is infused into the process, labelling the object, as one recognises it. The feelings generated by sensory contact are smeared with labels and signs along with the qualitative assessment imputed to the event. With sharpened awareness, one is able to observe the swift transition of sensory consciousness.

The Buddha offers a diagnostic approach to sensory consciousness: first and foremost, to become aware of the negligence, and to take the situation under one's control so that the causative (primary) agent can be addressed. Usually, prior to any medical treatment, the pathogenic agent needs to be identified, as otherwise it is difficult to treat the symptoms. At first, it may seem that there are multiple pathogens. Once the most virulent pathogenic agent causing the symptoms has been identified, it is easy to prescribe the medicine.

You see, when something is thrown at a dog, it starts to chew the object, circling around it, yet the lion, would turn back and hunt for the cause. As if you were a lion, you must aim to look at the causative factors, not circling around the symptoms.

To identify the causes underpinning the unfolding of events, become mindful of the process. Mindfully, become aware of the breath. Sounds and thoughts may be present, but, patiently, and repeatedly apply mindfulness to the breath. If you are distracted, become aware of the distraction, bringing the mind back to the primary object. Remaining mindful amidst distraction is strong and dynamic. Just “mind your own business”, becoming aware of things as they unfold, gradually developing mindfulness and concentration to catch the latent forms of defilements lurking in the hidden terrain of the mind.

If there is clarity of mind, one rarely engages in debate. There is no judgment or comparison and the phenomena witnessed are in its original form. There is no need

to blame another or to speak to others in lowly languages. You learn the art of applying the clutch and the brakes. Each and every cognitive series enables you to understand your habits and personality traits, if you are mindful of the process. The observation at the beginning, the middle and the end of each breath appears different.

In the dimension of time, the past, present and the future undergo change and so does the breath, as long as it is visible in your awareness. Directly confronting the breath, one can observe the chronological changes to the breath and its transient nature. Progressing deeper, one can observe the subtle breath and how it undergoes change from one moment to the next. They are like passing clouds.

Practising like this, one sees the futility in mental proliferation over transient objects. Dwelling upon them as auspicious or inauspicious is a worthless task. It is like being in a dream world, assuming or rejecting the images, mistaking the dream for reality. We exert desire over materiality (*kama tanhā*), wishing that we can share the experience, the pleasant feeling, when we are with those near and dear to us (*bhava tanhā*). Believing in these experiences as real, you try to expand them to a larger scale and when impediments block progress, you develop negativity, or animosity towards anyone that hinders your projects (*vibhava tanhā*).

Similarly, feelings also are impermanent and cannot be kept under one's control. Feelings are more transient than materiality. Seeing them as impermanent, they are not worthy of being claimed, being assumed, to be called "mine" and "myself". One can experience materialistic pleasure based on visual objects, luxuries and quality products. So economists fight over these developments, classifying states as being part of the first world, the developing world and so forth. We are asked to model the economy according to the first world, to aspire to a first world economy. Underpinning these classifications and demarcations is feeling, which is transient.

So, we live amidst uncertainty; since, nothing is comprised of an essence, nothing is governable. Even immaterial forms of feelings, such as *jhānic* bliss and rapture that can arise in the practice are also impermanent. Throughout this process, although the purification continues until one reaches the first *magga phala* to become a stream entrant, immaterial feelings still remain reversible. It is only at the stage of *anāgami*, the stage of non-returner, that one's experience is credible and irreversible.

Consciousness is like a magician that manipulates according to its own agenda. It can betray you anytime, as long as you assume the experience. If, on the other hand, you are aware of the non-self characteristic of the five aggregates, seeing their transient nature and observe their unfolding without classification and value judgment, directly, you are not fooled by the mirage of perception or the tricks played by consciousness. Day by day, through direct experience, you relinquish materiality; naturally aligning with the immaterial form of feelings and time and again, reaching a state of sign-less perception. Practising like this, release from the sensory realm becomes second nature to you. There is no tension. The entire

practice is one of trial and error and through mistakes one learns the art of navigating further in the practice. This is the journey of the *vipassanā* practitioner.

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